## *From Watchdogs To Attack Dogs*

"Read All About It" by Adam Gopnik, in *The New Yorker* (Dec. 12, 1994), 20 W. 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

"Edge" and "attitude" are very highly prized attributes in journalism today. In a front-page story about President Bill Clinton's trip to Oxford University last June, the once-somber *New York Times* reported that he "returned today for a sentimental journey to the university where he didn't inhale, didn't get drafted, and didn't get a degree." The president is only "the most visible object of this malicious manner," and the *Times* only its most prestigious practitioner, notes Gopnik, a *New Yorker* staff writer.

Many analysts look upon the new approach as the triumph of the "tabloid" style over "serious" journalism. Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein has argued that the "idiot culture" of scandal and sensation must be countered with a reassertion of the investigative tradition that he champions. Gopnik, however, argues that "the new attitudes in the press" are the long-run consequence of "a peculiar twist in the logic of skeptical journalism that Bernstein helped to reinvigorate."

Once reporters got stories and status by getting close to the powerful in government—which made the journalists more "responsible." That is not as true now. In the past 20 years, Gopnik writes, the press has been transformed "from an access culture to an aggression culture: the tradition, developed after the Civil War, in which a journalist's advancement depended on his intimacy with power, has mutated into one in which his success can also depend on a willingness to stage visible, ritualized displays of aggression."

Post-Watergate journalism may have looked like the hallowed "muckraking" traditions of yesteryear, but Gopnik points out that there was a profound difference: "The new crusaders had no causes, or were not allowed to admit to them." The commercial press still held aloft its traditional ideal of "objectivity," and the crusading reporters had to pay deference to it (or at least give the appearance of doing so) in their stories. The end result of this bind, over the years, Gopnik contends, is the sort of "knowing" yet mindless journalism in fashion today.

"The media," he writes, "now relish aggression while still being prevented, by their own self-enforced codes, from letting that aggression have any relation to serious political argument, let alone to grown-up ideas about conduct and morality." It is, he laments, "the Sam Donaldson era."

# RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

## *The Transformation Of Catholicism*

"Christianity and Democracy" by Pierre Manent (translated by Daniel J. Mahoney and Paul Seaton), in *Crisis* (Jan. 1995 and Feb. 1995), 1511 K St. N.W., Ste. 525, Washington, D.C. 20005.

Pope John Paul II invites Christians to discover in their religion the true source of the rights of man, and the Catholic Church now celebrates the sacred character of religious freedom and freedom of conscience. Yet not so very long ago, the church was indignantly denouncing these same rights and condemning the separation of church and state. This turnabout, contends Manent, director of studies at l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, reflects a profound change in the relationship between the church and democracy.

"If the church initially, and for so long, declared herself against democracy," he notes, "it is because she had . . . the conviction that the modern democratic movement was directed fundamentally against her, that is, against the true religion and thus against the true God." And indeed, Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century did aim to establish the secular, liberal state, based on the collective will, and without regard for "the law of God."

The excesses of the French Revolution chastened many liberals. Even as the Revolution's aggressively antireligious actions prompted the church to refine and harden its opposition to modernism, many true liberals became willing "to join with, if not always the church, at least Christianity, or with 'religion' in general," in order to place a check upon the human will.

To 19th-century liberals such as Alexis de Tocqueville, the hostility toward Christianity exhibited in the previous century was not "natural." Religious faith, not unbelief, was "the permanent state of mankind." And since religion was anchored in nature, Tocqueville reasoned, it could do without the state's support. Indeed, he noted, religion in the United States, invigorated by its independence from the state, was a useful restraint on men's minds, limiting the dangers of political liberty. In the end, says Manent, Tocqueville effectively reduced the justification of religion to social utility—"natural" religion was completely overshadowed.

Regarding itself as entrusted with the one true faith, the Catholic Church, however, was not content to have belief judged according to its usefulness to society. The church's "thought or doctrine contains commands, which is its nature, indeed its duty to want to have respected," Manent observes. Consequently, the separation of church and state placed it in a difficult position, one it long resisted. As late as the early 20th century, Pope (now Saint) Pius X denounced such separation as a "supreme injustice" done to God.

More recently, however, the church has taken a much different course. To escape the bind in which separation puts it, Manent says, the church has substantially transformed the character of its message. Since the Second Vatican Council of 1962–65, the church has ceased to present itself as "the most necessary and most salutary *government*, doing her best in a political situation contrary to the good of souls." Instead, the church has become "simply the collective 'beautiful soul,' presenting herself to men as 'the bearer of ideals and values.'" The realization of ideals or values cannot be commanded, he observes, but must be left up to the free will of individuals. "The church repeats, in a more emphatic way, what democracy says about itself."

Although such a church cannot serve as Tocqueville's brake on democracy, Manent thinks that the "political submission . . . to democracy" is a good thing. "Democracy no longer, in good faith, has any essential reproach to make against the church. From now on it can hear the question the church poses, the question which it alone poses, the question *Quid sit homo*—What is man?" In an ironic reversal of their Enlightenment relationship, Manent concludes, the church, having ceded political sovereignty to democracy, has gained the advantage in the moral dialectic between church and state.

## *What Is a Catholic?*

The historian-journalist Garry Wills, author of *Under God* (1990) and other well-known works, relates in the *New York Review of Books* (Dec. 22, 1994) what usually happens these days when the subject of his beliefs as a Roman Catholic comes up.

*When I am asked whether I am a church-going Catholic and answer yes, no one inquires whether I really believe in such strange things as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Resurrection. I am asked about ovaries and trimesters. The great mysteries of faith have become, for many inside the church as well as outside, the "doctrines" on contraception and abortion. These are hardly great concerns in the gospels and the letters of Saint Paul, which never mention them. But they crowd out most other talk of Catholic beliefs in modern conversation.*