IS THERE A DISTINCT AMERICAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE FUTURE OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE?

The topic assigned to this group session, is put in the form of a question. Our particular task is to try to answer, or perhaps only begin to understand, the question: Is there a distinct American contribution to the future of the religious life?

To be clear at the outset, the context of this discussion limits the use of the term religious life to those societies in the Roman Catholic Church to whom the name has been historically and canonically applied.

This narrow understanding of the term is adopted for purposes of clarity and methodology and so excludes certain communities whose way of life in a larger and deeper sense is most certainly religious: the formally organized religious communities within Judaism, Islam, or the oriental and primitive religions, for example; the institutionalized religious congregations in the Christian churches outside the Roman communion and the secular institutes within it; other societies such as the family, the parish, and many other similar organizations or communes. Many of these can rightly claim to live a style of life that is religious. It can be readily admitted, with Gabriel Moran, that for all of these communities whose religious life is beyond question there is a basis for resentment and an implicit affront in the appropriation of the term by the Roman Catholic canonical communities.[1] Yet this does not deny all legitimacy to the narrower usage. It may well turn out that part of the solution to the problem in the narrower context will demand that these two meanings of the term religious life be put in some better relation the one to the other.

The first thing that strikes us as we juxtapose the American experience and the religious life is that the question is relatively new; in pre-aggiornamento days it was hardly ever asked. Like so

[1] G. Moran, "Religious Community: A Call to be Born" in *National Catholic Reporter* Dec. 18, 1970, p. 9. See also his development of this theme in *The New Community* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 10ff.

many other aspects of our American situation the religious life was largely a European import. If this session had been entitled "What *was* the American contribution to the Religious Life?" the presentation could be short indeed.[2] Mother Seton, Isaac Hecker and the Paulist experience, the founding of Maryknoll, all come to mind. But even these drew heavily on European models for their life style if not their apostolic thrust; they were rapidly brought in varying degrees under the Roman and canonical influence. For the most part, it was the European based institutes that attracted the majority of Americans who chose to lead the religious life. After World War II especially, Americans were able to make some contribution to the growth of their institutes in terms of numerical expansion (one thinks especially of the Trappists in this connection), financial support (we developed effective fund raisers and builders), and perhaps apostolic impact (the Catholic school system, for example, the retreat movement, street preaching and the American missionaries). In the fifties a vogue developed for electing American superior generals and that too may have been a contribution of sorts. But by and large the American influence remained minimal and unrecognized in questions of major policy touching the nature of the religious life and its life style.

Part of the reason for this lack of American leadership was due, no doubt, to the fact that American religious brought very little that was distinctly American into their religious experience at all. American Catholicism until rather recently tended to be a ghetto Catholicism dominated by the outlook of the immigrant generations. This involved an implicit adherence to the European dogmatic tradition whereby the modern world was the avowed enemy; it was tantamount to heresy to apply to religious thought the American spirit of pragmatism, pluralism, secularity, and the principle of change. The lay Catholic in the secular world could solve the conflict by being Catholic on Sunday, in his home and private life while being typically American for the rest of the week in his business and politics. The religious, however, was supposedly dedicated all

[2] For a somewhat more extended development of this point, see T. O'Meara *Holiness and Radicalism in Religious Life* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), pp. 4-6.

day, every day, to a life that was monolithic, other-worldly, unchangeable, and dedicated. Entering a religious congregation meant not only the renunciation of marriage, property, family ties, and self determination, but also much of the culture and freedom typical of the American way.

Some adaptations, of course, were made. American pragmatism is too deeply rooted in the national character not to emerge in some form or other. It is precisely this that led to the external expansion of personnel, facilities, and apostolic enterprises of American religious. Common sense adaptions were made, also, especially in the institutes of men, to make the ancient rule at least partially livable in the modern world. This reflected a typical pragmatism. Canonists and superiors alike used their American ingenuity to develop interpretations so that ball games and horse races, tobacco and liquor, radio and television could be permitted to enter the sacred precincts without serious detriment to the rule or the apostolate. At least this was made to work for men. In the days before women's lib, what went on in the sisters' convent wasn't considered important enough for anyone to care.

In the process of renewal that began in Vatican II the concept and style of the religious life has undergone significant change. There isn't a single one of the elements in the definition of religious life given in Canon 487 that has not been challenged in the process. The evangelical counsels were undermined by a host of historical, juridicial and exegetical questions; many biblical moralists would deny that there is such a thing.[3] The traditional scholastic doctrine of states of perfection, the distinctions between states and function, between the charity of religious and that of seculars, effectively died when the fathers of Vatican II put them aside in preparing its document of the religious life. *Perfectae Caritatis*, widely recognized as one of the less inspiring products of the Council, at least pointed away from the traditional theology to the total gospel and to the signs of the times as *loci* and *foci* for the renewal of the congregations

[3] See, for example, the discussion in R. Schackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965); also, Q. Quesnell, "'Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven' (Mt 19: 12)" in *CBQ* 30 (1968), 335ff.

and orders. All of these developments were profound enough to open the religious life to a more distinctively American influence.

American religious were not slow to seize this opportunity. In many congregations it was the American political experience and administrative know-how that was called upon to help develop new structures of community government, new concepts of authority, and new confidence in a fully participatory decision making process.[4] Less formal but ultimately more significant was the discovery of the contemporary thought world by some at least of American religious. More and more they began to put aside the ghetto mentality and its presuppositions, to accept change and pluralism, to celebrate the secular world and social concerns. There was a brand new refusal to renounce self determination and personal friendships or to endure any longer an ancient European life style imposed on a community of contemporary Americans.

Vatican II alone was not enough to explain this development. It is conceivable that during this period more American religious attended to the straightforward protest of Bishop Robinson and Dietrich Bonhoeffer than to all the carefully nuanced documents of Vatican II put together. These were the new European voices that found a response in the young and prepared the way for the radical and popular American theologies of the sixties: secular theology, the death of God, religionless Christianity, situation ethics, and the theology of play.[5] Not all American religious of course, reacted positively and decisively to these revolutionary approaches. But enough of them did, especially the "new breed" as they were then called, and with such enthusiasm as to insure that the theology of the religious life could never be the same again. Even now, when

[4] A good example is *The Book of Government* (especially the introduction) adopted in the second session of the thirty-ninth general chapter of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in 1967 and published in English by the F.S.C. National Secretariat at Lockport, Ill. The American influence on this document and the re-structuring of this world wide congregation of lay religious can be seen in the position papers prepared by Casimir Gabriel F.S.C., Gabriel Moran F.S.C., and Luke Salm, F.S.C. These papers, after their use by the chapter, were published in the *Lasallian Digest* 9, 1 (Fall 1966).

[5] The relevant works of Robinson, Bonhoeffer, Cox, Fletcher, Altizer, Hamilton, and Keen, as well as the "debate" books that follow up the critical reactions, are too well known to need documentation here.

many of these theological fads have lost their novelty, their impact on religious thinking remains. American religious, especially those with an optimistic eye to the future, have ever since looked more and more to American authors to articulate the meaning of their faith experience and to provide a viable future for the religious life.

For this reason, it is important to review the present state of American theology. It is surely more advanced than is recognized by the majority of American Catholics whose theology is still tied to the traditional European categories. American theologians are well beyond the "churchy" questions of ministry, teaching authority, ecumenism, and biblical hermeneutics.[6] American theology remains radical in the best sense; it dares to raise the question of whether there can be a future for religion at all; it is not distracted by peripheral and intramural questions such as birth control and infallibility, nor does it hope for a viable future out of theological categories that are dead. Herbert Richardson sees our contemporary public atheism as a sign of the disintegration of the total cultural climate that up until now has characterized the modern world.[7] Eugene Fontinell writes his book on the presupposition that religion is in a state of collapse.[8] Langdon Gilkey sees no future for Protestant fundamentalism, metaphysical theology, neo-orthodoxy, or the radical and secular theologies of the sixties,[9] and the same could probably be said of their Catholic counterparts. Peter Berger's sociological observations lead him to conclude that the traditional religions have become cognitive minorities whose plausibility structures are becoming more and more difficult to maintain in the modern world.[10]

Despite this dismal but probably accurate assessment of the religious situation, the same American authors with typical American optimism have begun to search in the American experience for a

[6] See, in this connection, G. Baum, "Prospective Theology" in *The Ecumenist* 8, 5 (July 1970).

[7] H. Richardson, *Toward an American Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

[8] E. Fontinell, *Toward a Reconstruction of Religion* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970).

[9] L. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

[10] P. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969).

new basis of hope for religion. Richardson finds it in our traditional affirmation of human progress and social technology within an explicitly religious perspective.[11] Fontinell finds in pragmatism his hope for a reconstruction of religion.[12] Gilkey would name the whirlwind and renew God language out of the ultimacy to be found in secular experience.[13] Berger urges us to relativize the relativizers and to look for signs of transcendence, a rumor of angels, in prototypical human gestures.[14] On a similar basis, Gabriel Moran projects a new design for religion;[15] Anthony Padavano finds soteriological themes in American literature;[16] Thomas O'Meara and Donald Weisser put it all together in a handy anthology which suggests that a theology for the future can be shaped out of American politics, revolution, social and historical experience, science, behavior, language, and education.[17] No projection of the future of the religious life can ignore the impact this sort of American theology is likely to have.

This positive attitude of theologians toward the American experience has encouraged young religious especially to identify with their cultural heritage and to look there for new and radical ways to live and spread the gospel in the world. They want to incorporate into their religious outlook such dimensions of the American character as those that Bernard Loomer has pointed out: the pioneering spirit to open new frontiers, the simple trust that the Indians taught us and on which the country was founded, the joy of creativity and optimism in a specially sensitive relation to nature and its resources, a sense of social responsibility and the social nature of individuality, the pragmatism that is willing to settle for the possible and the better rather than the best, and even our affluence and our awareness of what money can do.[18]

[11] H. Richardson, *op. cit.*, especially Chapter 5.

[12] E. Fontinell, *op. cit.*, especially Chapter 5.

[13] L. Gilkey, *op. cit.*, especially Part II, Chapters 3 and 4.

[14] P. Berger, *op. cit.*, especially Chapters 2 and 3.

[15] G. Moran, *Design for Religion* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

[16] A. Padavano, *American Culture and the Quest for Christ* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1970).

[17] T. O'Meara and D. Weisser, eds., *Projections: Shaping an American Theology for the Future* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970).

[18] I am indebted for much of this analysis to the transcript of the tape of

All of this appeals to the imagination and the enthusiasm of young religious. We could almost stop here and proclaim this to be the American contribution to the future of the religious life. What complicates the problem is the threat that this poses to those religious who are older or, more accurately, those concerned with tradition, continuity, and the values that this life exemplified in the past. It is an interesting fact that of all the aspects of Church life discussed at this convention in relation to the American experience, this session on the religious life is the only one with the word "future" in its title. It is not clear whether this was meant to imply some doubt or premonition that there may be no future at all or, on the other hand, whether the future was presumed to be assured and all that need be done would be to draw out of the American experience some models or blueprints to help bring it into being. The ambiguity in the title reflects the ambiguity in the situation. At least this analysis of the American experience helps to define the areas of ambiguity in the present and some of the challenges for the future. The remainder of this discussion, then, might profitably turn to four such challenges: the challenge of radicalism, of pluralism, of permanence, and of secularization. Though these challenges are universal and hardly limited to American religious, they relate to American culture and experience in a special way.

The first of these challenges is radicalism. The term is applied to the religious life by Thomas O'Meara and is contrasted in his book with renewal. He makes the point, as many others have, that the renewal set in motion by Vatican II seems to have failed. He calls instead for a new radicalism, a new critique of "words, of structures, of history," which he says "must begin at point zero, with no presuppositions other than the most basic values of the evangelical and ecclesial community."[19] The use of the term radical in this context suggests a compatibility between the radical demands of the gospel and the radical or revolutionary movements of our time. While this Christian radicalism has a strong appeal for the future-oriented religious, it constitutes a real threat for those who confront the failure

an unpublished address entitled "A Theology for America," delivered by Bernard Loomer at St. Mary's College, California, on July 7, 1970.

[19] T. O'Meara, *Holiness and Radicalism in Religious Life,* p. 22.

of renewal in the opposite way by blaming the radicals[20] and retreating to a traditionalist stand.

As a result, there are intelligent and dedicated religious today who are genuinely convinced that their corporate future lies in one, and only one, of these approaches, each of which claims support in the gospel and the church. The radical warns that the future must be faced and grasped before it is too late, with minimal regard for the past. The traditionalist is usually realistic enough to accept some change as inevitable but he wants it to be cautious and gradual, convinced that there can be no future unless the patrimony of the past remains essentially untouched. The renewalist feels that there is much from the past that can and should be salvaged, but his hope for the future lies in a transformation and revival of the best of the tradition under the influence of the new ideas.

Of the three positions, the renewalist is probably the one that most religious would want to identify with, but it is the most difficult to maintain. Inevitably the pressures from both sides force a choice between tradition and the future. Religious communities are consequently living now with the same divisions that haunt the rest of the church.[21] Do you read *The Wanderer* or the *NCR?* Do you teach the Baltimore catechism or the Dutch? Do you favor the rhetoric that comes out of the Vatican or out of the Berrigans? The divisiveness inherent in these choices, or the manifold options in between, stems from the challenge of radicalism and is something new in the religious life. It is the first of the ambiguities that must be resolved before we can hope for a future for the religious life.

The second contemporary challenge stemming from the American experience is pluralism. The challenge of pluralism is implicit in the challenge of radicalism. Gone are the days of a uniform schedule, corporate commitment, and homogeneity of thought, spirit and style in the religious life. If there is any accuracy in what has just been described as the polarization between radicals, traditionalists, and renewalists, then this question of ideological pluralism assumes seri-

[20] For example, J. Hitchcock, "Aggiornamento has Failed," *Commonweal,* 94, 10 (May 14, 1971).

[21] For a temperate description of this situation, see T. Clarke, "Renewal in the Church: Two Mentalities in Conflict," *America* 124, 9 (March 6, 1971).

ous proportions. More than any other factor, it has prevented our best theories about creating community from working out in practice. If groups that form within a community cannot agree together on the essential elements and purpose of the religious life, how can they manage to live together? If so, on what basis and for how long? How much diversity on basic questions can a religious community or congregation endure?

The nature and dimensions of the problem of pluralism could be illustrated and tested by reference to one possible application. Gabriel Moran, for one, seems to have suggested for discussion the possibility that the religious community, the "new" community as he calls it, might be open to a varied sexual mix, a variety of ways of being "in" and "out" of the community, including a variety of sexual relationships between and including celibacy and marriage.[22]

This question is not unrelated to the current discussion on clerical celibacy. In the older theories it was taken for granted that celibacy is a distinctive and constitutive norm of the religious life in a way it is not for the priesthood. One might even have favored marriage as an option for diocesan clergy in the hope that the celibate witness of religious might be more apparent and effective. But the American social experience especially has blurred the old distinctions. The ordinary American Catholic identifies the religious and the clergy; Americans do not think of their parish priests as secular any more than they think of nuns and brothers as lay persons. Clergy and religious in America fraternize extensively, share many of the same problems and experiences, cultivate the same petty vices, and accept the same compromises, such as the American way of life demands. The increasing support for optional clerical celibacy cannot but have its echo among the religious whose preoccupations are the same.

If this is so, the problem of pluralism becomes specific. Can we go so far as to question whether celibacy and sexual homogeneity are essential to the religious life? How much and what forms of sexual expression are compatible with the religious life? Is it possible that pluralism in this matter could help resolve the tensions in the more abstract and ideological pluralism that now exists? Or would such an

[22] G. Moran, *The New Community*, p. 125ff.

adaptation be an unthinkable compromise with the prevalent mood of the times? This and all the other problems of how to balance pluralism and homogeneity constitute a second area of ambiguity whose resolution is crucial to a future for the religious life.

The third challenge is permanence. For some years now various attempts have been made to develop a theory of the temporary vocation. In this instance it is possible that the facts of the matter are more significant than any theory. Americans, especially young Americans, are inclined to see nothing but hypocrisy in the present canonical practice. They are not impressed with the notion of perpetual vows that are "perpetual" only until a dispensation is sought and obtained. Nor, for that matter, are they impressed by a series of temporary vows where permanent commitment is the goal and sometimes the condition of their emission. The situation is not helped by the increasing number of even older religious seeking dispensation from perpetual vows. Religious men have known about dispensations for a long time and have taken advantage of them. In the last five years or so religious women, among whom dispensations were once relatively rare, now seem to have discovered the possibility and are making up for lost time. Dispensations, originally intended no doubt for exceptional cases, seem now in certain age groups to have become more and more the rule.

A case can certainly be made for a theology and a canon law that would better conform to the facts.[23] How else would the religious life appeal to young Americans who can be idealistic enough but only for a year or two at a time? Not long ago, one American provincial superior advertised in a national weekly inviting candidates to join his institute on just such a basis. This is an imaginative approach that recognizes the tension in the American spirit between a genuine frontier idealism and pragmatic realism: if a beautiful dream doesn't work out after a while, abandon it and try for something else. One might ask, however, whether the religious life could survive and be effective on such a precarious premise. The answer at this moment is not very clear. The questions on both sides do, however, point to

[23] For an example of the opposite view, see T. Vitali, "A Question of Life or Death: Is 'Temporary Vocation' a Valid Concept?" *Review for Religious* 30, 1 (Jan. 1971).

yet another area of ambiguity that needs resolution if there is to be a religious life in America for very much longer.

The fourth and final challenge to be offered for discussion here is secularization. Though not peculiar to America, this sociological process is more advanced here and has had more direct impact on religious thought. It has affected American religious life in a special and fundamental way in the form of a challenge to the traditional notions of mission and prayer. Mission is here used to refer to the consciously apostolic work that most religious institutes with a numerous American membership have traditionally undertaken for the spread of the gospel in the world. Most of the modern congregations were founded for some such apostolic end and many of the older orders have adopted one or another of them. This sense of a definable apostolate tended to give a characteristic spirit and sense of purpose to the various institutes. A corporate mission helped to boost morale, to attract new members, and to provide a ground for community solidarity.

The process of secularization has shifted the emphasis from corporate apostolates sponsored by the churches to personal service and choice, from a strictly religious zeal for conversion and the "saving of souls" to genuine concern for human betterment in the secular world, from a close identification between the religious community and the apostolic institution to the separation of community from work. Consequently, mission has lost much of its potential as a cohesive force in the religious life.

The situation of the teaching orders in Catholic schools is an outstanding example. Many of the religious in institutes devoted to this work have become disenchanted with it. They resent being used as "cheap labor" to keep alive a school system that many consider an anachronism in American pluralistic society. The religious who do see a human and apostolic potential in this work often want to regroup into communities that are not work-oriented. Such religious often see no difference, in terms of apostolate, between their own teaching and that of lay persons. John Greeley in his dissertation recently accepted in the School of Theology at Catholic University, argues that there is none.[24]

[24] J. Greeley, *The Function of Faith in the Vocation of Apostolic Religious*

If secularization is a challenge to the traditional notion of mission, it is even more so to prayer which has a longer history and a more universal role as an essential element in the religious life. In his dissertation, John Greeley puts prayer in the sense of faith-consciousness at the very center of religious life. He says: "The most important element of a religious personality is the development of a sense of the transcendent, of an abiding awareness of God's love, so that he is impelled to the love of the neighbor. Failing this there is no great or compelling reason for the religious life to exist."[25] Yet the prayer forms traditional in the religious life, and presumably established to guarantee the development of this sense of the transcendent, seem to have lost much of their vitality and effectiveness. The pace of secularization has created a situation where splendid liturgy, standarized vocal prayers, and scheduled times for meditation no longer engage many religious, especially young Americans; these things no longer "turn them on" as they would say.

If prayer is as essential as John Greeley says and the tradition has insisted, then how do we adjust to this challenge? The more radical approach argues that formal prayer is hardly necessary at all, that one can meet God more adequately in creative work and concern for other persons. This view is in line with American activist and pragmatic predispositions. Some suggest liturgical celebration with meditative bible reading as a solution, but the liturgical enthusiasm of a few years ago on which this is based seems to have lost its impetus. It survives as dynamic prayer only in liturgies that are occasional, informal, highly personal, and contemporary in form and mood. The Pentecostal movement can be cited to be the prayer trend of the moment but its effectiveness and staying power are yet to be

Brothers (Washington: C.U.A. diss., 1971), p. 213, 219 and passim. Though this thesis make a forceful and legitimate case for a faith quality as the distinguishing mark of brothers in apostolic institutes, it could be argued that the author misinterprets the mind of the General Chapter of the Christian Brothers when he says that the Chapter "took as the principle of unity the apostolic work of the Brothers" (p. 232) or that in the documents "other elements of the Brothers' life are subordinate to the apostolate" (p. 243). In fact, the Chapter in question explicitly refused to accept any one such principle or to subordinate one element to the other as the history of the text of the *Declaration* shows. See L. Salm, *A Guide to the Documents of the Thirty-ninth General Chapter: Second Session* (Lockport, Ill: FSC Secretariat, 1968).

[25] J. Greeley, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

tested. Sometimes Pentecostal prayer is conjoined with prayer forms taken from exotic religious traditions that involve dance, body posturing, and contact.[26] All of these tentative approaches create one more area, and an essential one, of confusion and uncertainty.[27] American secularization, then, especially as it threatens traditional notions of prayer and the apostolate, constitutes an important challenge and source of ambiguity upon the resolution of which the future of the religious life depends.

The conclusion to this paper can be briefly stated. In answer to the question "Is there a distinctive American contribution to the future of the religious life?" all we can say is that we don't know. The American contribution is increasingly apparent in its nature and in its impact. It both threatens the very existence of the religious life and, at the same time, offers the greatest hope it has for a significant future. Which of these two possibilities will ensue depends in large measure on how we resolve the ambiguities implicit in the four challenges of radicalism, pluralism, permanence and secularization. We cannot solve these problems here. Theologians in a special way must become more engaged in them, as must also the religious themselves and the whole Catholic community. On this depends our fidelity to the past, our challenge for the present and our hope for the future.

LUKE SALM, F.S.C.
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[26] In addition to the growing literature on the Pentecostal movement and Pentecostal prayer, see also G. Maloney, "And Now, the Yoga Retreat," in *America* 124, 22 (June 5, 1971) and the news story "Nuns' Prayer Movement Attracts Laity," *The New York Times,* May 31, 1971.

[27] See, for example, R. Reuther, "The Vanishing Religious Order and the New Human Community," *The Christian Century,* 88, 14 (April 7, 1971).