

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF NORTH AMERICAN THEOLOGY: THE U.S. STORY

This Land is Your Land  
This Land is My Land  
From California to the New York Islands  
From the Redwood Forests to the Gulf Stream Waters  
This Land was Made for You and Me.<sup>1</sup>

While I was thinking about tonight's address, my friend Michael True suggested that a talk to theologians on "the U.S. story" sounded like an excellent opportunity to launch the long-stalled campaign to canonize Woodie Guthrie and replace "The Star Spangled Banner" with "This Land is Your Land." Reluctantly, I will forego the temptation and simply let the verse stand as the text for tonight's reflections. If, in the words of another troubadour of the American civil religion (though one less suitable for canonization) Norman Mailer, our Church is now "full of mutations and staggering across deserts of faith," it may be due less to our departure from God than to the absence of meaning in our experience as Americans who happen to be Catholics.<sup>2</sup>

In the torrent of articles which preceded the recent extraordinary synod, few writers noticed the change in our sense of ourselves as Americans. John Kennedy, John XXIII, the council, all made many of my generation feel that, at last, this land was our land. We were "a new generation, American and Catholic." The action in those days was in the suburbs, in Newman clubs and on Catholic campuses, among "the emerging laity," wherever the Catholic middle class gathered. We were going to build an open church modeled on the open society. We were going to dismantle the Catholic ghetto and take our place on the historic stage, not because we were angry at the Church which had nurtured us, as later critics charged, but because a larger, richer possibility beckoned.<sup>3</sup> We lived, we liberal Catholics, at the heart of a great, compelling American myth. In Chaim Potok's novel, *The Chosen*, Danny Saunders, raised in silence by his Hasidic father, is expected to follow in his footsteps as leader of the community, a tzaddick. Danny, however, decides to attend Columbia University and become a psychologist. His

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<sup>1</sup>Text is in Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A life* (New York: Knopf, 1980) 142-43.

<sup>2</sup>Norman Mailer, *St. George and the Godfather* (New York: New American Library, 1976) 87.

<sup>3</sup>The conciliar and immediate post conciliar writings of Michael Novak, Daniel Callahan, Donald Thorman and Andrew Greeley are discussed in David O'Brien, *The Renewal of American Catholicism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) chap. 6.

father's reaction is surprising; Reb Saunders turns Danny free, for he believes his son has encountered "the Master of the Universe." Danny may leave his "beard and earlocks" behind, his father says, but "all his life he will be a tzaddick. He will be a tzaddick for the world, and the world badly needs a tzaddick."<sup>4</sup> We may not have "heard the world crying," as Danny did, but was not our experience like that?

A century earlier Isaac Hecker had told Catholics to plunge to the very depths of their souls. There they would find God, and with God's spirit as their guide, they could become men and women of their age and nation and help bring about "the triumph of the church," when every question of the soul would be answered and every aspiration of nature fulfilled. "America is the country of the future," Hecker wrote. "Never in the history of man has there been presented a spectacle of greater interest than the new page which our people are at this moment unfolding before the world's expectation." For Hecker it was especially exciting to be a Catholic in the United States. "Nowhere is there a promise of a brighter future for the Church than in our own country," Hecker said, "because religion reigns most worthily . . . when she rules by the voluntary force of the intelligent convictions of conscience." Although Hecker's age had its "martyrs, recluses and monastic communities," these would not be "its prevailing types of Christian perfection." Instead

Our age lives in its busy marts, in counting houses, in workshops, in homes and in the varied relations that form human society. . . . This is the field of conquest for the heroic Christian of our day. Out of the cares, toils and duties, afflictions and responsibilities of daily life are to be built the pillars of sanctity of our age.<sup>5</sup>

It was an exciting vision. Immigrants and timid Catholics should put aside their particularities, not because old world traditions were bad, but because the American way was richer and fuller, a closer approximation of the Kingdom of God. In doing so, they could bring the truths of their faith into the heart of American life, there to enrich the lives of all persons of good will and provide indispensable resources for the nation's glorious, providential experiment in human freedom.

Echoes of this liberation story are still heard. In the first draft of their economics pastoral, Archbishop Weakland's committee called upon ordinary Catholics in their daily life to "shape decisions and institutions in ways that enhance human dignity." This is a "most important path to holiness," the letter stated, one aimed at building "a world where love and friendship among all citizens of the globe becomes the goal of all."<sup>6</sup> But this vision of a church convinced of the providential movement of history, hopeful about its own people and alive to signs of the coming Kingdom, usually gives way today to another, less enchanting image. Andrew Greeley documents our new found wealth, education, access and status but

<sup>4</sup>Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* (New York: Fawcett, 1967) 268-69.

<sup>5</sup>Isaac Hecker, "The Future Triumph of the Church," sermon preached at the second Plenary Council of Baltimore, 1866, text in Hecker Papers, Paulist Fathers Archives, New York; Hecker, "Saint for the Day" in *Paulist Sermons* (New York: Arno Press, 1976).

<sup>6</sup>"Catholic Social Teaching and the United States Economy," First draft.

it no longer sounds like good news.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it is because Greeley and his communal Catholics sometimes seem to suggest that this is the end of the story, that we have not been liberated "to hear the world crying" or to bring about "the triumph of the Church" but to settle into a society which is the best we are likely to see. More often, though, among people like us, the story is forgotten for the opposite reason; America as found has turned out to be less than we hoped. Sub-cultural restorationists like James Hitchcock and Catholics United for the Faith think we have purchased success at the cost of our Catholic integrity.<sup>8</sup> Evangelical radicals as different as Daniel Berrigan and Ralph Martin agree that our success has made us complicit in the horrors of a decadent society, bent upon its own destruction.<sup>9</sup>

Even the most moderate seem convinced that the history of American Catholicism had been a gigantic mistake. In a striking and uncharacteristic passage in their pastoral letter on nuclear weapons, the American Bishops adopted almost verbatim Avery Dulles widely used image of the church as "a community of disciples." As a minority, we Catholics should identify rather easily with the early Church, they tell us. We should "regard as normal even the path of persecution and the possibility of martyrdom." Catholics should separate themselves from many "commonly accepted axioms" which stand in the way of that call. Sadly, our separation must be rather complete for the bishops and Dulles agree that our country is "increasingly estranged from Christian values" and we live in "a secularized, neo pagan society."<sup>10</sup> I, for one, was rather relieved when the bishops dropped Dulles's word "neopagan" from their final draft, but the image, hardly unique among contemporary Catholics, remains bleak. The historic project of the American Church to preserve the faith of its people and achieve a secure place in society, like the historic project of most of our families to achieve security and respectability, has apparently brought not liberation, but a new captivity.

Has our American story been that bad? Has our history been a story of liberation, as we once believed, or has it been one of pursuit of false gods? Were those who went before us headed toward the promised land, or were they merely circling about the fleshpots? Historians think we were once not quite American; now we are and they are not sure what to think of it. James Hennesey, for example, describes John Carroll's "plan" for an American Church "internally autonomous, self-perpetuating and free of the least taint of foreign jurisdiction." Unfortunately, Vatican centralization, the collapse of lay leadership, delay in developing a native clergy and evangelical resurgence all spelled failure for Carroll's efforts. Immigration and conflict with nativists instead "drove a deep sense of alienation from the American mainstream into the American Catholic subcon-

<sup>7</sup>Andrew Greeley, *American Catholics: A Social Portrait* (New York: Harper, 1977).

<sup>8</sup>See for example James Hitchcock, *Catholicism and Modernity: Confrontation or Capitulation* (New York: Seabury, 1979).

<sup>9</sup>Daniel Berrigan, *The Nightmare of God* (Portland OR, 1983); Ralph Martin, *A Crisis of Truth* (Ann Arbor MI, 1982).

<sup>10</sup>Avery Dulles, *A Church to Believe In: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 10-11; "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response" (Washington, United States Catholic Conference, 1983).

scious" so that development of a "Catholic tradition authentically American and at the same time authentically Catholic and Roman proved difficult of achievement." American Catholicism became a community "certain and set apart" until, after Vatican II, it reached "a revolutionary moment." American Catholics still retain a "special sense of themselves," Hennesey believes, but he is worried. He seems to agree with John Tracy Ellis, who, in more pessimistic moments, argues that our theologians have backed into a *de facto* alliance with secular humanism while too many of our people have adapted to the worst elements of American culture.<sup>11</sup>

Jay Dolan is more optimistic. He agrees with Hennesey that our national church began with a promising "republican interlude" but it was quickly overwhelmed by a more European style of Catholicism. Dolan provides the fullest portrait to date of immigrant Catholicism in all its complexity. Still, some common themes emerge. There was far more lay initiative than we had thought. A "new devotionism" marked American Catholicism, as "the plain, undemonstrative style of religion" of the republican period gave way to an "emotion packed religion distinguished by its emphasis on the practice of external rituals, communion with a host of heavenly relatives, and devotion to a suffering Savior, all mediated through a sacramental system controlled by the clergy." Lay leadership was shunted aside, clerical and lay roles were sharply defined, religion was correspondingly distinguished from other areas of life, and within the realm of religion the priest was supreme. Dolan argues that Catholic immigrants accepted all this because they were profoundly conservative. From the outside the immigrant church seemed alien and repressive, but from the inside the world made sense, loneliness and alienation were eased, and the lives of ordinary people were invested with dignity and meaning. Still, it was an old world transplant, with its pessimistic view of human nature, its resignation in the face of suffering, and its communal solidarity all bound to give way before the corrosive force of modernization. In the twentieth century, with the help of parochial schools, conservative leaders postponed that inevitable outcome. In triple melting pot fashion, they blended their people into a church which seemed itself an ethnic group until, in the wake of World War II, a new Catholic middle class began to push against the fences. Vatican II blew them down and a new and so far undefined Catholicism began to take shape.<sup>12</sup>

There is another, somewhat different way to tell this story, one which uses the active voice and allows for the possibility that yesterday's Catholics were participants in shaping their history. It begins with men and women who came because they chose to come. They found in their new communities people like themselves for whom life was immensely difficult and fragile. Hasia Diner's pioneering study of Irish immigrant women reveals the extent of drunkenness, desertion, industrial accidents and schizophrenia in Irish neighborhoods, a portrait of cultural disin-

<sup>11</sup>James Hennesey, *American Catholics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) passim, esp. p. 321. On Ellis see "Prospects: The U.S. Church," *Origins* 3 (November 1, 1973) 289-93; "Interview," *National Catholic Reporter*, May 19, 1978; "American Catholics in 1979," pamphlet (Boston: Pilot Publishing Company, 1979).

<sup>12</sup>Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience* (New York: Doubleday, 1985) passim.



tegration repeated among many other immigrant groups.<sup>13</sup> In the midst of these communities leaders appeared, usually people with intact families and steady employment. They began to organize the community in part to enhance their own life prospects by overcoming the stigma attached to their nationality, in part to preserve the continuity of their families and to express national and religious traditions they valued. There was no ideal essence of old world Catholicism to transplant, and their alienation from American society was less severe than we had supposed. Migration to America, Timothy L. Smith argues, involved "a redefinition in religious terms of the boundaries of peoplehood as folk memories were brought to bear on new aspirations." It led to "an intensification of the psychic basis of religious reflection and ethnoreligious commitment" and, most controversially, to "a revitalization of the conviction . . . that the goal of history is the creation of a common humanity, a brotherhood of faith and faithfulness." This latter made the relationship of religion and ethnicity dialectical, for "even while affirming that the unity of all mankind was the goal, intensified religious commitment defined more sharply the boundaries of subcultures and communities."<sup>14</sup> Thus, in the ethnic Catholic parish, there was both a sharp sense of the particularity of this group and a new, more expansive sense of Catholicity reflected in new devotions, the Roman liturgy, and the sometime defensive insistence on the long history and universal reach of the Catholic Church.

As Smith sees it, then, hope as well as memory shaped the life of immigrant churches and synagogues.<sup>15</sup> Based upon persuasion and commitment, these communities provided a principle of order in a disordered world, and a center of authority in a world of conflicting voices and multiple temptations. The project of self-consciously forming community was itself a uniquely modern adventure, as provision of the Church could no longer be taken for granted or left to the clergy or the state. Conservative piety, with its relatively pessimistic understanding of human nature and its less than revolutionary approach to social conditions, was quite functional to the situation in which newcomers found themselves. Preachers stressed again and again that people were free to choose; the possibilities of freedom could be realized, and its dangers to personal integrity and family life avoided, one pastor said, if people would place themselves "willingly under obligation."<sup>16</sup> They should join the Church, contribute to its support, receive its sacraments and follow its moral teaching. They should turn away from drink and boisterous behavior, fulfill their family responsibilities, and, as Leo XIII put it, "associate as

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<sup>13</sup>Hasia Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1983).

<sup>14</sup>Smith's major statement is "Religion and Ethnicity in America," *American Historical Review* 83 (December, 1978) 1155-85. See also "Congregation, State and Denomination," *William and Mary Quarterly* 35 (April, 1968) 156-76 and "Religious Denominations as Ethnic Communities," *Church History* 35 (June, 1966) 131-49.

<sup>15</sup>Timothy L. Smith, "Immigrant Social Aspirations and American Education, 1880-1930," *American Quarterly* 21 (Fall, 1969) 536.

<sup>16</sup>James O'Hara, undated notes in announcement book, archives, Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Syracuse, New York.

much as possible with other Catholics."<sup>17</sup> To those still close to their peasant roots, it was no surprise to learn that people were sinful, that the world was a hard place, and that self-control was a key to solving life's problems. After generations of study of cultures of poverty, it should not be a shock to learn that conservative theology worked better than liberal, that order, authority, clear moral rules and family stability can help, not hinder, the process of liberation.

Visitors to an urban parish at the turn of the century would find a confusing combination, to be sure. Preaching, with its emphasis on the weakness of human nature and the dangers of the world, might seem to suggest the need to escape the world by coming to church. But, the church, in fact, was filled with worldly activity, especially with projects to build a new church, which would be a monument to religious faith but also to worldly accomplishment, a source of pride for the people and a symbol of success for the pastor. The key to the paradox was that in the church people were learning about self-discipline and self-help. The routines of religious practice instilled habits of order and restraint, while at the same time opening horizons of new possibility. The Church depended upon its people, so that in the concrete experiences of parish participation, people discovered a new sense of their dignity and worth. The piety which at first glance was world denying, in practice was a kind of pastoral theology of liberation, for if it taught anything it taught that what had been need be no longer, that age old notions of deference and ascribed status could give way to a new life of personal responsibility and self-making. And the evidence for these new ideas was right there, in the progress of this parish of which this person was a part.

Then, as now, of course, the bottom-up process of church formation existed in some tension with the imperatives of the Catholic Church as an organization.<sup>18</sup> To survive in the context of pluralism, the Church had to make its members practicing Catholics, eliminate or co-opt traditional devotions and draw people to the sacraments. It had to persuade people to offer personal and financial supports, so it had to clarify the boundaries between the Church and competing organizations. In the twentieth century sociologists of religion would explain why conservative churches were growing by reference of clarity of belief, intensity of community life, and a set of demands which cemented group solidarity and institutional identity. Catholic parishes offered that and more, and in the process met and fulfilled the needs and aspirations of the people. But, of course, organizations have their own agendas. In Europe the ultramontane movement placed organizational needs at the forefront and defeated those who would place the institutional church in service to larger missionary objectives. In the United States the series of disputes centered around the Americanism controversy did the same. The school question in particular became the convergent issue around which conflicting currents gathered. Conservatives won out with their argument that, after the cement of ethnic-

<sup>17</sup>"Longinqua Oceani" in John Tracy Ellis, *Documents in American Catholic History* II (Chicago: Preager, 1964) 502-508.

<sup>18</sup>An excellent examination of the organizational church is Edward Kantowitz *Corporation Sole* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982). On the contemporary conflict of ministry and organization see John Coleman, "The Future of Ministry," *America* (March, 28 1981) 243-50.

ity receded, only schools could preserve Catholic loyalty and allow the organization to survive. Organizational priorities corresponded to the pastoral needs of new immigrants and most of the old ones; liberals had only a small middle class to fall back on. So the universalism of faith became focused exclusively on the Church, pastoral strategies of maintenance gradually replaced those of community, missionary and evangelical imperatives were made secondary to organizational considerations.

It is almost impossible to overemphasize the degree to which organizational priorities shaped the ideology of twentieth-century American Catholicism. "The teaching of Christ was not left to drift with the centuries," one bishop said. "The Savior promulgated a complete organization" at the center of which was the hierarchy, which had kept "inviolable the direct revelation that God gave personally to it in the person of his first priests." A priest in that same diocese announced to his people that "the cross before which we kneel must not be a cross of our own making," rather, "the cross before which we must kneel is the divinely established priesthood in its glorious hierarchy." Forty years later that diocese's bishop told an assembly at the dedication of a new school that the parish, the "church in miniature," needed three things, a school, for teaching was "not the greatest privilege of the priest but his greatest responsibility," an altar where the Mass could be celebrated by the priest, and of course, the priest, "the dispenser of the mercy of God (and) the grace of the redeemer, who works for the salvation of souls."<sup>19</sup> By then the people were not left out, but taken for granted. It is possible to argue, as Avery Dulles does, that in a paternalistic age, when people are used to being ordered about, they accepted such authoritarian definitions of church life.<sup>20</sup> But in the United States not only the more democratic experience of the Republican period but the sometimes bitter disputes which marked the early life of eastern and southern European immigrant parishes seems to challenge this interpretation. More likely the clerical monolith was acceptable because most church members had little interest in church policy after the battle for leadership in the ethnic community was over and after it became clear that the Church dealt only with religion. In addition, one suspects priests and bishops were good at their pastoral job. The great urban pastors rivaled the great urban politicians in their genuine identification with their people. Everything we know about those people, confirmed for many of us by our grandparents, suggests that far from being docile and submissive before authority, they had a strong dose of skepticism about the claims of the powerful; if they suspended that skepticism in church, it was in part because they genuinely respected and trusted their pastors.

By the 1950s, American Catholicism had become one of the world's great success stories. With the help of the GI Bill, the new unions and the general prosperity of the period, American Catholics began that accelerated movement into the American middle and upper classes which Father Greeley has documented so well. For millions of American Catholic families, the dream came true. By then, however, the self-understanding of the Church had deprived that dramatic story

<sup>19</sup>These quotes are taken from my *Faith and Friendship: Catholicism in the Diocese of Syracuse* (Syracuse, Diocese of Syracuse, forthcoming).

<sup>20</sup>Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 3-4.

of religious meaning. Lay success did not enrich Catholic culture and church teaching had little impact on the lives of the laity, outside the pockets of the lay apostolate. Church leaders had confined the Church to church, they had defined religion in terms of organizational unity and coherence and settled for a subculture in which the highest responsibility of church members was to support its schools and denounce its enemies. Reynold Hillenbrand, Dorothy Day and Eugene McCarthy knew something about "tzaddicks for the world," but most church leaders were into American equivalents of beards and earlocks. No wonder that the sixties were so shocking. In the same diocese cited earlier, the auxiliary bishop returned from the council to tell his people that the Church was not a matter of buildings and organizations, but of community united in God's love, and a lot of Catholics scratched their heads. Three years later, when Martin Luther King was killed, the ordinary told them Catholics would be "counted and judged" by their response to racism, and more than a few got mad. As James Hennesey said, it was "a revolutionary moment."

Those who worked to add community and servant to the formerly institutional models of the Church undoubtedly overestimated the openness of the open society and underestimated the difficulties of building an open Church. Being Catholic in America was not so simple as had been supposed. John Carroll set limits to the democratic temper because he feared Catholics might come to resemble the "congregational presbyterians of New England."<sup>21</sup> When Isaac Hecker grew lyrical about the possibilities of freedom, Orestes Brownson said Hecker was "semi-Pelagian."<sup>22</sup> Turn of the century conservatives unwittingly anticipated the problem posed by liberal theology: if people are good, God is within, and God's spirit is alive in history, why do we need the Church? Similarly, many Catholics of the post-conciliar era have come to wonder if the Catholic brand of Christianity can survive in a democratic society, especially if they believe that society is "increasingly estranged from Christian values," much less "neopagan." Gregory Baum recently recalled how American Catholics at the time of the council "were eager to participate actively in their society." They welcomed Vatican II, "because it laid a spiritual and theological foundation for their involvement in the world." What they did not recognize, Baum argues, is that "this new development put a question mark behind Catholic identity."<sup>23</sup> Like almost everyone else, Baum suggests that Catholics need to recover a critical distance from their culture. Surely there must be limits to that distance, however, for Catholics are responsible for what America is, not just what it should be. Just a few years after the advent of renewal, sociologist David Reisman wrote these prophetic words about American Catholics:

All social advances, all liberations, turn out to be problematical—which is of course no reason for trying to head them off. Furthermore, precisely because so many American Catholics are moving out from encapsulation toward a wider world view

<sup>21</sup>Hennesey, *American Catholics*, chap. 8; Dolan, *Catholic Experience*, chap. 6.

<sup>22</sup>Brownson to Henry F. Brownson, March 15, 1871 in Brownson Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives.

<sup>23</sup>Gregory Baum, "After Liberal Optimism, What?" *Commonweal* 3 (June 21, 1985) 368-70.



. . . what will happen to them and their movements is tied up with the fate of America itself. If we Americans cut ourselves off still more completely than at present from the rest of the world, both by our violence and by our affluence, we will force some of our critics back into an inner immigration and others to become Catholic in the original and broadest sense of the word and thus non-American, if not actively anti-American.<sup>24</sup>

Reisman was right.

Reacting against the uncritical celebration of the American political economy, worried sick about abortion, the arms race, military and diplomatic unilateralism and the suppression of the aspirations of the world's poor, Catholics unwisely rush to protect their integrity but there can be no theology at once Catholic and public, there can be no constructive participation in the public moral dialogue, if we regard our nation and its people as irretrievably lost to materialism, hedonism and violence. Those "who see everything beyond the church as only demonic, anti-Christian and evil can only be political, never public," Martin Marty writes.<sup>25</sup> That was the problem of the preconciliar culture of Roman Catholicism; if we forget the American Catholic story and invent another to salvage our own righteousness, there will be no tzaddicks for the world from our ranks, and there will be no future triumph of the Church.

So there you have "the U.S. story," in the middle of the journey, so to speak. This is a church we have made for ourselves, and a country we have helped to make. For those concerned to develop theology in "the North American context," there are some obvious lessons and some less obvious questions. Change has been the rule; no matter how rapid and radical in recent years, change has been no more dramatic than that which surrounded the American revolution or that experienced by immigrants who knew all at once in their lives those historic processes of migration, urbanization and industrialization. Then, too, there is the fact so evident in history "from the bottom up," that the Church was a very worldly project. Rhetorical denunciations of the modern world reflected a wider differentiation of religion from other elements of life, and they were intimately linked to sharp distinctions between laity and clergy. As Joseph Komonchak has pointed out, the formation of modern Roman Catholicism in the nineteenth century both reflected and contributed to that secularization which the Church so regularly denounced. Komonchak argues that there is no first moment when the Church becomes the Church and a second when it defines its relation to the world. Instead "the church's self-constitution is itself an act within and with reference to the world." Self-constitution based on *a priori* judgments that the world is too worldly, or even "neopagan," are self-serving, self-fulfilling and for Catholicism, self-defeating.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup>David Reisman, *The Academic Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972) 352.

<sup>25</sup>Martin Marty, "From Personal to Private, From Political to Public Religion," pamphlet (Notre Dame, Cushwa Center for American Catholic Studies, 1984) 14. See also John Coleman, "The Christian as Citizen," *Commonweal* 108 (September 9, 1983) 457-62.

<sup>26</sup>Joseph Komonchak, "Clergy, Laity and the Church's Mission in the World," *The Jurist* 41 (1981) 443. See also Komonchak, "What's Happening to Doctrine?" *Commonweal* 3 (September 6, 1985) 456-59.

Less obvious is that Americanization is too simple a category for assessing the recent experience of the Church in the United States. John Carroll and his Maryland associates were Americans, and their heirs from John England through Isaac Hecker to the liberals of the Vatican II generation were distinguished by their hope that the Church would make its own the values of American democratic culture. But John Hughes, Bernard McQuaid and George Mundelein were Americans too, and so were those people in the immigrant parishes. The subcultural strategy which arose from the combination of immigrant needs and organizational imperatives helped the Church and many American Catholics achieve their objectives but Hecker and his Americanist disciples understood that institutional priorities would not serve the Church's missionary responsibility or even meet the needs of its own members once they had fully imbibed the freedom, openness and pluralism of democratic culture. However, liberal Catholics underestimated the complexity of immigrant adjustment to urban industrial society, and they misread the insecurity which accompanied pluralism. Only during the 1960s, when the maturing of the Catholic middle class intersected with the Vatican Council and the upheavals in American society did the very American Catholic subculture prove dysfunctional to the faith and experience of the Catholic people. Then the Church found itself where Hecker thought it was moving a century earlier.

Radical voluntarism, evangelical piety, a search for fundamental Christian truths behind conflicting and confusing theologies, a blurring of distinctions between sacred and secular, the appearance among Catholics of apocalyptic and millenarian prophecies, the erosion of clerical and hierarchical authority that is not pastorally based, the appearance of egalitarian values masked in the language of ministry, a "democratic hermeneutic" and assertion of popular claims to the Bible, in these and many other ways Catholics have *once again* become American; all make Catholicism as problematic as it was in Carroll's day, but no more impossible. In the middle of the nineteenth century the great Protestant student of American Christianity, Philip Schaff, noted that Catholics were prominent at the top and bottom of the American social structure, but had not yet penetrated the middle class, which Schaff considered "the proper body of the American nation." When they did, Schaff argued, Catholicism would "assume a more liberal character" and "more or less approximate evangelical Protestantism."<sup>27</sup> Daniel D. Williams wrote a century later that America's "voluntary religious communities" made "the office of minister, whatever the traditional interpretation of its authority" dependent upon "the capacity of the minister to elicit from the company of Christians the discipline and action appropriate to a Christian congregation."<sup>28</sup> The obvious truth of these remarks points up the degree to which American Catholics now face situations long known to American Protestants; it is less a matter of "Americanization," for the Church always was American, but of the democratization which other churches experienced earlier. Religion is a matter of persuasion, evangelical styles predominate, and Catholicism remains a project.

<sup>27</sup>Phillip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of its Political, Social and Religious Character* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961 reprint) 184.

<sup>28</sup>Daniel D. Williams, "Christianity and Democracy in America" in *The Shaping of American Religion*, I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961) 480.

More challenging to theologians anxious to construct theology in the American context is Williams's suggestion that all Christian churches need to theologize about the democratic experience.<sup>29</sup> Put another way, in terms of the contemporary interest in the location of theological reflection, one might suggest the need to locate at least some theology in the midst of American culture, rather than within the Church and its subculture. It is troubling, to be sure, when one loves country more than Church; we have had many examples of the destructive potential of nationalism, and we all worry when liberation movements appear to place the good of the nation ahead of the good of the Church. But we have also had all too many examples in recent history of church leaders who placed the well being of the Church ahead of the good of the nation and its people. Surely it is important for the Church to have a strong enough faith to sustain a critical distance from the dominant institutions of society and to nourish a community of conscience. But it is also important to have a commitment to the public good strong enough to spy out the self-serving righteousness of the Church. It is commendable, for example, that our bishops had the courage to critique national attitudes and policies on nuclear arms; it is regrettable that they did not have the capacity to acknowledge the Church's own responsibility for helping to shape those attitudes and policies. "Insofar as particular beliefs and values of a society can serve as standards by which the defecto praxis of a society or nation is fostered or criticized, they provide significant cultural resources for the church," Francis Schüssler Fiorenza has written.<sup>30</sup> Can it not also be said that insofar as these values serve as standards to foster or criticize the Church, they also have provided and may still provide important cultural resources for the Church. We have learned too much too fast to suggest once again that the world, in this case, the United States, set the agenda for the Church, but we should have learned as well that the Church cannot help set the agenda for the world, or for the nation, if it is not truly public, which is to say that it takes with full seriousness its profound worldliness, or in this case its profound Americanness.

One implication is, of course, the need to become familiar with American, and not just American Catholic, historical studies. While moral theologians in particular have paid increasing attention to social science, few theologians have yet explored American history. This is no small undertaking, because American historiography today lacks a sweeping synthesis such as the progressive school which informed the work of John A. Ryan or the so-called consensus historians like Daniel Boorstin and Clinton Rossiter, whose work influenced John Courtney Murray. In some ways the field is more exciting than ever, with superb work emerging in women's history, Black history, immigrant studies and working class history. One characteristic of this work is that it often centers on specific cities or regions, as the local histories in the colonial period have given rise to a community studies approach to a variety of fields. As a result, there is a decentralized, fluid, complex, concrete character to American historiography today which makes generalization extremely difficult. Even the American studies movement, the most

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>30</sup>Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Church's Religious Identity and Its Social and Political Mission," *Theological Studies* 43 (1982) 197-225.

ambitious effort to date to make sense of the American experience as a whole, has stumbled over methodological problems and offers few handles for an authentic synthesis. Still, with its concern with culture and its creative examination of symbols, American studies remains an area worthy of exploration by theologians. When Reinhold Niebuhr turned his attention briefly to American history, he was able to offer some influential insights into American democratic experience. I suspect that Catholic theologians, with their instinct for the complex fabric of human experience and their awareness of moral ambiguity, irony and mystery, might well make an even more exciting contribution. At the very least, a dialogue with American historians and historically conscious social scientists and cultural critics seems essential to the project you are considering.

In the end, it seems to me, a pervasive dualism shapes American Catholic consciousness, a dualism accentuated by the breakdown of the older Catholic subculture. Nowhere is this expressed more clearly than in the discussion of two styles of teaching in the bishops' recent pastoral letters. Catholics and their Church are now and always have been both American and Catholic. They have been and are now tempted to place the Church first, and define their Americanness in Catholic terms alone. They have been and are now also tempted to place America first, and redefine faith and loyalty from the perspective of their love for their country. Faced with the problem of building a new church in a new society, the American leaders of the Catholic Church proved remarkably successful not by grasping either of these poles, but by insisting in a variety of ways that their Church could and must be both American and Catholic.

Today, radicals on the left and right would define everything in Catholic or Christian terms alone, while accommodationists would confine religion to Church. For all their ambiguity and compromise, the pastoral letters say both/and, not either/or, and in this they stand at the very heart of the American Catholic tradition. It is there, at the intersection of Catholicism and Americanism, the place where in fact most of us live, that the quest for North American Theology must begin.

Forming and maintaining the Church as a community of faith with some degree of unity and integrity, and at the same time acting in a responsible manner within the larger society, are tasks not easily reconciled.

As Yves Congar wrote before the Council, the "small church in a large world" exists as "a sacred thing in the midst of the world, but she does not exist for herself; she has a mission to and a responsibility for the world." So, at the very heart of the Church is a tension, as she is pulled in two directions, into and out of the world.<sup>31</sup> Allowing for the problem of Church and world, Congar's tension between integrity and responsibility is true for the Church, and for each of its members. Always in tension, they need not be in contradiction.

H. Richard Niebuhr once described the history of American Christianity as a dialectic between order and movement. The natural tendency of American Christians to organize themselves for worship, pastoral care and the religious instruction of their children led to the formation of congregations, denominations, schools and organized forms of charity and evangelization. But many American Protes-

<sup>31</sup>Yves Congar, *The Wide World My Parish* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961) 11.



tants felt called out of comfortable pews to a more vigorous pursuit of holiness. Revivals challenged conventional religion, and movements for the abolition of slavery, for temperance, women's rights, and social justice called down judgment upon the settled churches. The churches in turn adapted to hold onto their members and to retain their integrity, movements faded, to be succeeded later by yet more movements calling Christians to follow the gospel and pursue the Kingdom of God. Niebuhr thought this ongoing interaction of organizations and movements arose from the democratic context of American Christianity.<sup>32</sup> Among Catholics the story always seemed to center on organization, as priests attempted to bring a restless and energetic people into parishes, where orthodox faith could be preached, the sacraments celebrated, and a distinctively Catholic Church preserved. Indeed, order at times seems almost the whole story, as bishops and priests seemed bent upon confining the Spirit of God to the carefully controlled channels of the Church and looked with the profound suspicion on enthusiasm and, worse, independence. Yet the Spirit of God churned under the surface, as Catholics experienced liberation from poverty and discrimination to grasp a new freedom and opportunity. The result was a truly free Catholic Church, which, since the 1960s has generated a bewildering series of movements, which have challenged the organization.

If, at times, the pattern is internal as well as external, as people attempt to balance the tensions of gospel discipleship, ecclesial responsibility and citizenship, that is perhaps as it should be.

As long as Catholic leaders see those tensions as matter of Church and world, they will be torn between ecclesial integrity and public responsibility. To get beyond that point, they will have to grapple with a question largely ignored since the trusteeism controversy, the religious and spiritual character of life beyond the Church. As Philip Murnion put it, commenting on the "disjunction" between religious and secular life, it "is only secondarily, a question of ethics; it is primarily one of meaning and value."<sup>33</sup>

Finally, at the heart of the Catholic story are the people, our people. In migration peoplehood expanded beyond villages and provinces to embrace nations; in the ordeal of assimilation bipolar identity as ethnic Americans gave way to another as Catholic Americans. The collapse of our subculture tempts us toward new, self-constructed ghettos, but it also opens before us visions of larger and more inclusive identities, as Catholics in a world Church, as Americans in an endangered global village. The yearning for that larger meaning lies behind our sometimes too eager identification with abstractions: the poor, the third world, women. If there is wisdom in the pastoral experience of our American Church, it lies in those parishes, political machines, trade unions and community organizations whose leaders had little use for abstractions but considerable confidence in people as they found them. If "real concrete historical man" is "the way of the Church" as John Paul II claims,<sup>34</sup> then we had best recover some of that confidence in our people.

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<sup>32</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Protestant Movement and Democracy in the United States" in *The Shaping of American Religion*, I, 20-71.

<sup>33</sup>Philip Murnion, "A Sacramental Church," *America* (March 26, 1983) 228.

<sup>34</sup>John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*.

It may, instead, be true, that as one theologian typically remarks, "one man, one vote democracy would be profoundly alien to the church." Still, it is not self-evident that non-democratic methods have insured that power and integrity are "vested only in faithful disciples," as that same theologian says they should be.<sup>35</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr once spoke of the "stupidity of the ordinary man" and John Courtney Murray's view of people's intelligence was not much higher,<sup>36</sup> which might explain some of the problems of developing an effective public philosophy/theology. Robin Levin writes that "a public theology for the next decade must assert that a politics which stresses both participation and accountability is both fundamental to requirements of the human condition and in keeping with the realities of human personality."<sup>37</sup> From John XXIII's catalog of human rights through the 1981 synod's discussion of "the right to development" to the U.S. bishops' use of the term "justice as participation" and their proposal of a new experiment in economic democracy, Catholic social teaching contains unique resources for such a public theology. American Catholic parish life, Catholic participation in trade unions and politics, and the Church's now half-century long relationship with community organizations, still vigorous all over the country, suggests forms of both participation and accountability grounded less on enlightenment rationalism and optimism than in peasant- and working-class realism, American individualism and suspicion of power, and Catholic concern with the fabric and culture rooted in family, work, liturgy and community.

Can a truly democratic Church, affirming freedom and equality, also be Catholic? That is and has always been the American Catholic question. Today, at the very least, an answer to that question will have to include a positive bottom-up pastoral strategy, a strong episcopal conference, imaginative experiments in church reform and shared responsibility, and creative efforts to draw our people to an excitement about the value and significance of the Catholic connection.

The U.S. Catholic story is not over, even though it has moved to a larger stage and the players have assumed a variety of new roles. The outcome of the story is being written in the decisions all of us make each day. There remain many things to be done, and many ministries; some must be attentive to the Church, others attentive to things beyond the Church. Pluralism in and out of the Church is not mere pluralism nor utter pluralism, and it is never easy. We will probably not find an American theology, but several. Crabby contentiousness is here to stay, but we middle-class Catholics, ourselves the beneficiaries of so many struggles, have few reasons for depression and none for despair. We have known liberation in our own family and communal history, and we know how that work of liberation continues today in the experience of others here and around the world. To the extent we have shared in communities of faith and friendship, we have glimpsed the promised land that God intends for all of us. Turning back in upon ourselves, fleeing to caves or

<sup>35</sup>Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 11.

<sup>36</sup>Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 138; John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1986 reprint).

<sup>37</sup>Robin Levin, "Resources for a Public Theology," *Theological Studies* 44 (1983) 709-10.

church basements, would be an unworthy climax to our story. Instead, let us who are scholars in the Church learn to talk once again with our people about the possibilities of freedom, about new worlds still to be entered, about the question behind our new national anthem:

One Bright sunny morning, in the shadow of the steeple,  
By the relief office, I saw my people.  
As they stood there waiting, I looked and wondered,  
Whether this land was made for you and me.<sup>38</sup>

If the land is now ours, and the people too, there is much to be done. Isaac Hecker's words to Catholics point us toward a church still to be built, a nation still to fulfill its promise, a story yet to be told.

Let us therefore arise and open our eyes to the bright future that is before us! Let us labor with a lively faith, a firm hope, and a charity that knows no bounds, by every good work and good example, for the reign of God's Kingdom on earth.

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<sup>38</sup>Klein, *Guthrie*, 147.