

Holocaust deniers are marginalized and forced to the periphery of respectable opinion, gulag deniers receive distinguished positions and are saturated with bountiful material and cultural rewards.

In Denial crystallizes a crucial phenomenon: Apologists for communism never really believed in, or cared about, their own arguments; they were concerned only with crafting lies to camouflage and further their deeper goal—the overthrow of American capitalism.

One result of this is a continuation of the Cold War by other means. By rewriting the past, left-wing academics believe they can program the progressive future, Haynes and Klehr suggest. “Continuing to fight the Cold War in history, they intend to reverse the victory of the West and convince the next generation that the wrong side won, and to prepare the way for a new struggle.”

In Denial is a crucial work that sheds vital light on one of the most important political phenomena of the twentieth century: the romance for communism of the West’s leftist intellectuals. The book offers a profound contribution to our understanding of why such individuals refuse to acknowledge the dreadful consequences of their own political faith—and how they continue to sacrifice human lives and historical truth on the altar of their misguided ideals.

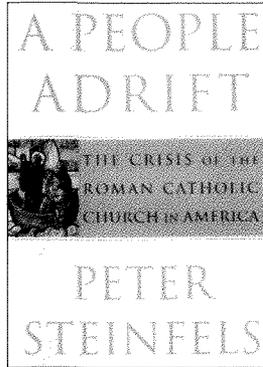
Jamie Glazov is managing editor at Frontpage Magazine. He is the author of *Canadian Policy Toward Khrushchev’s Soviet Union*.

CATHOLIC DILEMMAS

By Naomi Schaefer

A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America
By Peter Steinfels
Simon & Schuster, 416 pages, \$26

It’s difficult to generalize about a religious group with 65 million adherents, but an outsider might reasonably observe



that American Catholics today are a confused lot. It is perhaps not surprising that there is significant diversity of opinion in such a large population, particularly in one that exists in a liberal democracy. But in his new book, *A People Adrift*, Peter Steinfels argues that it is more than just particular disagreements that plague the American Church today; it is a lack of direction.

The conservative and liberal factions, argues Steinfels, have little to say to each other any more, and the vast majority of Catholics in between have nowhere to turn for guidance. It is this last group with whom he seems most concerned.

Steinfels, who writes the “Beliefs” column for the *New York Times*, and who served for many years as editor of *Commonweal*, provides a useful historical perspective on this breakdown. He notes the significance, for instance, of former New York governor Mario Cuomo’s signing legislation to provide public funding for abortions and the subsequent threat of excommunication issued against him by Archbishop John O’Connor.

Cuomo’s response, a theological one, that “there is no Church teaching that mandates the best political course for making our belief everyone’s rule” shocked American Catholics, who had rarely heard Catholic political leaders publicly challenge the Church hierarchy.

On the flip side of the question of political versus religious loyalty, there was the moment when many Catholics began to rethink their historic affiliation with the Democratic Party. At the 1992 Democratic convention, former Pennsylvania governor Robert Casey was banned from presenting his view opposing the party platform on abor-

tion, despite his support for just about every other Democratic article of faith, and his tremendous popularity.

And, in another historical reality check, Steinfels notes that the recent sex abuse scandals are nothing so new. Most of the priests involved, he maintains, are of an older generation, the majority of the incidents took place decades ago, and many similar charges were made in the early ’90s.

Issues such as the sex scandals and the abortion question have woven Catholic controversies right into the fabric of American public debate. And Catholic institutions are now thought of more and more as public institutions, partly because of the large number of non-Catholics who are served by Catholic hospitals and schools, for example.

But if these institutions are, as Steinfels argues, becoming indistinguishable from their secular counterparts, what is their distinct purpose? The answers that many college faculty and hospital administrators offer—usually platitudes about “serving the community”—do not satisfy Steinfels. And rightly so.

Catholic schools do perform a service that secular (or at least public) schools do not. But Steinfels wonders how effective they can continue to be when there are fewer Catholics attending them, fewer Catholics teaching at them, and fewer priests and nuns leading them.

It is, of course, this last factor that will most affect the future of the Church as a whole. And Steinfels does not offer much in the way of hope that the trend of diminishing numbers of people choosing the Catholic religious vocations will change, nor much in the way of solutions beyond the predictable *New York Times*-flavored ones: letting women into the priesthood, allowing priests to marry, and assigning more parish duties to laymen.

Steinfels is at his most original on a subject that may be of little interest to non-Catholics: church services. The quality of the Catholic liturgy and sermons may not be sexy enough to make his paper’s front page, but these are vital

factors in the spiritual and intellectual lives of most Catholics. Or rather, as Steinfels argues, they are *not*.

He quotes one *Commonweal* contributor, who rails that American Catholics have “come to accept lifeless liturgies” and “clueless, noteless sermons that appear to be warmed over term paper memories from a poorly taught New Testament 101 class.” Priests are not held accountable for the quality of the homilies they deliver, Steinfels complains.

Meanwhile, hymns are often sung by a choir with no participation from the congregants or, where there are no choirs, sung by almost no one. He writes: “Imagine a birthday celebration where two or three out of ten family members actually sang ‘Happy Birthday’ and the rest stood silent or barely moved their lips. What would be the message?” It’s a difficult but fitting image for “a people adrift.”

Naomi Schaefer's book on religious colleges will be published in the fall of 2004 by St. Martin's Press.

SURVIVAL LITERATURE

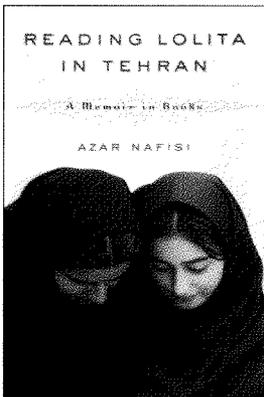
By Juliana Geran Pilon

Reading Lolita in Tehran:

A Memoir in Books

By Azar Nafisi

Random House, 368 pages, \$23.95



The first literary genius of the East, spinning her tales a millennium ago, was a clever woman named Sheherezade who defied her king-husband's vow to kill her (as he had her predecessors). By weaving a mix of reality, fiction, and humor into her storytelling, the queen of Persian imagi-

nation succeeds not only in postponing her death, but in achieving the immortality of fable and legend.

How ironic that Persia's current regime should consider Sheherezade's life-saving gift, the free imagination, to be its most ferocious enemy. Like all totalitarian regimes, Iran's current government seeks to dictate both behavior and thought.

In her new book, Azar Nafisi perfectly describes her countrymen as having “become the figment of someone else's dream.”

A professor of comparative literature, Nafisi resigned from the University of Tehran in 1995 after refusing to dress according to the regulations of the self-styled Islamic regime. She didn't mean to be a hero; but neither would she allow her spirit to be killed by the mindless new kings.

Her superb bestseller, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which describes the nightmare that has been gripping Iran for much longer than one thousand and one nights, is testimony to that determination. The book is a record of the literary discussions that Nafisi and seven young women held in her home for two years until she left for the United States with her husband and children in 1997. Although her country has yet to emerge from darkness, this book charts the way.

An actor in the drama of her country, a writer of subtle style with universal appeal, Nafisi also describes the lives of others, in the tradition of her medieval predecessor. These are carefully camouflaged for protection, but scrupulously accurate. What unites her protagonists is that they are “a category of victims who have no defense and are never given a chance to articulate their own story.”

Nafisi describes the early days of the Iranian revolution, the fanatical regime that seized her country, the eight-year terror of the Iran-Iraq war, and the spectacle of the nation murdering its own children.

In response she turns to Henry James, who wrote despairingly as he watched the German destruction of the Rheims cathedral in 1914, that “We must for dear life make our own counterrealities.”

For Nafisi and her students, those counterrealities are works of fiction. Rather than being merely escapist, these works help them understand the complexity of their situation, while simultaneously denouncing its perversion.

How else but through literature could one cope with a brutal regime where girls are killed for “tempting” men by being too beautiful, imprisoned for walking with a man other than a husband or brother, and considered legally marriageable (often to middle-aged satyrs) as early as age nine?

Through the novels they lovingly explore, Nafisi and her pupils discover both empathy and self-respect. It is the lack of empathy that defines—and dooms—the autocrat of any era. Ultimately, no Ayatollah can succeed in destroying Sheherezade's children.

Nafisi has brilliantly, breathtakingly, demonstrated why.

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