

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF AMERICAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

The topic of this paper has been assigned to me. It is my intention therefore to examine the impact which the social context has had on Catholic theology in the United States. This is an essay in the sociology of knowledge. Marshall McLuhan has called Toronto an excellent balcony from which to watch the United States. His remark is, alas, too flattering for Canadians. For we do not simply look at the U.S.A. from the outside and journey into it from time to time. We in English-speaking Canada have a culture that is to a considerable extent derivative and dependent on American culture, including the good and the bad. We have a hard time to affirm our own. One great difference between the two nations is that Canadians are not aware of a manifest destiny; nor do they constitute an empire. They do not expect to be first in anything, with the possible exception of ice hockey. English-speaking Canadians study cultural developments in the U.S.A. as phenomena not wholly external to themselves. They share with Americans many cultural experiences. This is especially true of Catholics. The histories of Catholics in the U.S.A. and English-speaking Canada have many common characteristics. Quite different of course is the historical experience of Catholics in French Canada. Because of these complexities, which are of great interest to us in Canada, allow me to omit in this paper any references to the Canadian situation. This, incidentally, dispenses me from worrying about an interesting question, the historical context of Bernard Lonergan's theology.

In this paper, I shall make remarks based on historical and sociological observations. It would be interesting and fruitful to examine these observations with the help of quantitative research methods. This would lead to greater precision and more nuanced judgements. Such a study might even demonstrate that some of my conclusions are exaggerated and in need of qualification. The method I choose to follow in this paper is called participant observation. When it comes to North American Catholic theology, I speak as an insider. I am a theologian who has been in dialogue with American theologians for over twenty-five years; I have been a member of the CTSA for a long time; I have been involved in a number of theological controversies in the North American Church. And since I am European-born, returned to Europe to study Catholic theology, and am now a member of the editorial board of the international review, *Concilium*, I am able to base my comparisons and contrasts on experiences gathered over a long period of time.

In the following pages, I shall discuss several characteristics of American Catholic theology and relate them to historical experiences that are properly American and not shared, at least not in the same way, by European and Latin American Catholics. Whether this essay will touch upon all the characteristics that deserve attention I do not know. I shall be grateful for the reaction of the members

of this society. Allow me then, without worrying about the theoretical justification for the sequence in which I shall examine these points, to jump into my topic.

A

1. A distinctive American Catholic theology is something new. It is a post-conciliar development. It began while the Council was still in session. Prior to Vatican II, the theology taught at seminaries was largely derived from neo-scholastic manuals produced in Europe. It was taught under obedience and received under obedience. At that time Catholic theology did not represent an intellectual adventure. It did not excite the students nor was there a response from the laity. Catholic theology did not engage in fruitful conversation with the Church's tradition, with early Christianity, the Patristic Age, the medieval debates, nor the wrestling of Catholics with modern thought. It did not introduce students to American Protestant theology; it did not even communicate to students the significant religious thought that had emerged in English-speaking Catholicism. For most students of theology, John Henry Newman remained an unknown. There was no attempt on the part of theology to communicate the theological insights contained in the imaginative literature produced by Catholics in Britain and America. Nor was theology related to American culture.

We note that the situation was quite different in Europe, at least in France and Germany and a few smaller countries like Holland and Belgium. Here creative Catholic theology had not been completely pushed aside by the neo-scholastic manuals. It had remained in touch with its classical sources and the innovative thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth century. It was after all European theological developments that laid the foundation for the doctrinal renewal of Vatican II. And since European theology had never forgotten the historical dimension, Vatican II did not appear to Europeans as a dramatic dividing line.

Why was the American situation so different? Why was so little attention given to theology in the American Catholic Church? This question has been amply dealt with by historians. While in the first half of the nineteenth century the Catholic Church was in dialogue with American culture and sought full integration into American society, in the second half of the century the bishops decided, after a long and heated debate, to give pastoral priority to the immigrants who at that time arrived in great numbers from the Catholic parts of Europe. The Catholic Church, following a preferential option for the poor in its day, decided to become the Church of the immigrants. The Church now gave up its dialogue with American culture. In this context little attention was paid to theology. What resulted was a certain sectarian anti-intellectualism, a cultural mood carried forward right into the twentieth century.

With the convocation of Vatican Council II in 1960, the cultural and intellectual aspirations of Catholics, especially of educated Catholics, changed almost overnight. Americans began to devour the writings of European theologians, they invited the famous theologians to cross the ocean for lectures to the widest possible audiences. American Catholic theologians began to think and write themselves. New publishing houses were set up to promote theological literature. North American theologians became travelers: they were invited to give lectures in church

settings and academic environments all over the country. American theology was being born.

Why did the American Church respond so enthusiastically to the intellectual liberation ushered in by Vatican II? Andrew Greeley has persuasively argued that the reason for this sudden explosion was an important historical development in the American Church.¹ Since after World War II, Catholics entered higher education and were joining the middle classes, they were beginning to feel uncomfortable with the pastoral style and lack of intellectual sophistication characteristic of the immigrant Church. Even if Vatican II had not taken place, Greeley proposes, there would have occurred something of an explosion in American Catholic life. Catholics were burning to enter into dialogue with American culture and be integrated into the American mainstream.

There was a certain analogy to this development in Holland. In Holland, Catholics lived mainly in the south of the country. They constituted a small-town and country population. When they moved to the industrialized part of Holland, they became laborers. Since World War II, however, Catholics had entered higher education, joined the middle class, and participated in the mainstream of Dutch life. As one writer put it, the new generation of Catholics were so creative because they combined the fervor of the minority with the self-confidence of those who have arrived. This combination is explosive. Of course, this mixture only lasts for one generation. For the children of these active and imaginative Catholics will not inherit the fervor of the minority: they now belong comfortably to the dominant culture.

There are historical reasons then, why American Catholic theology (and possibly Dutch Catholic theology) is conscious of Vatican II as a turning point. This is when American Catholic theology started. So great was the jump from manual to contemporary theology that American Catholics acquired a strong sense that there were moments of discontinuity in the Church's tradition. Because of this peculiarly American experience, American Catholics, including their theologians, readily contrast the pre-conciliar and the post-conciliar Church. American Catholics tend to believe that the Church's teaching is subject to change.

In one of his public remarks, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger has criticized the approach to recent church history that regards Vatican II as a watershed. He emphasized instead the continuity of the Church's teaching and theology. After a public lecture given by him in Toronto in April of this year, Cardinal Ratzinger consented to participate in an open discussion at the Toronto School of Theology. We asked him many difficult questions. "In your public lecture you have spoken of the guiding function of the magisterium," one theologian said, "but you did not mention that the magisterium itself underwent transformation. North Americans," this theologian suggested, "remember in particular that in the fifties, John Courtney Murray was in trouble with the Roman magisterium over his defense of religious liberty and that a decade later he was invited to help draft the conciliar declaration on religious liberty. If we had an appropriate theory of development," the theologian proposed, "might we then not recognize that at certain times the

¹Andrew Greeley, *The New Agenda* (New York: Doubleday, 1973) 42-43.

dissent of theologians exercises a positive role in the evolution of Church teaching?" Cardinal Ratzinger agreed that we are in need of a theory of development applicable to the magisterium. But he did not like the word "change" applied to the Church's teaching, even in the case of religious liberty. Change suggests that modifications are due to external pressure of alien cultural influences. Cardinal Ratzinger preferred the word "development" which suggests a gradual unfolding of the inherited truth under new historical circumstances. The Church's teaching, he argued, never changes.

American theologians, according to my analysis, have a greater sense than European theologians and certainly than Cardinal Ratzinger, that the development of Church teaching, however continuous and self-identical, includes moments of discontinuity. For American Catholics, Vatican II was such a moment. American theologians sympathetic to Charles Curran's theological positions are not bothered by the fact that they differ from the teaching of the magisterium. I am prepared to argue that even American Catholics who desire the condemnation of Charles Curran's positions worry that the magisterium might actually change its mind. They too have a sense that Vatican II was a turning point, and that they can no longer count on an unchanging Church. If Rome actually condemns Charles Curran's moral theology, these Catholics will remain afraid that Rome will pull another John Courtney Murray on them and in a decade invite Charles Curran to help formulate more appropriate norms for sexual ethics.

The passionate interest in theology, generated by Vatican II, has led to the creation of many new teaching institutions. We shall have more to say of these institutional changes further on.

2. The second characteristic of American Catholic theology is its openness to ecumenical dialogue. The almost total separation of pre-conciliar Catholic theology from Protestant intellectual currents was overcome very rapidly through the impact of Vatican II. In Europe, certainly in France and Germany, Catholic ecumenism preceded the Council. Thanks to the rapid post-conciliar evolution in North America, Catholic theologians have come to be engaged in constant dialogue with their Protestant colleagues: they cooperate with them in many joint theological and practical projects, and have come to enjoy personal friendships with many of them. Catholic theologians readily admit that they have learned much from their Protestant colleagues, and they recognize that Catholic theology in turn has had an impact on American Protestant thought. American Catholic theologians find dialogue and collaboration with Protestants unproblematic.

At the same time, this ready dialogue has not tempted Catholic theologians to move in a direction at odds with the Catholic tradition. It is my impression that Catholic theologians have remained very faithful. What they have learned from Protestants they have revised in the light of Catholic experiences and integrated into the Catholic tradition. They have been helped in this by the fact that the Catholic community enjoys a certain sociological identity. Catholics constitute something of a tribe, a tribal community, in America, defined by certain cultural traits that may not be easy to identify but that are often perceived intuitively. It is not just that Catholic theologians drink more than their Protestant colleagues. They do seem to reflect a different style, a different ethos, a different cultural memory.

The dogmatic foundation of the easy acceptance of ecumenism on the part of Catholic theologians remains somewhat unclear. While the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism recommends mutual respect, joint prayer, sustained dialogue and practical cooperation, it presents an ecclesiology that sees the Catholic Church as the unique embodiment of the Church of Christ and leaves that status of the other Christian churches somewhat vague. The Decree recognizes many ecclesial gifts of Christ in these churches but it considers them ordained toward their fullness in the Catholic Church. The Decree says that ecumenical dialogue must be carried on "on equal footing" (*par cum pari*), but does not spell out what precisely this parity, this equality, means. The ecumenical practice among American theologians transcends the ecclesiology of Vatican II. Americans often feel, in line with the philosophy of pragmatism, that a new practice, in this case a new ecclesial practice, in keeping with new religious experiences, will actually lead to a more appropriate perception of the truth.

American Catholic theology has also been open to Jewish religious thought. Catholic academic institutions often hire Jewish theologians, Catholic publishing houses publish Jewish theology, and Catholics engaged in dialogue with Jews do not hesitate to join with them in Jewish worship. Here again the practice precedes a clear doctrinal foundation. John Paul II's recent visit to the Roman synagogue gave universal recognition to a development fully embraced in North America, even though the dogmatic basis for joint worship remains obscure. It could be argued, I think, that the Church's recognition of the spiritual status of Jewish religion is the most dramatic example of doctrinal turn-about in the age-old *magisterium ordinarium*.

The rapid entry of American Catholics and, in particular, American Catholic theologians into ecumenism is related to the very structure of organized religion in the United States. Alexis de Tocqueville, visiting America in the first part of the nineteenth century, was the first to notice that the pluralistic structure of religion in America fulfilled an important social function.² Religion had adapted itself to the needs of people in a vast land, in a society marked by an as yet unheard-of horizontal and vertical mobility. While in Europe the churches tended to embrace entire nations and offer the overarching symbols that protected their unity, the churches in America constituted a plurality of communities, none identified with the whole, which allowed people to feel at home where they lived and when they move to another place, to become quickly integrated in their new location. The plurality of religious organizations provided Americans with a sense of belonging in their vast land. Tocqueville's observations on American religion have been elaborated by subsequent sociologists. No one has written as persuasively as Andrew Greeley on the pluralistic, or more precisely, on the denominational character of religion in America.

The sociological distinction between church and sect has been useful for the study of religion in Europe.³ Churches understood themselves as embracing an

²Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, revised by P. Bradley (New York: Random House, 1945) 9-13, 21-29, 104-18, 129-35.

³Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2, trans. O. Wyon (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) 331-43.

entire people, as co-extensive with a given culture, as the inherited, privileged, historic religion. Churches therefore sought an accommodation of the gospel with society. Sects, on the other hand, understood themselves as minority movements, as gathered communities, as made up of converts to the faith. Sects had no intention of embracing the totality. They did not desire integration into society. They emphasized rather the distance between the gospel and the prevailing culture.

Many sociologists have argued that the church-sect distinction was not useful for the study of religion in America. Richard Niebuhr observed that in America, churches tended to become sects and sects churches.⁴ In America, the churches that arrived from Europe no longer aimed at representing the entire society: they became willing to see themselves surrounded by others. And the sects that arrived from Europe or were organized in America rapidly established themselves. They grew in membership, their people moved into the middle class, they acquired education and wealth, and instead of distancing themselves from society, they too tried to accommodate the gospel to the cultural mainstream. To designate the organizational form of religion in America a new term was required. In his *The Denominational Society*, Andrew Greeley, following Talcott Parsons, proposed that religion in America exists in denominations. Denominations resemble churches to the extent that they cooperate in the building of society. Denominations are worldly. But they also resemble sects to the extent that they see themselves as minorities surrounded by others. Denominational religion is pluralistic. A certain competition between denominations does not prevent them from cooperating with one another in the exercise of their social responsibility.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church in the United States began to see itself as a denomination, as one church among many. Tocqueville marveled at the accommodation of the American Catholic Church to democratic institutions and democratic sentiments.⁵ But when in the second part of the century the Catholic bishops decided to make their community the Church of the immigrants, they steered the Church away from assimilation and integration. A minority movement in the Catholic Church continued to seek full participation in American culture and its democratic tradition, a movement that was eventually repudiated under the name of "Americanism." To remain apart from society, the American Catholic Church acquired certain characteristics sociologists of religion designate as sectarian: standing apart from culture, refusing to participate in the intellectual life, and cultivating visible signs of apartness, for instance observing Friday abstinence at public occasions. In the twentieth century, especially after World War II, the more access Catholics had to the middle class and the more integrated they became in American culture, the more they longed to participate on equal terms in the pluralistic society. Existing Church teaching forbade this participation. When Vatican Council II, in the Decree on Ecumenism, recognized other Christians as Christians as other churches, as Christian communities alive in the Spirit, American Catholics and especially American Catholic theologians quickly redefined their relationship to the pluralistic pattern of American religion. In so-

⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957) 17-20.

⁵Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 30-31.

biological terms, Catholicism in North America became denominational religion, one church among others, faithful to its own tradition but ready to cooperate with others and assume joint responsibility for society with them.

This rapid development was quite different from the responses of European Catholicism to the new ecumenism. In Germany, ecumenism demanded the negotiation of a new equilibrium between two established churches. In Germany, ecumenism becomes very quickly a political issue. In France, Protestants were a minority, often a cultural elite, and ecumenical dialogue tended to remain confined to specialists. In England, Catholics were ill at ease with the privileged position of the Anglican Church and often preferred to remain aloof. In Holland, the entry into ecumenism was rapid, as in the U.S.A., but on very different social foundations: here ecumenism produced a new fellowship by bringing together two historical communities in a joint effort to influence the mainstream of public life. Only in America (and possibly in former overseas British Dominions) does the category of denominational religion apply. This is the reason why in America even the synagogues can be integrated into the cultural mainstream.

Andrew Greeley attributes the formation of denominations to the genius of the American churches. They adapted the inherited religion to the needs and aspiration of American society. This creativity, he thinks, explains the strong presence of Christianity in American society. There are, however, sociologists who have a more critical view of the denominational society. Richard Niebuhr in his *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* argued that it was the failure of the Christian Church to live up to the Christian message that resulted in the formation of the denominations.⁶ The churches found it impossible to transcend the cultural tensions in American society, first between North and South, then between the urban East and the Western frontier, then between White and Black, and finally between the well-to-do and the poor. The denominations resulted through assimilation to unredeemed America.

These explanations of denominationalism do not necessarily exclude one another. Historical developments are complex. What follows from Niebuhr's critical observation is that the rapid entry of Catholic theologians into ecumenism was a development not necessarily without ambiguity. Did it imply accommodation to middle-class values? More of this later.

3. Another mark of American Catholic theology is its pluralistic structure. It is pluralistic from several points of view. First, Catholic theology is taught at many different kinds of institutions. It is, of course, taught at Catholic seminaries and theological faculties. Most of these, thanks to ecumenism and a more open approach to American intellectual culture, have moved closer to the university campus. This has led occasionally to new institutional arrangements. In some instances Catholic theological faculties have cooperated with Protestant divinity schools to constitute ecumenical unions or consortiums, schools of theology, which bring into dialogue and interaction distinct Christian traditions, all of which are respected and loved. There is no attempt in these new theological unions to create a theological interdenominationalism. The purpose of the interaction is to foster among

⁶Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 21-25.

the participants fidelity to the best and most authentic elements of their own traditions. As I mentioned earlier, the ecclesiology implicit in this practice has not been fully spelled out.

But Catholic theology is also taught at other institutions. Many Catholic colleges have created theology or religious studies departments where Catholic theology is made available to lay students. In some of these colleges students are able to major in theology and even obtain academic degrees in it. This is a post-conciliar development. Before the Council, Catholic colleges did not offer courses in theology. The courses in religion that were available treated the topic mainly from a pastoral viewpoint. In those days, it was the philosophy department, committed to neo-thomism, that regarded itself as the soul of the college and the guardian of its Catholicity. The commitment to scholastic philosophy, called for by ecclesiastical authority, often made the philosophy department uncomfortable with the return to the Bible and the new approaches to theology encouraged by Vatican Council II. Sometimes tensions occurred in Catholic colleges between the philosophy department and the newly created theology department which emphasized biblical studies and a historical approach to theology and its philosophical presuppositions. The theology department tried to articulate in a new way the meaning of Catholicity.

Yet Catholic theologians also teach at many other academic institutions. We find them today teaching Catholic theology at Protestant divinity schools, at interdenominational seminaries, and in religious studies departments at secular colleges and universities. We find them at centers of religious educations, at mission schools, and at other pastoral institutes. The institutional base of Catholic theology has become very varied. We notice that many Catholic theologians teach at academic institutions where they are no longer subject to Catholic ecclesiastical authority. This is a phenomenon not without significance.

A second aspect of the pluralism of American Catholic theology is the diverse character of its practitioners. The membership of the CTSA gives witness to this development. Theology is taught by men and women. The presence of women on theological faculties is only at the beginning, but the large number of women graduating in theology must make one hope that their number will also increase on the teaching staff of theological schools, despite certain hesitations on the part of the Vatican. What is remarkable is the body of literature of feminist theology that has been produced by American women theologians, Catholic and Protestant. This literature is unique in the world Church. American feminist theology is today being translated into many languages. Compared to other countries and other cultures, the participation of men and women in American theology is remarkable. But compared to the requirements of equality, the limited presence of women in American theological faculties is still lamentable.

The pluralism of Catholic theology also includes practitioners identified with sectors of society and cultural traditions that have been marginalized by society. There is an impressive Black theology, mainly in the Protestant tradition, though not altogether absent in Catholicism. A theological movement is emerging in the Mexican American community and more generally among Hispanic Americans. There are significant efforts to develop an approach to Catholic theology that is

critical of middle-class culture and represents action groups in solidarity with segments of people, at home and abroad, that suffer oppression by the American empire. These new theological movements have achieved a certain institutional presence in the Theology of the Americas Conference, founded in 1975, which brought together theologians beyond the mainstream, representing Third World Christians, women, racial minorities and labor socialists.⁷ While these movements are still at the margin, they have had some influence on mainstream theology. This is true above all of feminist theology. Academic theologians who respond positively to Latin American liberation theology and understand their task as creating an appropriate political theology for North America, try to strengthen the impact of the new theological trends coming from the base. Their influence may not be strong in the CTSA, but it exists among us and may become more important. We are only beginning to understand what "the preferential option for the poor" means for the exercise of Catholic theology. What follows from this is that while American Catholic theology has a remarkably pluralistic character when compared to European theology, its pluralism is nonetheless marred by the structures of inequality proper to America.

David Tracy has argued persuasively that pluralism properly understood is one of the special contributions of the American cultural experience, a contribution that has become fruitful in American Catholic theology.⁸ Catholic theologians have been in dialogue with several philosophical approaches and engaged in conversation with different currents of the social sciences. While these various intellectual currents, reflecting the secularism of the Enlightenment, have often defended positions inimical to theology, they have been subject to self-correcting trends and sometimes achieved an openness that offered points of entry for theologians concerned with the meaning and power of the Christian message in the contemporary world.

Tracy recognizes that European thinkers are often suspicious of pluralism. Some think that pluralism implies a relativism that empties out the very notion of truth. Others see pluralism in the realm of thought as a reflection of the market, or better the supermarket, where customers choose what is most appealing to them. Radicals often criticize pluralism as an ideology that disguises the significant conflict in society by inserting it into the endless differences of opinion based on personal preference. Tracy argues that pluralism understood and practised at its best brings into conversation partners who are faithful to their own traditions and philosophical approaches, who respect the intellectual position of the others, who try to understand their point of view, allow themselves to be challenged by these others, and seek to respond to this challenge through enriching their own tradition either by retrieving a forgotten insight or by imaginatively drawing out of the inherited symbols relevant meaning as yet unexplored.

Pluralism thus understood does not imply relativism, compromise, or fuzzy thinking. Instead dialogue among several partners creates fidelity, imagination and innovation.

⁷S. Torres and J. Eagelson, eds., *Theology in the Americas* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1975).

⁸David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978) 1-14.

Allow me, nonetheless, to add a word of caution from a sociological point of view. The conversation involving two or more participants is only fruitful if there exists a certain equality of power among them. The call for dialogue between the powerful and the powerless easily becomes an ideology that aims at making the powerless happy without a change in their social position. Dialogue, pluralism and hermeneutics point the way toward universal reconciliation: this is true. But the commitment to pluralism must have a political thrust: it must aim at transforming institutions to increase equality of power among the participants.

4. I wish to mention a fourth characteristic of American Catholic theology, even though I am unable to clarify it completely in my own mind. In America, Catholic theology has a strong public presence. By this I mean (a) that the Catholic public regards theology as relevant and follows reports of what theologians are saying, and (b) that even the wider secular public recognizes the importance of religion in American society and hence shows a certain interest in theological developments.

During the after Vatican II, the Catholic public showed an enormous interest in the evolution of Catholic theology. Theological books sold well, public lectures by theologians were well attended, theological study days and workshops sprouted in every corner of the country. Even though this intense involvement of lay people with theology has declined, a widespread interest remains. Catholic theologians continue to have a sense that they speak for a community and to a community. This link to the Catholic community has given American Catholic theology a pastoral sense. Catholic theologians feel very strongly that theology, even when highly theoretical, is not abstract because it always has to do with peoples' lives and the decisions they make regarding the crucial issues.

But even the wider public, I wish to argue, has a certain interest in theological developments. The Catholic Church has a strong presence in American society. The significant controversies in the church and important theological developments are reported and discussed in the public media of communication. While there is often attention to the sensational, it is hard to deny that many excellent newspaper reports, radio and television programs, and analytical articles in magazines reveal a serious interest in theological questions and the meaning they have for the Catholic community and American society as a whole.

The social foundation of theology's public presence is not hard to find. Religion has been a success story in the U.S.A. While in European societies industrialization and entry into modernity were accompanied by the waning of religion, this did not happen in America. To interpret their own historical experiences many European sociologists have proposed the so-called theory of secularization.⁹ According to this theory there is an intrinsic contradiction between modern society and religion. The more people become involved in industrial processes and participate in the technological mindset, the more detached they become from the churches and the more secular their philosophical outlook. In Europe there is much empirical evidence for this theory. However all sociologists, including the European, recognize that the theory is not verified by the American experience. In-

⁹Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975) 140-60.

dustrialization and the growth of the cities in the latter part of the nineteenth century did not lead to the waning of religion. On the contrary, religion fulfilled an important social function among all sectors of the population, including the workers. Vast numbers of workers were immigrants for whom the Church remained the important community that protected their identity and trained them to survive and even do well in their new country. While secularization represents a significant trend in American society, especially among intellectuals, religion remains a powerful cultural force.

What is the reason for the success of religion in America? Sociologists have offered different explanations for it. Andrew Greeley has argued that American Christianity, thanks to its own resourcefulness, adjusted itself to the conditions of the new world and the emerging industrial society so that it was able to contribute to the social well-being of the people. Denominational religion provided people with a local identity linked to a national community: and it offered people caught in the pragmatic, this-worldly atmosphere of a business civilization with a transcendent purpose that gave meaning to their lives. Other sociologists have been less positive. They have argued that religion in America compromised with modern, secular culture by becoming secular itself, concerned with its social function rather than with the sense of otherness. Religion has become part of the American way of life. Religion in America, some European observers claim, has become part of an American ideology. Good Americans attend their church or synagogue at least occasionally. America stands for God against the atheist foe.

Whatever the reasons, religion is an important cultural factor in American society. As a consequence, American theology, Catholic and Protestant, has a strong public presence. Theology, moreover, is conscious of its public role. American theologians, especially the Catholics among them, tend to take for granted that religion is a dimension of human existence on the personal and social level.

B

So far we have looked at certain characteristics of Catholic theology in America and related them to particular historical conditions. We have mentioned (1) the sense that Vatican II was a new beginning, (2) the openness to ecumenism, (3) the institutional and sectional pluralism of the theology, and (4) its public presence in church and society. And we have not disguised the ambiguity resulting from the assimilation of Catholic theology to the national culture.

There are two quite distinct social sources for raising critical questions in regard to the development of American Catholic theology. The first such questioning comes from the Vatican, the institutional center of the Catholic Church, responsible for its worldwide unity. That Vatican thinks of itself as supreme guide protecting regional theologies from becoming too contextual and from neglecting the universal dimension. Yet observers of the Vatican easily have the impression that this call for universality and the warning against excessive cultural incarnation are based on the Vatican's own unconscious identification with a particular cultural phase of European history. While the Vatican suspects American theology of "Americanism," Catholics from North America, Latin America, Africa

and Asia detect a certain pan-Europeanism in the documents emanating from the Vatican.

Recent events show that sectors of the Vatican are seriously worried about the development of Catholic theology and Catholic pastoral action in the United States. The reprimand of Charles Curran must be seen in the context of other public gestures on the part of the Vatican that express distrust of American theological literature, religious education, pastoral programs and democratic styles of ecclesiastical organization. These measures are supported by small Catholic organizations in this country with good connections in Rome, organizations that interpret Vatican II as if it had brought nothing new. They are unhappy about the new ecumenism, they oppose the pluralistic character of Catholic thought and practice, and they resent the public impact of Catholic theologians on church and society.

Why does the Vatican pay so much attention to these groups? It is hard to avoid the impression that the Vatican at this time fears the farther decentralization of Catholic life and hence aims at greater centralization. Out of this policy comes the displeasure with the relative independence of recent American ecclesiastical developments. Involved in this may also be a certain European arrogance that looks upon America as a derivative culture, a watered-down Europe, destined to remain under the tutelage of European teachers.

There is, however, another source of critical questioning, one that deserves close attention. It is located in Latin America and other Third World churches as well as in Christian communities representing the marginalized sectors of American society. Here the question raised is whether post-conciliar American Catholic theology has surrendered to liberal values and the liberal political philosophy associated with the American dream? In the preceding pages, I myself mentioned the ambiguity associated with contemporary American Catholic theology. Has a certain sense of discontinuity made post-conciliar theologians forget the cautions against liberalism contained in pre-conciliar theology? Has the entry into ecumenism and the new denominational self-understanding encouraged Catholic theology to join the cultural mainstream? Has the theological affirmation of pluralism led theologians to a liberal, pluralistic political philosophy which sees society as the balance between various communities and interest groups that may need occasional correction but does not constitute a prison, an oppressive system, for any of them? Does the public presence of theology encourage the conformity of theology to the major cultural trends in society? Is American theology (and the theology of Canada and other NATO countries) generated out of an identification with the middle class? The question must, therefore, be asked whether and to what extent American Catholic theology has become part of the liberal ideology that legitimates American society as the land of freedom and offers it as a model to the rest of the world?

I suspect that the reason why I have been invited to give this presentation is that the planners of the conference anticipated that I would deal with this critical question, and that even if I arrived at a radical conclusion, I would do this in the polite tone proper to academic prose.

With other social critics, I see in the United States three politico-philosophical approaches.¹⁰ The first one corresponds to the orientation of the present administration. It is often euphemistically called neo-conservative. It represents a peculiar union between monetarism and militarism. The neo-conservative political philosophy regards the free market as the essential principle of society, assuring economic growth, personal freedom and the relative justice of equal opportunity. Neo-conservatism wants to remove the influence of the public on economic institutions, shrink the welfare system, weaken labor organizations, reconcile people with existing levels of poverty and unemployment, and foster indifference to the plight of the impoverished nations. Neo-conservatism sees America as the outpost of freedom in the world. And because American society is the highpoint of human cultural evolution, it is argued, the enemies of the free market, the socialists, the people under the power or the sway of the Soviet Union, try to humiliate the American people. What is necessary, therefore, is a new love of country, a new nationalism. To defend itself against its enemies, reluctantly, America has taken on the role of a military empire.

Let me say that with few exceptions Catholic theologians do not follow this political philosophy. It is to the honor of the Christian churches, the mainline denominations as they are often called, that they have resisted this trend to neo-conservatism. On the highest level of their ecclesiastical institutions, the American churches have expressed their commitment to a different political philosophy. I shall say more of the courageous stands taken by the Catholic bishops further on.

The second political philosophy in the United States is critical of monetarism and militarism. It represents the liberal tradition. It proposes reform. This political philosophy favors a government-sponsored industrial policy to guide the privately owned corporations and promote industrial growth that will create employment. It wants to see the welfare system strengthened and organized in a more human fashion; it demands the respect for labor organization, it opposes discrimination and fosters equality of opportunity, and it calls for greater generosity toward Third World nations. This political philosophy does not see America as an empire but as a nation among nations and hence calls for the cooperation of America with other nations to solve the problems of the world. Liberals rely on Keynesian economics, that is, a national economy in which government subsidizes the industries and intervenes in the market to overcome the periodic slumps and depressions associated with capitalism. Liberals remember Roosevelt's New Deal of the thirties that set the economy on a new course, a course that eventually led to increasing prosperity for the widest sectors of American society.

What has gone wrong in American society, according to this liberal philosophy, is the decline of morals. Americans have become selfish, narcissistic, concerned only with themselves and their self-promotion. Gone is the traditional American spirit of social responsibility, gone the ideal of the citizen imbued with loyalty to the community. Americans have begun to make use of public institutions almost exclusively for what they can get out of them. Because of this decline of morals, Americans no longer support the social ideal implicit in the New Deal.

¹⁰In this section I follow the analysis presented in the as yet unpublished manuscript, "The U.S. Bishops on Capitalism," by my colleague, Professor Lee Cormie.

Instead they have turned to individualism and self-promotion. Many delude themselves that the well-being of society as a whole will be served if each individual eagerly labors to improve his or her economic status.

Robert Bellah's recent *Habits of the Heart* is the classical expression of the liberal's lament. In the past, Bellah argues, the American eagerness to succeed was tempered by a strong sense of civic responsibility. Thanks to this civic sense Americans desired a land of freedom and justice for all. But over the last decades, especially since the sixties, the civic virtues have been neglected. What is left is an almost universal individualism which expresses itself on a purely material level as utilitarianism or on a spiritual level as the search for self-fulfillment or what Bellah calls expressive individualism.

Yet, according to Bellah's analysis, there are still some alternative languages left among Americans, languages that retain the love of community and foster fidelity to tradition. If healing and reform are to come to the American republic, Bellah thinks it will have to come through a cultural conversion to the traditions, secular and religious, that are bearers of community values.

There is, however, a third more radical politico-philosophical approach to American society. Here poverty, unemployment, discrimination, marginalization, the fragmentation of community and indifference toward third world nations are not seen as unfortunate accidents in an otherwise acceptable system nor as the unintended result of increasing cultural individualism: they are seen rather as the consequences of a politico-economic order created by the rich and powerful to enhance and protect their own privileges. Here the decline of virtue is interpreted as the result of an economy that relies almost exclusively on market forces and hence fosters a culture of self-promotion, competition, individualism, quantification and consumer gratification. Such a radical political philosophy is often proposed by Latin American social philosophers and liberation theologians, and by left-leaning social analysts in the U.S.A. identified with various marginalized groups, including a significant sector of the women's movement. What is remarkable is that this critical analysis has recently been adopted in important ecclesiastical documents, including the social messages of the Canadian Catholic hierarchy.

If this radical analysis is correct, then the liberal social philosophy outlined above disguises the real ills of American society, prevents people from recognizing the causes of the economic decline and the breakdown of their communities, and encourages them to entertain the false confidence that greater virtue, cultural conversion and the renewal of the old institutions will deliver them from the ills under which they suffer. If this radical analysis is correct, then the liberal social philosophy turns out to be an ideology in the pejorative meaning of the word, a set of ideas and ideals designed to legitimate existing power structures and disqualify the critics of the system as irresponsible extremists.

I am prepared to argue—though I may be wrong—that a good deal of American Catholic theology, innovative, ecumenical, pluralistic and effectively present among the people, has joined the cultural mainstream and expresses a liberal social philosophy. Vatican II itself recommended a new openness to modern, democratic, capitalist society. Vatican II itself offered a rather hopeful view of modern, liberal society. Vatican II itself put a new emphasis on the dignity of the person,

on human rights, on moral conscience, on personal freedom. Vatican II itself reflected something of the cultural optimism characteristic of the North Atlantic middle-class societies, the countries from which the important liberal bishops and theologians came. It is my impression that American Catholic theology, reacting against the pre-conciliar indifference to personal experience and personal rights, has greatly emphasized personal worth, personal conscience and personal growth, all understood as fruits of the Holy Spirit. American Catholic theology has been less concerned with the common good than was traditional Catholic theology. The biblical message of salvation, the doctrines of the Church, and the sacramental liturgy, all elements of the Christian tradition, were only too readily seen as gifts of grace, meaning and power, given to individual Christians and their communities.

American Catholic theology, as I mentioned above, tends to repudiate the neo-conservative trend in American society. But the critique of society which Catholic theologians provided has often been exclusively a critique of culture. In this context, psychology and psychotherapy appeared as helpful resources for analyzing the ills and projecting the remedies. My own book, *Man Becoming*, published in 1970, reflected this trend. What was required was a cultural transformation that would lead people to greater openness to others, greater acceptance of their own bodies, and greater generosity towards society.

Radical critics of American society would argue that focusing on a cultural analysis allowed theologians to dispense themselves from making a structural analysis of the economic and political forces with their link to the military. By calling for a cultural conversion, theologians left unsaid that without commitment to structural change cultural conversion means very little. What is required is both, the reconstruction of society and the renewal of virtue.

While liberal theology prefers to ground its reformist social impulses in the doctrines of the Incarnation and the universality of grace, political theologians recognize that social reconstruction implies a long struggle against powerful forces and hence prefer to ground their theology in the eschatological promises, God's judgement on a sinful world, God's coming through tribulation and vindication, God's reign as critical norm of all historical processes. Liberal theologians—and this includes most of us—engage in dialogue with contemporary culture to explore the salvational meaning of Jesus, God, grace and the sacraments, and then only, under the rubric of practical theology or social ethics, touch upon the structures of domination. Political theology, on the other hand—if I understand it correctly—supposes that we can articulate God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ only in the context of a social analysis that clarifies the sin into which we are born and the forms of new life that are concretely and historically possible.

It is my impression that the American equivalent of German political theology and Latin American liberation theology exists among American theologians only as a minority trend. We are grateful to Orbis Press and other publishers for offering us English translations of the important Latin American literature. Books on liberation theology even sell rather well. Courses in political and liberation theology are offered in many colleges and some seminaries. But the conscious rethinking of these important theologies and a responsible application of the radical

perspective to the American situation remain confined to a fairly small number of theologians. I do not wish to mention them by name for fear of leaving out some. An important impetus comes from women theologians who situate the struggle of women in a movement critical of all forms of domination. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the difference between the liberal and the radical trend in American theology is symbolized by the distance between two institutions, the thriving CTSA to which we belong and the faltering Theology of the Americas Conference. As I proposed earlier in this paper, we are only beginning to understand what the preferential option for the poor as hermeneutical principle means for the exercise of Catholic theology in America.

While a radical critique of modern society is found only in a minority of American Catholic theologians, it is found much more frequently in ecclesiastical documents on social justice, including the U.S. pastorals on peace and economic justice. The impact of the Latin American Church, especially the Medellin and Puebla Conferences, is here undeniable. The radical critique of capitalism (and communism) has been endorsed and further developed in John Paul II's remarkable *Laborem exercens*, however difficult it may be to reconcile his teaching with some of his practical policies. This new trend was very quickly supported by the Canadian bishops.¹¹ In writing their messages, the Canadian bishops relied on a network of small groups in the Church which had opted for solidarity with the powerless and marginalized and looked upon society from their perspective. More recently the same trend has influenced the American bishops. Their pastoral letters on peace and the U.S. economy were composed in an ongoing dialogue with many sectors of American society, with special attention given to the marginalized and the radical Christian groups in solidarity with them. The same trend is reconfirmed in the most recent Vatican Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation (March 1986).

The tension between liberal and radical trends in American Catholic theology finds dramatic expression in the U.S. bishops' pastoral on economic justice. Both perspectives have had an impact on the pastoral letter. It is easy to criticize this lack of internal harmony. One may well argue, however, that the only way to get the support and the vote of an entire episcopal conference for a radical proposal is to insert it into a document that can also be read in a liberal perspective. Because I have the impression that the American Catholic bishops are more progressive in their social analysis and social vision than the majority of American Catholic theologians, I wish to present a brief analysis of the contrasting trends, liberal and radical, in the U.S. pastoral.

Much of the U.S. pastoral sounds like a call for a new New Deal. What the bishops ask for, in the name of justice and compassion, is a capitalist society in which government assumes special economic and social responsibilities. Government must stimulate, direct and stabilize the economy; it must plan for full employment, work for greater distributive justice, legislate against discrimination of women and people of color, and overhaul the welfare system in accordance with the dignity of those in need. In this context, "the preferential option for the poor"

¹¹Gregory Baum, "Toward a Canada Catholic Social Theory," *Cross Currents*, 35 (Summer-Fall, 1985) 242-56.

is an ethical principle that must be followed in the making of public policy on every level.¹² Decision-makers in all institutions must ask themselves what impact their policies have on the poor and what policies they could and should introduce to improve the lot of the powerless. Many of the concrete policy proposals contained in the U.S. pastoral follow this reformist thrust.

In reliance on *Laborem exercens* and on radical Christian voices in the American Church, the U.S. pastoral also contains bold proposals that go far beyond a New Deal Revisited. These proposals are summed up in the call for "a new American experiment."¹³ The first American experiment, the revolution, created institutions to protect and promote the political rights of the people. Now that America has become the most powerful nation in the world, a nation and a world in which poverty abounds, the time has come, the bishops argue, for a new American experiment, one that will extend democracy into the economic realm. The economy is to be by the people and for the people. To achieve this, the bishops recommend structural changes for which there exist no precedents in the history of capitalism. They demand the creation of institutions that guarantee people's economic rights: the rights to food, shelter, health and work.¹⁴ They advocate workplace democracy: they recognize the rights of workers to be the subjects of industrial production, that is, responsible agents sharing in the decisions that affect the work process and the use of surplus value produced by them.¹⁵ Finally, the bishops propose that the market economy operate within a plan, a national plan, aimed at the service of the common good and controlled by the democratic process.¹⁶

The pastoral recognizes that a new New Deal or the new American experiment, or something in between, can come about only through the cultural conversion of the majority, through the commitment to a new consensus. The ethical and in fact the religious dimension is here primary. But in the context it is quite clear that the moral conversion offers a solution for present ills only if it is accompanied by bold structural changes. The pastoral follows the old adage of Pius XI, "Two things are necessary for the reconstruction of society, the reform of institutions and the conversion of morals."¹⁷ What the pastoral does not recognize as clearly as other ecclesiastical documents is that contemporary individualism and utilitarianism, the respectability of economic greed and the indifference to inequality and poverty, are to a large extent the result of an economic system that relies almost exclusively on the free market. Still, in my judgement, the U.S. pastoral has a clearer sense than the major trend of American (and NATO) Catholic theology that the problems of personal spirituality, personal ethics, and personal

¹²For a comparison between the meaning given to 'the preferential option' by the American and Canadian bishops, see G. Baum, "A Canadian Perspective on the U.S. Pastoral," *Christianity and Crisis*, 44 (January 21, 1985) 516-18.

¹³Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy, Second Draft, paragraphs 283, 285.

¹⁴Ibid., pars. 84, 85, 95, 96.

¹⁵Ibid., pars. 102, 103, 288-91.

¹⁶Ibid. pars. 303-306.

¹⁷*Quadragesimo anno* 77 in W. J. Gibbon, ed., *The Great Encyclicals* (New York: Paulist Press, 1963) 147.

well-being cannot be understood and overcome without an analysis of the material factors of domination and an historical commitment to emancipation.

At the end of this paper, then, I see myself arriving at an improbable conclusion. If American Catholic theology were to follow the radical analysis of the contemporary situation, including the arms race and the quest for empire, contained in contemporary ecclesiastical teaching, American Catholic theology would move more resolutely in a new direction, in line with political theology, and explore the meaning of the preferential option for the understanding of divine revelation.

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