

COLUMNISTS

Strength is in ideas, but also in money

Religion, like politics, is marked by diversity and conflict. There are not only many religions, but also many different versions and expressions of each one of them.

Thus, within Christianity there are Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, and Anglicans. And each of these divisions can, in turn, be subdivided, for example, into Roman Catholics and Eastern-rite Catholics, or Baptists and Lutherans, or Russian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox, and so forth.

Within many of these Christian denominations today there are power struggles underway to determine who defines the tradition and who controls the debate. Various groups vie for recognition in the media and in the public forum generally, holding that their own particular views will be accepted as more authoritative than others'.

One way such groups seek to discount the credibility of an opposing group is by questioning its real numerical strength. A common putdown is to assure the press that the other side doesn't speak for the vast majority of the membership, or indeed that it is composed of aging elitists who will eventually pass away from the scene, leaving nary a trace.

When internal power struggles are played out at the level of ideas and arguments, they can be a sign of institutional health. A community without vigorous intellectual exchanges is precluded from continued growth and enrichment.



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

Anyone even remotely aware of the history of the Catholic Church knows how much of that history has been marked by internal conflicts and occasionally even by spectacular upheavals. And yet the church has more than survived. It is suffused today with spiritual vigor and vitality as it approaches the dawn of the third Christian millennium.

But there are also power struggles that do not always involve arguments over ideas. They seem to operate instead on the might-makes-right principle. Thus if you have top authority figures temporarily on your side, you don't really have to prove anything. Assertions laced with quotations from the authority figures suffice.

In today's power struggles within the church, it also helps to have money on your side. In fact, with the right sort of financial support, a group can give even a wobbly viewpoint a wide and glossy circulation. A recent article in *The Christian Century*, a national Protestant

journal, highlights the point ("Funding the war of ideas," July 19-26 issue).

The author, Leon Howell, opens with a remark by Deacon Paul Weyrich, a conservative activist who also happens to be an ordained permanent deacon in the Catholic Church. "In any kind of battle," Deacon Weyrich observed, "communication is number one."

"Conservative and neoconservative thinkers," Howell notes, "have been especially successful in communicating their views and rallying their followers through books, magazines and op-ed pieces. They have been helped along by conservative-leaning foundations that have been willing to put their money into journals and think tanks in order to win the battle for hearts and minds."

Four such foundations stand out as the most active players in the power struggles that are currently being played out inside the churches today. They are the Bradley, Olin, Smith Richardson, and Scaife foundations, known collectively as the "four sisters" because they tend to act in concert. Together they made grants of \$57 million in 1993.

They gave \$3.4 million, for example, to the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., which supports not only politically-oriented figures like Robert Bork and Jeane Kirkpatrick, but also high-profile Catholics like Michael Novak.

The Institute on Religion and Democracy, well known for its regular attacks on the national and world councils of churches, received \$260,000 from

three of the four sisters in 1993. That figure constituted the bulk of IRID's total grant receipts and revenues for the year.

The Ethics and Public Policy Center, headed by another high-profile Catholic layman, George Weigel, received from the four sisters \$670,000 of its \$1 million in grants and total income of \$1.1 million in 1993. The EPPC produces several books, sends out three newsletters, and organizes a variety of seminars each year.

The Institute on Religion and Public Life, headed by Father Richard John Neuhaus, a former Lutheran pastor and now a high-profile Roman Catholic priest, received \$690,000 out of a total of \$896,000 in grants and \$1.2 million in total income. The IRPL publishes the monthly magazine *First Things*.

"It is clear," Howell suggests, "that, for better or for worse, the discussion in mainline church circles would be much different without the magnified voices of these small, but well-endowed organizations."

"(Father) Neuhaus, Weigel and others might say that neoconservatives have flourished in the culture wars on the strength of their ideas, but the money from the four sisters hasn't hurt," Howell concludes.

Instead of pointing the finger of criticism rightward, however, moderate and progressive Catholics should be asking why moderate and progressive Catholics of means aren't putting their money where their mouths are?

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