

THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN COURTNEY MURRAY: THE POSSIBILITIES FOR ECUMENISM

The Murray Workshop convened around a topic and two papers tying Murray's thought to the 1993 Convention theme. In "Unidirectional Ecumenism: Classicist Notions of Religious Empowerment in Murray's Early Religious Liberty Argument," J. Leon Hooper took up Murray's mid-1940s argument with American Protestant authors. John T. Pawlikowski explored mutual changes in how Murray and Jews in the United States were present to each other in "Murray and the Jewish Community."

Hooper examined a 1945 through 1948 exchange between Murray and several Protestant authors concerning civil religious freedom. The occasion was a Statement on Religious Liberty from a joint committee of the Federal Council of Churches and the Foreign Missions Conference. This exchange began civilly enough, but Murray soon adopted the polemical tone that governed many Roman Catholic/Protestant writings of the time. Why, Hooper asked, did Murray so quickly give up on civility?

Several external factors were at play. During and after this period Murray was increasingly under critique of other Roman Catholics for his own religious freedom argument. Yet, on closer examination of Murray's Protestant sources, several factors internal to Murray's own argument suggest themselves. Initially in this exchange Murray interpreted several notions, such as the Anglo-American denial of state control over religious matters, as theologically based arguments. Only a few years later would he himself accept these developments as legitimate extensions of medieval social and political theories. Something, then, in Murray's earliest social and political theory led him to misread, or over-read, those Protestant arguments.

Hooper suggested that one culprit was Murray's notion of a "perfect society." For Murray, two perfect, necessary societies existed in the present order, namely, the Church and the state. All other social memberships were voluntary. So, when Murray heard Protestants rejoice that ecclesial membership in the U.S. was voluntary, he heard a theological claim that all denominations stood equally before the Lord. Later Murray would recognize this claim, if not the rejoicing, as a legitimate restriction on state control over religion.

Another culprit can be found in the causal link Murray and his tradition understood between those perfect societies and genuine human freedom. Membership in the state was necessary for the development of genuine natural freedom.

In the case of natural freedom, the antagonist to Murray's argument was clearly Western individualism and political contractualism—the belief that the state was a nonnecessary, human construct, solely at the service of self-interest. In the case of redemptive freedom, Murray's antagonist was both materialism or materialistic atheism, on the one hand, and Protestant, denominationally-egalitarian ecclesiologies, on the other. Both materialism and Protestant ecclesiologies challenged Catholic claims to be the sole institution necessary for salvation.

Yet, Hooper suggested, more was at play here than a statism and an ecclesiological bias. To get at the "necessity" of state and Church membership for the development of human freedom, Hooper appealed to Lonergan's notion of classical consciousness. At this time Murray clearly held for what Lonergan called a classicist control of meaning—a dominance of theory over practice. Further, he located control of theoretical meaning, at least as applied to ethics and theology, exclusively within the hierarchical Church. For Murray, the laity operated solely at the level of applying natural and revealed truths to the temporal order. However, in Murray's theory of the time, they had no legitimate say in the formation of those generalized moral and religious truths. Even less did non-Catholics have much to contribute to generalized ethical and theological truth claims.

How, then, did Murray conceive lay empowerment for practical action in the social order? Hooper suggested that, in a classical mode, the model of empowerment was logical. Just as conclusions follow from premises, so action proceeds from general truth claims. Only with this understanding of the causal link between general truths and action can one capture the necessity that Murray claimed for both state and Church membership. Hooper concluded by suggesting that Murray moved from this classical control of meaning to a much more historical, interior, and relational understanding of the development of moral and theological truth claims.

Pawlikowski outlined how Murray figured in Jewish-Catholic relations in the United States. Until Vatican II, a preoccupation with Protestant arguments and authors eclipsed any significant attention to Jewish reality, though he valued practical cooperation with Jews toward social objectives. Likewise, until his contribution on religious liberty at Vatican II, Jewish leaders and writers returned the favor. Even at Vatican II, recalled an American rabbi in attendance, Murray expressed astonishment at the very existence among Catholics of the so-called "deicide" basis for anti-Semitism; he said he had never encountered it. Nor, in general, did he see a link between the Council's commitment to religious liberty and to the Church's dialogical relation to non-Christians.

Still, during and after Vatican II both Murray and Jewish attitudes underwent a change toward mutual appreciation. He came to see Jewish views as essential to solving the social question in the United States. Jewish authors began to comment favorably on Murray's legal and political views on religious liberty, though without engaging his philosophical or theological principles. This remains

the case, with the exception of David Novak's Jewish appropriation of Murray's natural law ethic.

Of course, Pawlikowski insisted, American Jewry is not monolithic and so the question of a Jewish reception of Murray needs to be considered in terms of Orthodox/Reform differences. Each relates differently to American culture and society and so they have nonidentical starting points from which to evaluate First Amendment issues and writers such as Murray. Reform Judaism, according to Novak, sees ways in which the heritage of Judaism was formative upon the nation's founding documents and ethos. A biblical contribution to our democracy, however, can be regarded as completed and now best engaged in more familiar secular terms. Orthodox Judaism sees American life and culture as something unassimilable and threatening to Jewish identity. A record of practical cooperation between Catholics and Orthodox notwithstanding, the Orthodox approach religious liberty primarily as an immunity from interference by the state, not as empowerment for religious presence to society. Pawlikowski remarked that floating alliances between Catholics and Protestant fundamentalists do not contribute positively to Jewish/Catholic relations in the United States.

After hearing the papers, participants in the workshop questioned the presenters on, especially, prospects for Jewish/Catholic cooperation on the issue of parental choice in education and how Murray's work might be a resource for breaking through the impasse into which the school issue seems to have fallen. In general, Murray's own development out of classicism, his contribution on religious liberty, his immersion in Vatican II, arguably his natural law ethic, his final phase of thought, all make his work after the mid-1940s a resource for ecumenical and inter-religious relations.

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