

## A RESPONSE (I) TO JOHN P. BOYLE

Fr. Boyle has ably surveyed the history of the struggle of American Catholic moralists to assimilate the fruits of our American experience and has raised a number of provocative questions about what this history can teach us.

What is the overall impression which his account conveys? Is it not that moral theology in the United States has failed to take full advantage of the riches of American experience largely because of the rigid, static "classical world view" to which the magisterium, especially the Roman Magisterium, unable to cope with the new "historicist world view" of Vatican II, continues to cling? The implied lesson of history, therefore, is that if the magisterium would only liberate us American moralists to revise moral theology on the basis of American experience, our discipline would be able to serve the universal Church more creatively and effectively. Fr. Boyle cites a number of recent studies which concur with this conclusion.

But is there such a thing as "American experience"? Are national categories fundamental for theology? If we accept the social analysis of liberation theology *class* categories are much more significant. In my recent book *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian* I argue that still more basic are the *world view and value system* to which persons commit themselves by their fundamental option. Everyone is forced by the human condition to make some such option, and to interpret his or her experience in the terms proper to it. Consequently, there is no "American experience" but only the experience of Christians, Jews, humanists, etc., living in America, trying to communicate with each other to win converts by persuasion or pressure.

In the United States and the First World under our influence, the dominant world view and value system today is not Christianity but humanism. Humanism is a functional religion based not on belief in some supreme transcendent reality, nor on a natural moral order, but on faith in the power of the human scientific intelligence to remake the world according to purely subjective values. This humanism originated in the disillusionment with Christianity produced by its religious wars and was first formulated as Enlightenment deism, then more radically as agnostic empiricism and romanticism.

Humanism's radical individualism gave birth to an equally radical collectivism, that of Marxism, which also functions as a world view and value system, the chief rival of humanism, today controlling the Second World. Christianity and the older religions have been forced by these two great functional religions into marginalized subjection, and see their future only in the Third World.

No surprise, therefore, that American theologians committed to the Christian world view, nevertheless tend often to accept uncritically through cultural osmosis the thought patterns or myths of the dominant humanism. One of these might be called "The Great American Myth" so absolute its control on our thinking.

Whenever our media writers present the story of great men or women, whether they be actors, artists, composers, scientists, explorers, philosophers, businessmen—or theologians—that story always turns out to be the same. Our hero or heroine is a rebel genius who puts forward creative ideas that shock the orthodox and bring down on this light-bringer the benighted, self-serving wrath of authority. But he or she courageously refuses to recant, and after long neglect finally gains recognition. Whereupon the reactionary authorities bestow on the dissenter the Nobel Prize or even canonize the very saint they formerly wanted to burn as a heretic.

This Great American Myth harmonizes beautifully with the humanist world view. Without bothering with rational debate, it automatically refutes all other world views. Like the ads for detergents humanism places its hope in whatever is "new and improved."

The pervasive influence of this myth can lead Catholics who are by no means humanists to force our own Catholic experience in America into the stereotypical mold of the American Myth and thus to miss its own unique lessons. Time forbids me to show in detail how this might lead to a very different picture than that presented by Fr. Boyle and, to cite another instance, by David F. Kelly in his *The Emergence of Roman Catholic Medical Ethics in North America* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979).

That the failure to be aware of the dominance of humanism in American history can be theologically misleading can be illustrated from the example, cited by Fr. Boyle, of the American who on the basis of "the American experience" made what was unquestionably the greatest positive contribution to Vatican II of any U.S. theologian, John Courtney Murray. From the perspective of a quarter of a century, a critical reading of Murray raises some serious questions.

As is clear from the biography, *John Courtney Murray*, by Donald E. Pelotte, (New York: Paulist, 1976) with its typical subtitle "Theologian in Conflict," Murray was in "The Americanist Tradition" supported by many of our great bishops such as Ireland, Gibbons, Keane, and Denis O'Connell who firmly believed that American democracy and the United States Declaration of Independence and Constitution are based on the natural law and reflect the essential Christianity of the American tradition. Can we today, in light of our experience since World War II, any longer buy that interpretation of our Catholic experience in America, an interpretation which today is espoused principally by the fundamentalists of the Moral Majority?

Critical awareness of the humanist domination of our culture does not require us to join in the fundamentalist campaign against "secular humanism." The fundamentalists themselves have unwittingly confused the individualism, nationalism, and militarism of humanism with the gospel. Rather we must follow the lead of Vatican II and enter into dialogue with humanism and Marxism just as we do with all the great religions. To dialogue means to be willing to learn. Murray

showed brilliantly that Christians have learned much about human rights and freedom of conscience from humanism. However, to dialogue also means fidelity to the truth one has already been given.

In his conclusions Fr. Boyle makes use of the four criteria of theological adequacy proposed by James Gustafson: (1) adequacy to Christian tradition and its "classical documents"; (2) adequacy to modern science; (3) philosophical adequacy; (4) adequacy to experience.

These are excellent criteria, but Fr. Boyle's conclusions seem again to be skewed by his interpretation of our history according to the stereotype of the American Myth. I have already argued this as regards the fourth criterion of "adequacy to experience." Before we can validly use American experience as a test of our moral doctrine, we must first criticize it in the light of the gospel as understood in Christian tradition. I concede that in turn our experience may raise significant questions for that tradition but the answers will be found in the Gospel itself, the Word of God, not in the ambiguities of human culture.

Let me briefly touch on the other three criteria. As regards "adequacy to tradition" Fr. Boyle speaks of our need for a better biblical foundation for moral theology but says nothing of a need to be adequate to the magisterium's interpretation of the Bible. I cannot agree that the magisterium's teaching on moral matters, e.g., sexual morality, is based simply on natural law. Rather it is rooted in its traditional understanding of the Bible, which historical-critical scholarship can serve, but not replace. I also deplore the *modus vivendi* now gaining popularity by which biblical scholars concede that when allowance is made for historical conditioning, the ethical pronouncements of the Scriptures turn out to be merely paraenetic, dealing only with "transcendental values," while moral theologians agree to limit themselves to developing "categorical" or concrete norms of morality for our times by purely philosophical methods.

It must also be asked how the methodology of "proportionalism" now so widely accepted in American moral theology can be shown to be an organically consistent development of Christian moral tradition, or is its wide acceptance due to American philosophical pragmatism, itself rooted (as the biography of John Dewey evidences) in German idealism? If we really believe in a "historicist world view" do not such problems of organic historical development of doctrine have to be explored seriously?

As for the need of moral theology to test its adequacy to modern scientific knowledge, again I heartily agree, but I note that another popular thesis is that the moral theology favored by the magisterium is "physicalistic" or "biologicistic." How then can modern science which reduces even psychological phenomena to biological and physical explanations be of any relevance to current moral theology which so vigorously rejects moral arguments based on biological structures and functions?

Finally, as regards adequacy to philosophy I cannot forbear to point out that the most considerable recent work in moral theology by an American theologian is Germain Grisez's *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, thoroughly abreast both of classical and contemporary philosophy and of great philosophical rigor. This work, representing, be it noted, the experience of a married layman in today's America

rather than of celibate clerics immersed in German phenomenology, because faithful to magisterial positions is being ignored by those who label themselves "the mainstream" of current theology, but his detailed analyses and arguments are not being answered. Could it just be that Grisez is really one of those dissenters who, according to the Great American Myth, always turn out to be right?

Since I have been so negative, I must end with a more positive proposal. I do indeed agree that we must enrich our Catholic tradition of moral and spiritual theology from experience in pluralistic America for which God has made us responsible. To do so we must first describe that experience both by phenomenological methods and by the objectivizing methods of the modern sciences. Then we must subject it to a critical analysis, a process of discernment by which we are able in a measure to distinguish what the Spirit is doing from what the world, the flesh, and the devil are up to. In that process of analysis the questions we ask and the evaluation of the answers we seem to receive must be guided by the light of the Gospel in Scripture as interpreted in our living Tradition in which the final judgment is to be rendered not by theologians but by the magisterium.

This proposal, of course, is liable to the fashionable criticism that it is just another product of a "classical world view" now made obsolete by the rise of the "historicist world view" expressive of modern American experience. But is it not precisely our historical experience as American Catholics which today with Vatican II has brought us to see more clearly than formerly that the Holy Spirit, the ultimate dynamic principle of history, is always true to Himself? A renewed moral theology, purified by a profounder historical analysis, will be the everlasting gospel liberated from the compromises of moral theologians with their own narrow times and cultures, including that of twentieth-century America.

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