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Fr. Andrew Greeley: contrarian, burr under the saddle, friend of 50 years

by Harvey Cox

Fr. Andrew Greeley
Appreciation

I have been thinking a lot about Fr. Andrew Greeley since I read of his death on the front page of *The New York Times* a couple of days ago. I think Andy would have been pleased that even in passing, he achieved this degree of notoriety. He enjoyed attracting attention, and he deserved it.

Andy was just about my age, and we had known each other for about 50 years. We first met after the brouhaha that greeted my book, *The Secular City*, in 1965. Andy was one of the first to review it. He did not like it. Characteristically, he assailed me with a barrage of survey research data that utterly refuted my thesis (or what he took to be my thesis). The fact that my book and his critique may have missed each other did not really matter. I was trying to ask what the seemingly inexorable (at least at that time) advance of secularization meant for Christianity. He doubted then, and still did until he died, just how inexorable, or even empirical, that secular advance was. After that, we enjoyed a lifelong friendship-cum-argument that sometimes brought us together but also sometimes put us on different sides of a debate. Andy, for example, was no fan of liberation theology.

The last time we spoke was a couple of years ago, when Andy gave a well-attended lecture at Harvard University. Always the contrarian, he sought to demonstrate, with statistics and graphs, that Europe was not the secularized desert it was made out to be. His audience seemed unconvinced. What about all those empty pews, the lagging vocations, the church's loss of influence in the political realm?

Undaunted, Andy insisted these were temporary fluctuations. Just watch. It isn't over yet. Although I was doubtful at the time, I have come to believe he may have been on to something. What is happening in allegedly secular Europe? Last year, nearly 300,000 people registered and did the pilgrimage to Santiago

de Compostela, many of them not churchgoers. Another estimated several hundred thousand did it without registering. The same thing is happening at other traditional holy sites, including the newly renovated one at Trondheim, Norway. We may yet see a spiritual renewal in Europe, but don't expect it to replicate all the features of the religion that once prevailed there.

Yes, Andy was a licensed contrarian, and he aimed his contrariness at me now and then. Still, we counted each other as friends. When, more than once, I asked him for an endorsement of one of my books, he invariably supplied a good one. Once, he wrote to me privately, "May it sell 100,000 copies!" This sounded good to me, but upon reflection, I decided it was a modest goal for a man whose books, though not the sociological-theological ones, could be picked up at airport kiosks.

What I liked best about Andy, however, was not his impressive command of data, but his uncanny ability to describe the style and ethos of religion, something that graphs do not capture. He knew the centrality of stories long before "narrative theology" came into fashion. He could convey the taste and smell of American Catholicism with such pithiness and nuance that even rank outsiders could catch a glimpse inside. These insights often became clearer in his racy fiction than in his scholarly works. And yes, I confess I was a fan of those parables of romance, deceit, betrayal and ultimate vindication -- usually in ecclesiastical settings -- that Andy seemed to toss off almost annually.

I think one of the things that kept us on good terms was the realization that we were both burrs under the saddles of our respective denominations. His advantage, however, was that he knew his adversaries so well: the frozen hierarchy, the insolence of Rome, the rigidity of much Catholic theology. It was all so palpable and self-evident. In my Baptist tradition, it was more diffuse and mercurial, hard to pin down. Once you have cleverly undercut Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson or exposed the inanity of the Southern Baptist Convention, what else is there to do? Maybe this is why I more often aimed my shafts at the injustice of the larger society, something Andy did not do as often, perhaps because there were just too many juicy targets in his own backyard.

I suppose the main feeling I grew to have about Andy was a mixture of fascination, admiration and, well, jealousy, or at least envy. How did he get so much done? How did he write all those racy page-turners and still maintain his scholarly standing, something I would love to have been able to do? In a couple of his books, he includes "a little priest wearing a Chicago Bears shirt," sometimes standing at the back of a crowd, observing and making an occasional wise comment. Sometimes when the priest doubled as a detective, he was more in the foreground. Still, we all knew who he was. Andy was always in the picture.

It is traditional to end tributes like this with something like "Rest in Peace." Somehow, however, that sounds a little inappropriate in this case. I am sure that wherever that little priest in the Bears shirt finds himself now, peace prevails. But I am also sure it won't be long until he will find some way to disturb it.

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