

THE PROBLEM OF THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

THE title of the seminar as given in the program would make it possible to discuss the problem in a very broad context, so as to include not only the formal teaching which takes place in college, but also efforts at adult education along these lines which are being made in many places. However, I intend to confine my contribution to the discussion to the problem of the organizing and teaching of religion—or theology—in colleges, and that I believe was the wish of Father Benard in setting up the seminar.

This discussion, which amounts by now I suppose to a controversy, has been going on for a long time, in many articles by well-known writers in such publications as *The Catholic Educational Review*, *The Journal of Religious Instruction*, and the Belgian publication *Lumen Vitae*. Two articles by Father John C. Murray, S.J., "Towards a Theology for the Layman," in *Theological Studies*, 5 (1944), 43-75, 340-76, have been particularly influential in the conduct of the discussion. Of course, as in every controverted issue, the literary expression represents only a small portion of the debate. It goes on orally among the teachers of religion, I suppose in every Catholic college. The "policy committee," or the "committee on curriculum" is set up to consider particularly this problem. The question comes up automatically whenever teachers in different colleges meet each other, either in informal visits or in educational conferences. Certain names become associated with one opinion or the other, and become rallying points. The Department of Religion in a certain college will move into an entirely new program, and will be convinced that they have solved the problem for themselves, and will try to convert others.

It goes without saying that all of this expresses vitality.

Whenever the effectiveness of an institution of any sort is being discussed, it seems perfectly natural that two parties should form, one in favor of retaining the institution and its general character much as it currently exists, and the other for substantial change.

This seems to be what has happened in the discussion of the institutionalized teaching of religion in college. And therefore in this seminar this afternoon, with a view towards carrying further the discussion with a cleanly drawn issue, I am going to try to analyze briefly the two positions, the "rightist" and the "leftist." I need hardly add that I have no intention of attaching a derogatory note to either tag; it is only for the purpose of raising an issue. Our own course at Notre Dame, both on the undergraduate and on the Master of Arts level, is pretty thoroughly rightist; while the Le Moyne College plan is leftist. I have to thank Father Bernard Murray, S.J., for sending me the brochure which describes this plan, and provides me with this example. I do not mean to imply by my terms that the faculty at Le Moyne are dangerous innovators, and I hope they will not regard us as reactionaries.

Leaders on both sides are priests all seminary-trained (though the type of education which they have received *after* ordination tends to be a separating factor, I think). They are all concerned with the same subject matter, the teaching of the Catholic Church, as it is found in all the traditional sources. But they approach their material differently, and the quickest way, I think, to put the difference is this—rightist thinking is subject-matter-centered, while leftist thinking is student-centered. Rightists resent this distinction, I think, and call it meaningless; but I think there is something in it. The rightist teacher keeps firmly in mind the distinction between the speculative and the practical part of theology, and tries to develop the speculative part with all the attention he can pay to the inner coherence of its elements. While the leftist teacher attempts to develop the dogmas as "motives" for Christian living. Or, to take another example, the question comes up of teaching religion by way of problems, the "approach through problems." The rightist teacher will immediately think of problems inherent in the subject matter—how Christ can have both beatific and experimental knowledge, for example—while the leftist will think of problems the student is likely to run up against in his life.

Another point of difference is to be found in the attitude which

the members of the two parties take towards themselves and their work. I do not think you will find many leftists among the STDs. They have followed the traditional studies beyond ordination, and have become pretty well stabilized. On the other hand, when a man thinks of himself more and more as an educator and less and less as a theologian, he is veering towards leftism. Rightists are a conservative body, and strongly corporate. They read the theological literature and are all familiar with the same authors. But the leftist is greatly interested in what he calls "related fields," and is resentful of the fact that a whole string of writers whom he admires (especially in the very area under discussion, the problem of teaching religion to the lay student) are completely ignored by the rightists.

Another point is the relative amount of heat generated in the controversy by the proponents of the two sides. I rather think that the leftists are hotter. There are some rightists, I believe, who say that their way is the only way. Their position is that if the attempt is made to teach religion according to some other order and method, the subject will be distorted, and there is the further danger of running afoul of "Humani Generis." But I believe most rightists are more modest. They are willing to admit that the course is not entirely satisfactory, that it needs improving; but they don't want change that they cannot understand. But the leftists tend to be extremely critical of the established method on the ground that it is lifeless, uninspiring, and irredeemable. And their criticism applies not only to the college teaching of religion to lay students, but extends also to the seminary course, which is the parent of the college course. And meanwhile, rightists are suspicious of the "education slant" of the leftists, and deprecate the enthusiasm with which leftist views are propounded and received among certain types of lay people. Thus, there is a general atmosphere of tension all around.

It would be possible to carry further this analysis of the two mentalities, but I am sure enough has been said to provoke discussion.

I should like now to take up the question of what the two parties want to teach. Rightists want to retain the traditional division into Dogma, Moral, and Apologetics, and to make a systematic progression through the tracts of theology, in an abbreviated version of the seminary course adapted as far as possible to the needs and grasp of

college students. This approach may be called the "Thomist-theological," with certain reservations. It is not based on St. Thomas himself—and indeed I do not think it possible in the college course, from the viewpoint of time alone, not to mention many other opposing factors, to study systematically the whole *Summa*.—But it is based on Thomism as reflected in the theological manuals. Thus it is that teachers and students go through the tracts, handling the same problems in the same order as in Tanqueray, for example, but in a capsulized version of Tanqueray, which in turn is a capsulized *Summa*. The same may be said about Moral, whether one follows the method of the precepts or the less familiar rightist method of the theological and moral virtues.

Leftists want to eradicate the tracts. The leftist approach can take various emphases, but in general it is out of sympathy with the "air-tight formulae" and "neatly classified dogmatic treatises" of "analytical theology" (J. Fernan, S.J., "The College Religion Course," *Lumen Vitae*, 4 (1949), 301-305). They want what they think is a vital theology, or a life-centered religion. They think the teaching should be organized, not around the plan and structure of theology as we know it, but in view of the function of the layman in the Church. The layman is a follower of Christ; therefore he should know the life of Christ above all. He is a participant in Christ's priestly worship; therefore he should know liturgy very well and be able to participate intelligently in it. He is a lay-apostle; and therefore he should know actively and with conviction the modern social teaching. No "De Deo Uno et Trino," etc. for the leftist, but Christ, liturgy, encyclicals.

I find a procedural difficulty in the leftist scheme. It is not at all corporate, but highly personal. I have the impression that it depends for its effectiveness on the personality of a good teacher and his most expert disciples. The teacher himself may have very well in his own mind the unity of the course, but he will have trouble communicating that unity to the rest of his department. Leftists abound in brief and often eloquent statements of the objective and method of their program, but they seem to want to teach everything all at once. Several years ago, when I published a—rightist—text-book on Christian morals, I received a long and critical letter from

a teacher telling me all the things I left out. I answered by saying that we teach some of those things in other courses. Leftists cannot tell you where one course begins and the other leaves off. Reading the Le Moyne College Plan, I had a feeling that its organizers ran up against that problem; and I was interested to see that they made a virtue out of necessity by presenting as a feature what appears to me as a difficulty. To quote the LeMoyne Plan on this point:

This is what we mean by organic unity; all of the ideas of the whole course are contained in each year of it, their evolution into full growth merely changing the emphasis with which they are seen from year to year.

I gather from this that they teach the whole course every year.

When I set up objections to leftist planning, I do not mean that I am out of sympathy with their objectives, or that I deny their criticisms of rightism: Rightism is too safe, too secure, too neat, too familiar. The priest teacher moves into any branch of the course too confidently. Possibly rightism is a "leveller" of teachers. It involves going over and over again the same materials. Of course, every teacher tries to improve his own teaching intensively, but at the same time—human nature!—the method does not encourage extensive further study. Also the strict organization of the department—eager to cover the content—restricts the investigation and inspiration of the brilliant teacher, and at the same time provides a comfortable routine for the man who is willing to keep on repeating tried and true material. Recently I have been reading a book by Canon Jacques Leclercq—not a liturgist or a Life of Christ man or a religious educationist, but a theological writer as well known as any other. In this book, *L'Enseignement de la Morale Chretienne* (Paris, Vitrail, 1949), vigorously and urgently he makes the same points against the rightist theology as those which are being made by our American leftists. The teaching seems old-fashioned, out of contact; it is all cut up and analyzed, so that the student is always struggling with detail, and never sees the general perspectives; the Christian teaching of morals is a teaching of minimum obligation, of control and restraint, not of *élan* and conquest—"it forbids well, but does not inspire"—and it does not start

out from Christ. These points are becoming so familiar that the planners of our theological teaching, especially in the seminaries, must take more and more notice of them.

However, for my part, at this time I cannot embrace leftism. Our purpose at Notre Dame has been to build a religion program which will be scientifically organized, and taught on an academic level equal to any other department in the college, adapted to the minds of our students, and hard and exacting. A good many of the students attending the current summer session are here because they failed in religion during the year. We have been trying to root out the idea of religion as the snap course and the average-booster. I cannot see how we can successfully introduce a leftist approach which cannot fail to lack organization, which will be confusing to the teachers, and which will be unable to produce clear ideas in the minds of students. Leftists seem to be unaware of the fact that there are other departments in the Catholic college besides the Department of Religion, and other educative agencies besides those of the classroom. We cannot teach all of religion, to say nothing of all of Christian culture, in the religion class. We try to take care of the practical preparation for marriage, for example, through the Marriage Institute, sixteen talks and discussions held each spring for seniors, married students, and graduate students. The other departments, particularly philosophy, literature, history, economics, political science, and sociology, have their necessary part to play in communicating Christian culture as a whole.

In the meantime, we want emphatically to make our course better, to try to show how each part of it fits into the general vision of Christian thought and life, to use our committee-work and syllabus-work in such a way as to move the courses towards the great high-points, to circle them around the central ideas, and to try to avoid, with all of the resources at our command, the bearing down on memory of detail. There are many possible statements of objectives, but I suppose ours is to try to help the students realize why they should want to be Catholics from conviction, and not from habit, and what it means to be a Catholic; and to make them really want to live the Catholic life personally, and socially through the apostolate.

This discussion of the problem of organizing the college teaching of religion—or theology—should go on. It is a sign of vitality, and out of it may finally emerge a “centrism,” which may give us the right solution.

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DIGEST OF THE DISCUSSION

Because of the length of the discussion and the many apparently conflicting views that were expressed, it seems better to attempt to synthesize the principal opinions than to describe the discussion as it actually took place.

Father Eugene Gallagher, S.J., of Georgetown University, was the principal defendant of what Father Sheedy had called the “leftist” position. Father Gallagher objected to such a classification, however, maintaining that Father Sheedy’s descriptions of leftists and rightists did not seem to him to fit any actual person, group, or situation. He observed that the La Moyne Plan, to which Father Sheedy had referred as an example of “leftism” in teaching theology, is not at all a faithful application of Father Courtney Murray’s ideas. During the course of the discussion, Father Gallagher presented the following explanation of the Religion program at Georgetown University. (It is to be noted that Georgetown purposely refrains from describing the course as theology, referring to it simply as the Religion program.)

COMMENTS OF FATHER EUGENE GALLAGHER, S.J.

This note of comment on Father Sheedy’s paper on “The Problem of Theology for the Laity,” is written at the kind and thoughtful request of Father Sebastian Carlson, O.P., who was assigned to take down the discussion that followed Father Sheedy’s paper.

In the discussion I remarked that Father Sheedy’s paper reminded me of Jung’s work on *Psychological Types*, given to a description of introverts and extroverts. His paper, like this work, did indeed describe tendencies, but its characterizations of college re-

ligion courses were somewhat extreme, and did not accurately describe the courses unsuitably referred to as "leftist," as these are found in reality.

Judging by the paper itself, and the bibliography appended to it, Father Sheedy would include in the "leftist" courses such as take their inspiration from Father John Courtney Murray's two articles "Towards a Theology for the Layman."¹

One such course is the Religion curriculum of Georgetown University, inaugurated in 1940 by Father Murray himself. This course is still being presented, with results demonstrably better than those of the course it supplanted (*The Truth of Christianity series*, by Doyle, Herzog, Chetwood). It has now been adopted by all the colleges of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus (Scranton, Loyola, St. Joseph's), not to mention many other colleges in the United States which have adopted it in whole or in part.

Hence, I would disagree with Father Sheedy's remark that "they [the leftists] have a hard time describing where one course begins and the other leaves off. There does not exist—or at least there is not readily available—a systematic approach of this type. Therefore, it could not be 'put in' to a large department without much study and preparation."

The religion writeup in the Georgetown College catalogue clearly describes where one course begins and the other leaves off, in a program that has existed for twelve years, and which has been adopted without too much effort by other colleges.

In the space allotted to me, I can only say that the Georgetown course is geared to prepare the layman for his special function in the Church, with the "totus Christus" theme as its master idea, and with an organization, and a series of emphases, and a manner of presentation peculiarly adapted to the instruction of laymen. Because of its special finality, therefore, it is quite different from the seminary course in theology, for which the Scholastic method is prescribed by the Church.

I am not particularly interested in defending the right of this course to be called *Theology*. I would be satisfied to regard it as a form of advanced catechetics, in the sense in which the *Confra-*

¹ *Theological Studies*, V (1944) 43-75, 340-76.

ternity of Christian Doctrine carries on catechetics for Newman clubs in secular universities. On the other hand, in an abstract discussion—which this is not—I would object to a definition of *Theology* which would identify Theology with the Thomistic type, to the exclusion of the theology of St. Augustine, for example, or St. Bonaventure.

In the course of the discussion following Father Sheedy's paper, Father Augustine Rock, O.P. evoked my interest by informing members of the panel that while in Rome he learned, *viva voce*, from a proponent of kerugmatic theology (*Verkündigungstheologie*), that the latter movement is now frowned upon by Church authorities, and that one paragraph of the Encyclical *Humani Generis* was designed to discourage it.

These remarks evoked my interest because, as is clear to me from a reading of the articles by Father Murray, cited above, many of Father Murray's ideas derive from the defenders of the *Verkündigungstheologie*, as a glance at his footnotes will show.

However, with regard to the paragraph in *Humani Generis*, most of the available commentaries in English—perhaps all—are in the dark about any condemnation of kerugmatic theology in that document. Five commentators who were present at the Theology Convention this year—Fathers Connell, Galvin, Burke, Weigel, Volpert—said, equivalently, that it was “news” to them. My own tenth re-reading of the Encyclical fails to discover any words which, *in se*, could be shown conclusively to stigmatize kerugmatic theology.

Hence, as the insistent examining professor asked the theology student, “*Quid nunc?*” We answer, with the hard-pressed theology student, “*Datur impasse.*”

Return to Digest of Discussion

Father T. C. Donlan, O.P., of Oak Park, Illinois, was the principal defendant of the “rightist” position. He asked that the discussion be kept in the order of principles, to avoid time-consuming argumentation over details. He maintained that the discussion could not be fruitful unless the vital preliminary question of the distinction between education in general and “schooling” in par-

ticular were first answered. He averred that it is impossible even to discuss the matter of teaching theology at the college level unless such a distinction is admitted. Father Donlan gave the following explanation of his concept of the teaching of theology, which is that of the Dominican Fathers throughout the United States.

COMMENTS OF FATHER THOMAS C. DONLAN, O.P.

Very many reasons can be adduced for teaching theology in the schools. For reasons of brevity, we will confine the presentations of these reasons to three: 1. The very nature of schooling demands that sacred doctrine be taught according to the content, order, and method of theology if the academic presentation of Christian teaching is to attain its due perfection. 2. By its very nature, theology is most perfectly amenable to the academic environment and method. 3. Theology offers the most perfect preparation possible in the academic environment for the understanding and fulfillment of the vocation of the Christian layman.

1. Schooling is one facet of the general educational process. It has a proper and immediate end that distinguishes it from other educational agencies, and it employs distinctive means for the attainment of this proper end. Pope Pius XI has expressed the proper and immediate end of schooling as the ". . . training of the young in the arts and sciences for the advantage and prosperity of civil society."¹ This training must, of course, be carried on in an atmosphere that is Christian, wherein the entire academic environment and all its instrumentalities are permeated with the spirit of Christian piety. In other words, the distinctive function of the school is to habituate the minds of students in truth. This end is properly intellectual and academic.

A completely Christian school must and will do more than this for its students, because the school has educational responsibilities that go beyond the function of teaching. But if the school is to be a school at all, it must teach, it must habituate the minds of students in truth. Failing in this, it may remain some kind of educational agency, but it cannot remain a school.

¹ Pius XI, *On the Christian Education of Youth* (Washington: 1936) p. 29.

The teaching of sacred doctrine in schools must submit to the requirements made generally of all academic subjects. People are constantly learning things as they happen to come along all through life. In schools, people are supposed to learn things not haphazardly as they *happen* to come along, but rather in an orderly fashion, precisely as they *should* occur. Therefore, an essential characteristic of academic learning will be intelligible order.

Further, when the content of a subject has been arranged in an intelligible order, it must be presented according to distinctively academic methods. All of these are reducible to what the Schoolmen called the *modi sciendi*, i. e., definition, division and demonstration.

Theology is the application of reason to the truths of faith, *fides quaerens intellectum*. Theology is a discursive wisdom that considers, in the light of divine revelation, all the truth that God has revealed. It is the function of theology to defend the principles of faith from which it springs, to draw conclusions from revealed principles, and to judge all things in the light of revelation. Now all of this is essentially an intellectual endeavor, and it is most proper to the academic environment and method of the schools. Theology is the only essentially intelligible and orderly presentation of divine wisdom possible in the schools. Insofar as the academic presentation of sacred doctrine is essentially intelligible, orderly, and amenable to pedagogical communication, it is theological.

2. It is generally agreed that the most perfect development of theological wisdom is to be found in the Scholastic method. The very name implies the historical truth that this method was developed by schoolmen, in schools, and precisely to fit the needs of schools. Centuries of experience have shown that Scholastic theology fits perfectly into the academic curriculum. Experience likewise shows that when it is lacking in a curriculum, a true Christian wisdom cannot be unfolded to the students by academic means.

In any curriculum worthy of the name, many and diverse subjects must be studied, a wide variety of arts acquired, and various levels of secondary causality investigated. The very diversity embraced in any curriculum offers ready-made material for a severe case of intellectual indigestion. In the interests of intellectual in-

tegration, psychological balance, and cultural vision, some specifically academic principle of order must be an integral part of the process of learning. This principle must be absolutely superior to everything else that is taught; it must form a framework of reference within which all learning can be properly ordered, and it must furnish an absolute standard by which all else can be judged. In view of the fact that the curriculum itself is an intellectual entity, the principle by which it can be integrated must itself be intellectual. In view of the fact that a curriculum should lead the students to be habituated in truth according to the various causes of things, the principle of integration must itself deal with the absolutely highest cause and must judge all else in the light of that cause. Because man is *de facto* elevated to the supernatural order, and because he is directed by Divine Revelation, the natural wisdom of metaphysics is insufficient to discharge fully the function of integrating the academic curriculum. The only other wisdom is that which derives its principles from Faith, and elaborates and applies them by reason; and this is the wisdom we call theology.

3. In a distinguished article,² Father John C. Murray, S.J., developed a concept of the layman's vocation chiefly from Papal pronouncements on the subject. He concludes that the specific function of the laity is to mediate between the spiritual and the temporal order—to mediate between the essentially sacerdotal body of the Church (the means and milieu of man's total salvation in body and soul), and the essentially secular, this-worldly body of human society wherein man is ordered to a temporal end, the achievement of his proper human perfection. This mediation consists in the penetration, shaping and control of the temporal order by an essentially spiritual and religious action. The effect of this mediation is simply to Christianize the temporal environment and to direct it to the ends of the Redemption.

Catholic education, in which Catholic schooling plays a vital role, has for its purpose to prepare men for what they must be and for what they must do in this life, so that they may attain to their ultimate happiness in the next. Consequently, Catholic school-

² J. C. Murray, "Towards a Theology for Laymen," *Theological Studies* V (1945) pp. 43-75; 340-376.

ing must aid in preparing laymen to discharge their Christian vocation. In view of the nature and purpose of the school, the preparation received there will consist properly and immediately in the intellectual and artistic formation necessary for the layman's vocation.

If the layman is to mediate between the spiritual and temporal orders, he must first have a clear understanding of both. This understanding cannot be complete without the wisdom of theology which views and judges all reality in terms of its relation to God. Unless a man is able to judge reality according to its objective value in terms of its highest causes, he will not be prepared either to determine what changes are necessary or desirable, nor will he have a clear vision of what spiritual means are to be employed in the task. Now this understanding of the realities of life and the ability to judge them in the light of their highest causes is precisely the result of the habit of the wisdom of theology. It seems clear, then, that the best academic preparation that can be had for the layman's vocation will be had only through a curriculum integrated by theology.

Return to Digest of Discussion

Almost all of the other viewpoints expressed at the seminar seem to be reducible to the two just exposed, or to be variations of one or the other, or an attempt at synthesis. Thus, one of the pioneers in the teaching of Theology to Sisters, said that the only possible solution is somewhere in the center between leftism and rightism. Catholic college students must derive from their courses clear, well formulated ideas about Revelation. Leftists, he thought, tend to stand too far off from dogmatic truths as pronounced and defined by the Church. The older methods of teaching religion are the better, provided that they inspire as well as enlighten. A solution could perhaps be found by combining the intellectual clarity which Thomism has inherited from the Angelic Doctor, with the affective warmth of St. Bonaventure, who defines theology as "veritatis credibilis notitia pia." (*De Septem Donis Spiritus Sancti*, IV, 13.)

Father Cyril Vollert, S.J., on the other hand, rejected the advisability of what he termed "centrism," and proposed that college

teachers of theology be both leftist and rightist—i. e., that they teach not only the traditional courses in Dogma and Moral, but also the other Sacred Sciences, Liturgy, Catholic Action, etc. He acknowledged the practical difficulties of such a plan so far as the allotment of hours in the curriculum is concerned.

Father Paul Palmer, S.J., expressed a more radical view when he discounted most of the present methods of teaching theology and called for far greater emphasis on the teaching of positive theology, and for much more use than is now customary of the founts of Sacred Doctrine,—Scripture and Tradition.

A view that seems to have represented the ideas of several of those present who did not take an active part in the discussion but expressed their views privately, was presented by one of the seminar group who said that to his knowledge, the only method that has proved successful anywhere is teaching based on an attempt to inspire rather than merely to instruct. Most "rightist" religion textbooks are unsuccessful because they are too dull, and too difficult for the ordinary college student. He proposed a method such as the following: Members of a Religion class should be encouraged to present some problem or difficulty, not merely hypothetical but actual, regarding Dogma, Moral, Christian living, or any such subject. The teacher should meet the problem or difficulty with appropriate references to the Bible, particularly to the New Testament, and then discuss the matter from the doctrinal angle.

The evening session, at which Father Sheedy again graciously presided, lasted until almost 11 P. M. In it the views of Father Gallagher and Father Donlan were again presented, and the discussion for the most part centered around these two outlooks.

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