

AMERICAN CULTURE AND THEOLOGY

An American theology ought to begin with American experience rather than with Christian doctrine. A respectable and distinctive American theology has not yet been devised because Catholic theology does not take American experience seriously.

There are a number of things American theology obviously cannot do. If we begin with these limitations, we can arrive more easily at the critical point of our definition and description of this theology.

In order to provide an indication of the methodology involved in American theology, this paper will be given without the academic apparatus judged so imperative in meetings of this kind. Such research and dependence on the past and other authors is not without its merits; indeed, this author has not been a stranger to it in previous addresses to this assembly. Nonetheless the appeal to systemization and tradition is not a theology developed in a distinctively American manner. American theology has not yet learned to think on its own or to feel comfortable in its own environment. In a sense, the American theologian is the one who seeks to speak from his experience rather than from his scholarship, from exposure to the American experiment rather than from assimilation of all that has preceded it.

American theology has been cautious because it has not trusted its own genius, shallow because it repeats what has been said before and often better, fearful because it hides its courage in research and in certification of its own insights by non-American authorities through magisterial guide-lines, biblical categories, conciliar exegesis—all of which is to the point but none of which contributes to the distinctiveness of a new theology. American theology has been in a state of inferiority because it has dealt with elements oblique to American experience and out of tune with the character of the culture. We have supposed, foolishly, that one was more Catholic if he was Europeanized and that too earnest a regard of American experience would lead to the Reformation rather than to Rome. It is

time for us to do our own thinking, to find a new path to Rome, and to define American experience as a way of enriching Catholic tradition rather than the reverse.

Something utterly new has come to pass on these shores. American experience may not prove to have been the most significant moment in human history, but it has been, unquestionably, a different moment.

When one designates elements in an American theology, he must keep in mind that no one of these elements is, in itself, a distinctively American characteristic. Americans, after all, share a common experience with other men. It is not the uniqueness of the elements we are about to articulate but the emphasis given to them and the amalgamation of them which make them American.

There are three features of American culture which ought to find their way into American theology.

BREAK WITH THE PAST

One of the most obvious features of American culture is its desire to break with the past. Jefferson wrote to Madison from Paris in 1789 raising the "question whether one generation of men has a right to bind another. . . ."

Obviously, there are limits which must be observed in any break with the past, especially in the discipline of theology. Tradition has its place in every style of life; its dislocation is not only unwise but even impossible.

The fact of the matter, however, is that most cultures of the world are traditional, rooted in the past, concerned with conserving and preserving. There are more cultures than the world requires which seek to keep the world's history, to manage its records, to change only as a last resort. The world is in need of a culture which begins with the present, one which is wise enough to know that it cannot break completely with the past, but daring enough to attempt a more significant break than other cultures allow. American culture is more apt than any other culture to accomplish this task, and yet nothing theologically new has come from these shores. No daring, prophetic, new, innovative, original American voice has been raised

in the community of theologians. We theologians are out of step with our own culture, compromised by Europe's past rather than vitalized by America's possibilities.

This country was established as a new experiment, one which has not wholly succeeded but one which can trace its failures to its experimental character. No American theologian has yet made an original contribution or sustained a major failure. This is because no American theologian has yet been sufficiently American in his theology.

This desire for an American theology is not rooted in chauvinism, presupposes no inherent superiority in our cultural make-up, has little interest in separating itself from the world community of theologians. Rather, American theology must be free of the past in a way no previous theology has attempted. "We must again try to discover," as Hawthorne once commented, "what sort of a world this is, and why we have been sent hither. . . ."

If the first characteristic of an American theology is to break with the past, then we must ask ourselves what should form the substance of its reflection. American theology is better equipped than any other national theology to deal with a theology of life because it has seen life occur in more diverse forms than any other culture. America first recognized life as a reality which had to develop on its own rather than through rigid controls or tenacious regard for the past. For this reason, the possibility of a concrete theology of community offers American theology a greater opportunity than any other enterprise. The pluriformity and restlessness which characterize American life are at the heart of a strong community. Americans will never produce an abstract theology any more than they have been able to produce a non-pragmatic philosophy. This does not mean that the transcendental must be dismissed from our considerations but it does mean that its starting-point is the pragmatic situation.

There are factors in the development of a theology of community, which, of course, would enter into an American ecclesiology that American culture can develop with especial force. These include the primacy of conscience rather than authority, the principle of diversity, possibilities for marginal existence, the definition of respon-

sible dissent, the experimental character of many forms of life within the community, its provisional status, and its orientation to pragmatic, not expedient, consequences.

INNOCENCE

A second characteristic of an American theology ought to be its commitment to the inherent innocence of the human situation. Although American theology could not be foolish enough to deny the reality of sin, even original sin, it will always have a difficulty with this doctrine. This difficulty is rooted in our lack of a sense of community with those who existed before us. We tend to be individualistic when it comes to the past and to see history as something we do not inherit but create.

America exists in an abiding attitude of revolution. It always has and it always will. This revolutionary character of our society and, hopefully, of our theology, derives from a commitment to the possibility of radical innocence. This is why the American Adam, the sinless Redeemer, the messianic figure has had so prominent a part to play in our literature.

American theology ought to recognize that innocence may have a cruelty to it, but it must also find a place for the category of innocence. Americans shall never deal well with a theology of sin or with a treatise on the existence of evil or even with a discussion on the nature of death. The infinite possibilities for innocence rather than the finite failure of sin is the proper subject of American theology. The confrontation of innocence with hyper-civilization has been one of the great themes of our culture. The victimization of innocence, its sometimes misguided character, its apparent simplicity and lack of sophistication and complexity have been recognized by thoughtful Americans. They have, nonetheless, not been able to affirm that any other way is better for us.

TRANSFORMATION

At the heart of American culture is a permanent hope for transformation. If a break with the past has much to tell us about the character of an American systematic theology and if innocence

should form the basis of an American moral theology, transformation is the key to an American spirituality.

The American does not wish to be settled. He is nomadic, never more himself than when he is engaged in a quest. He is never more peaceful than when he is mobile. He is a crusader and a perpetual pilgrim. The reason for this is that he is in desperate need to become a new man, to find a force which will transform him, a revolution which will return his innocence to him, or assure him of its presence. Americans ask so often what difference does it make if one is a Christian, or what does it mean to be an American, because they are intrigued with the notion of transformation. This is why revivalism has been a constant ingredient of America's religious life and why charismatic spirituality and unstructured liturgical worship will always be attractive to us.

The materials from which an American theology must be structured are those rooted in this nation's life, in experience rather than reason, the present rather than the past, innocence rather than sin, revolution rather than the *status quo*. An American theology is more at home with concrete alternatives than with synthetic solutions, with historical possibilities rather than with historical derivatives.

Because of its desire to break with the past, encounter innocence, and pursue transformation, an American theology must always find a place, even an honored place, for the person who functions on the margin of the community. A theology insensitive to this category will fail to mediate the American commitment to permanent revolution or the American aspiration for continual transformation.

America's myth of youth and its passion for freedom, its nomadic character and its trust in democracy derive from this central concern with transformation. An American theologian who seeks first to obey rather than to question, one who asks what authority has said rather than seeking to know whether it should have spoken is an American who shall repeat but not create. American theology ought to be populist, pragmatic, and to the point. It should explore, probe, seek change, create choices, further experience.

The time has come when American theology must achieve its maturity. All the elements by which it can do this are present. Never before have the strong and the weak, the light and the dark, the

good and the evil of our culture been so openly discussed, so easily admitted. Now is the time in a crisis of culture and in the possible collapse of the Church in this country when an American theology can be written. This is the time when the American theologian must become bold, not arrogant—staunch, not stubborn—new, not destructive—pragmatic, not expedient—concrete, not trivial—national, not ethnic—revolutionary, not anarchistic. For too many years, no voice has been sounded which could be called the voice of an American theology; for too long a time, no book has been written which could be recognized as American and theological, Catholic and utterly new. The time has come when American theology must seek not to correct its culture but interpret it, not to condemn the excesses in our society but to canonize its merits, not to listen to the past but to overcome it.

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