

*The Catholic Imagination*, by Andrew Greeley

reviewed by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [October 18, 2000](#) issue

Early in the 19th century Friedrich Schleiermacher remarked that Roman Catholics "are all immersed in the miraculous and may expect it at any moment." Without mentioning Schleiermacher explicitly, Andrew Greeley's engaging essay is a commentary on his observation. Greeley's thesis, derived from David Tracy's book *The Analogical Imagination*, is that there is a distinctively Catholic, "enchanted" imagination. There is a Catholic style of telling stories about God and human existence, a Catholic manner of imagining God and human existence in art, music and literature, and a Catholic approach to neighborhoods, families and sexuality.

Greeley's Catholics live in an enchanted world in which Mary is not only the Mother of God but an image of God's maternal love for us, in which sexuality can be an experience of God, in which families and communities are signs of God's presence, and in which grace is found on every street corner, in every home and in every neighborhood. All of life can be sacramental. Creative writers, composers and artists from a Catholic background are immersed in this world even when they struggle against it. Even the anticlerical Giuseppe Verdi and the nonbelieving James Joyce express the central values of the Catholic imagination.

As a sociologist of religion, Greeley claims that there is a correspondence between the works of Catholic high art and the sensibilities of ordinary Catholics. He presents the central argument of his essay as sociological rather than theological, grounded in studies of the opinions and practices of Catholics and Protestants in ten North Atlantic nations where both communities are significantly represented. Greeley repeatedly protests that he is not expressing a preference for being Catholic rather than Protestant (or Hindu or Buddhist). Nonetheless, his own enchantment with the enchanted world of the Catholic imagination comes through clearly.

In contrast to the warnings and restrictions of Augustine and the Catholic magisterium concerning sexuality, Greeley finds, Catholics for centuries have celebrated sexual expression as a sacrament of God's love. He notes that not only did Bernini portray Teresa of Ávila's mystical experience as orgasmic, but that some Catholic Renaissance artists depicted Jesus rising from the grave in a state of sexual

arousal, which is visible even though discreetly veiled by his flowing robes. According to Greeley's research, contemporary Catholics have sex more often, enjoy it more and are more playful about it than Protestants.

Greeley's central argument is quite persuasive, and his perspectives are often thought-provoking. However, his assertions of contrasts between Catholic and other traditions are at times puzzlingly inaccurate. He sees Paul Tillich as rejecting all anthropomorphic metaphors and symbols for God; this judgment contradicts Tillich's own explicit acceptance of anthropomorphic symbols and ignores his rich theology of symbolism, his development of the theology of culture (a major influence on David Tracy and thus, indirectly, on Greeley's own work) and his interest in the arts as religious expressions. Greeley cannot imagine that Buddhist missionaries (he is not sure there were any!) accepted elements of earlier religious traditions in the way early medieval Catholic missionaries did. This assertion denies the history of Buddhist entry into Japan, in which Shinto gods were honored as bodhisattvas and Taoist and Confucian values were prized. It also ignores the honoring of Hindu gods in present-day Buddhist Thailand.

Like Schleiermacher, Greeley insists that poetic expressions of religious experience are primary and that doctrines are secondary and derivative formulations. He notes that most Catholics are hardly concerned with the technical theological term *homoiousios* but are deeply concerned with the image of the Christ child in the manger. Since *homoiousios* is the term used for the assertion that Jesus was only similar in being to God the Father, not one in being, Greeley's usage of a heretical term when the orthodox term would be more expected is itself an indication of his broader point that the meaning of such terms has been lost to all but professional theologians.

Readers of Greeley's sociological writings will find nothing surprising here, since much of the material has appeared in Greeley's earlier studies on a variety of topics. Nonetheless, this is a helpful compilation of Greeley's important work on the style of imagination that makes Catholic life distinctive.