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# THE BACKWARDNESS OF AMERICAN CATHOLICISM

As practicing theologians, you can speak yourselves to the intellectual vitality of theology in Catholic colleges and universities, and I am looking forward to listening in on your discussions over the next few days. For my part, I have been asked to look off campus, off the Catholic campus at least, and to comment on the standing of Catholic theology in the wider world of American university life more generally conceived. As you know, this is a world which sustains the largest academic community in the history of human civilization, is hierarchically arranged, and has at its center the great research universities that set the direction and pace, so far as research and writing are concerned, in the various scientific and scholarly disciplines. I am not a theologian, but a historian with a special interest in the study of American culture and institutions who has worked for many years now in an institute for advanced study, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, that spends much of its time serving the needs of this academic community.

I must say at the beginning that in my experience Catholic theology, indeed theology of any kind, has very little standing at all in this vast scholarly enterprise. For the most part theology is simply absent from the ongoing discussions and arguments that drive the disciplines at their topmost level.[1] I doubt that five percent of the nearly 1300 scholars who have worked at the Wilson Center since it opened could identify by name any Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, and I am quite certain that fewer even than this have actually read theology, Catholic or otherwise. But while this observation on the absence of theology in today's academic culture is true as far as it goes, it does not go very far, and surely it will come as no surprise to anyone in this audience to learn that off the Catholic campus a certain indifference to the discipline prevails. Beyond the reservation, if I

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[1]For a very bleak assessment from an insider's standpoint of what appears to be a total lack of intellectual vitality in Protestant theology as practiced in the major divinity schools and departments of religion, see Van A. Harvey, "On the Intellectual Marginality of American Theology," in Michael J. Lacey, ed., *Religion and Twentieth Century American Intellectual Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 172-92. For a corresponding and equally bleak assessment of the meager yield in understanding obtained in America after a full century of the scientific study of religion in departments of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, see in the same volume Murray Murphey, "On the Scientific Study of Religion," 136-171. Murphey pinpoints the tradition's reluctance to deal with questions of doctrine, and thus by implication with theology as a form of knowledge, as the routinely evaded critical issue. Perhaps the "secularists" make a better case for the need of theology, considered simply as formal reflection upon the ultimacies inherent in any system of belief, than some of the theologians. On this point see Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

can put it that way, you can generally expect to find that your subject is regarded at best as part of the maintenance machinery of a sectarian subculture, and thus of no general interest. Such is the situation as I see it, and I would like to reflect briefly on some of the reasons for it and on some of its implications.

Let me begin with a bit of indirection. There is a passage at the opening of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) where W. E. B. Du Bois, the great African-American scholar, author, and political activist, speaks about one of those awkward moments in the etiquette of race relations that sometimes strained the conversation of the liberals of a century ago. "Between me and the other world," he says, referring to his relations with the white people, mostly good hearted Congregationalists, who surrounded and supported him as he grew up in late nineteenth century New England,

> there is ever an unasked question, unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter around it. They approach me in a half hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly how does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or I fought at Mechanicsville; or Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil?

At these, says Du Bois, "I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem, I answer seldom a word."[2]

His book was an exploration of what it felt like to be a problem, to be caught up in the turmoil of a fast moving, secularizing, improvisational culture, too busy for the most part to reflect upon itself, and only dimly aware even of the burden of its racism and thus ill prepared to comprehend it. It was a culture deeply infatuated with science, which it believed to be the authentic source of dynamism in modern life, and with the new universities that served the needs of the spirit of science and critical scholarship. It was a culture increasingly ill at ease with theology, suspicious of philosophy, and proud of the practical bent it brought as a matter of course to every question, no matter how recondite. It was a culture confident, finally, that given enough time and technology, free enterprise and mass education, everything would be alright—there would be enough of everything for everyone, even those who made up the "backward races," as they were called, those thirsty riders who trailed the caravan.

Du Bois, too, was intrigued by the problem solving potentials of the scientific enterprise; he, too, had the highest hopes for the modern university, which he considered to be the real "secret of civilization." But unlike some of his contemporaries he nonetheless perceived the futility of scientism when confronted with stubborn moral and political questions, and he never lost sight of the deeper philosophical issues at stake in late century social and economic developments. "So woefully unorganized is sociological knowledge," he tells us, "that the meaning

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[2]W. E. B. Du Bois, *Writings,* Library of American edition (New York: Literary Classics of America, Inc., 1986) 363.

of progress, the meaning of swift and slow in human doing, and the limits of human perfectability, are veiled, unanswered sphinxes on the shores of science.''[3]

It is a painful thing to be a problem, to feel oneself a member of a backward group in a forward age, and Du Bois's genius was to write memorably about the truths he discovered as he thought through the attempts of black folk to live with and into the dynamism of modern civilization. He writes about the stress of living in a white man's world which yields the black man ''no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others.''[4] One ever feels one's ''twoness,'' as Du Bois puts it.

I bring Du Bois to your attention because I think there is something in his outlook on modern American culture that speaks to our own experience of it, and thus may have some bearing, however indirect, on the theme of the convention this year. The feeling of ''twoness'' or double consciousness that Du Bois talks about is hardly limited to African-Americans. On the contrary, as we have come slowly to understand, it is the mark of intelligent participation in modernity itself and is quite characteristic, to a greater or lesser degree, of all reflective people in today's vast, overactive society, so beset by the problems of multiculturalism even while it continues rather hopefully to extol the virtues of its diversity. In recent decades with the almost painful growth of consciousness about the nuances of our differences along the lines of race, class, gender, and worldview—with the new awareness of the potent influence of these subtle nuances upon whatever identities we choose personally to assert or to repress—we have been exploring in all its possible combinations, it seems, this sense of doubleness, or perhaps more accurately, of multiple identity, in which Du Bois pioneered.

I believe it to be the case that American Catholics of whatever racial and ethnic background, like African Americans and many other groups, suffer, if that is the proper term, from this sense of twoness or double consciousness. In saying so I don't mean to highjack Du Bois's understandably proprietary feeling for the really distinctive injury and memory of it suffered by blacks. Like him I would find absurd the suggestion that the Irish, Italians, and Poles, for example, were treated

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[3]Ibid., 544. So far as I am aware, Du Bois never addressed himself even indirectly to the status of theology as an intellectual discipline, and of course he shared all of the suspicions of theology that the most brilliant of his Harvard teachers harbored. It is unlikely that theology would have had a place in his ideal university. It is certain, however, given the centrality he accorded to religion in black culture and consciousness, in his treatment of the ''sorrow songs,'' for example, that the study of religion would have had an important place. Throughout *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois addresses himself prayerfully to the transcendent God, without whom the sorrow songs cannot ''ring true.'' Perhaps there is more at work here than the clever maneuvering of a resourceful rhetorician, and one cannot but help thinking that were Du Bois alive today, he would take an interest in the ongoing debate about relations between religious studies on the one hand, and theology on the other.

[4]Ibid., 364.

as badly by those who led the caravan as were those once enslaved who were so easily identified by color thereafter as outsiders.[5]

I do mean to suggest, however, that in broad cultural terms, Catholics, too, have long been regarded by America's non-Catholic intellectual elites as something of a problem. It is only the difficulty of "rightly framing the question," to use Du Bois's phrasing, that has spared us from being asked more often what it feels like to be members of a backward race, intellectually speaking, with an old world mumbo jumbo all our own, fraught with formalism and clericalism, and marked by a communal history that was shaped in America by a spirit of defensiveness and the feeling, so long evident to outsiders, of being beleaguered by the main currents in modern thought. Like African Americans, Catholics, too, have long been uncomfortably conscious of being watched, of a kind of cultural surveillance in which the condition of their minds and hearts was monitored not only by Rome but by many impressive and perhaps equally well intentioned non-Catholic communities in America as well. As a result Catholics, too, have experienced the sense, as Du Bois put it, of "always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."[6]

One sign of the presence of this double consciousness and the anxieties it produces has been the recurrent appearance in recent historiography on American Catholicism of the so called "Catholic intellectualism" debate, a nagging concern with the quality and prestige of intellectual life within the subculture, which, as historian Philip Gleason has noted, emerged in the 1950s to become "the central issue in American Catholic life."[7] While it can hardly be construed as a truly popular concern within the Church (understandably enough the millions do not fret over it), for me personally it remains the central issue, and its eventual resolution has implications not only for Catholics but perhaps for the future character of modern culture more generally.[8]

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[5]Du Bois was a man of many parts who played many roles, and no one can say with certainty how he might respond to the contemporary emphasis on differance and ineffable particularities. As I read him, however, I cannot imagine that he would find too interesting the almost competitive brandishing of wounds and grievances. Likely he would be searching for useful philosophical grounds upon which to base the discussion, and would be grappling with the evident problems of relativism, searching for the sources, if any, of moral obligation that link the members of one group to those of another.

[6]Ibid., 364.

[7]Philip Gleason, "Immigrant Assimilation and the Crisis of Americanization," in his *Keeping the Faith: American Catholicism Past and Present* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987) 72. Gleason in my opinion has written more cogently on the relations among religion, ethnicity, and the process of "becoming American" than any American historian, mainly because he feels so strongly the various pulls and counterpulls involved in the real thing. In this particular essay he treats the Catholic intellectualism debate as the first major phase in the transformation of American Catholicism.

[8]With respect to this feeling about the broader cultural significance of the reawakened Catholicism that has appeared in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, I find myself in agreement with Richard Neuhaus's *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Post-Modern World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), and George Weigel's *Catholicism and the Renewal of American Democracy* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), which is not to say that I understand either the history or the prospects of American Catholicism in terms identical to those they develop to grapple with the awakening.

There are two good reasons for this worry about backwardness. They are closely related and there is enough truth in each of them rightly to cause us some discomfort. First is the generally undistinguished quality of Catholic colleges and universities as centers for research—not, I hasten to observe, as centers for education, where they often do very well, but as centers for research. The Catholic educational system attempts to replicate the public educational system top to bottom, but it is weak at the topmost level, while the system made up of the public universities and the now non-denominational private ones is very strong at that level, indeed, the strongest in the world. This public system is at the heart of modern American culture, and for good or ill the conduct of research, led by autonomous, self governing academic disciplines, is at the heart of the public system. Catholics long ago chose not to commend the system to their young, first because of its Protestantism, later because of its secularism. As we know these were not groundless concerns. Bottom to top the schools *were* rooted in a Protestant ethos, and now they are indeed secular; but they are also the institutions which at their best sustain the most powerful and difficult and fruitful forms of intellectual inquiry developed in the modern world. Their Catholic counterparts, on the other hand, from the beginning had difficulty with the spirit of modern inquiry itself, and over the long run did not generate the vivid alternative that many hoped for when Catholic educators rather haphazardly set themselves to replicating the non-Catholic system at the level of the research oriented graduate school.[9] Catholic universities and colleges simply did not become centers for research and interpretation of comparable vitality.

The Catholic intellectualism debate is a complex, many-angled affair, difficult to reduce to a few simple points, but for our purposes here it is sufficient to note that it turns on relations between a secular culture and a religious subculture. Implicitly or otherwise the debate involves a comparison. On the one hand we find the intellectual achievements in the arts and sciences of a vast, well funded and organized, elaborately specialized, and in principle secular academic culture. It is a culture that is open—again in principle—to all, without regard to gender, creed, class or color. On the other hand we find the corresponding intellectual achievements of a clerically led, denominational subculture, perceived by outsiders and by many insiders as less concerned with the increase of knowledge than the maintenance of tradition and the preservation of the faith.

I do not mean to belittle these aims; the maintenance of tradition and the preservation of the faith are as valid as objectives can be. Nor as I see it are they nec-

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[9]For a brief overview of the history of Catholic higher education in the U.S., see Philip Gleason "American Catholic Higher Education: A Historical Perspective," in Robert Hassinger, ed., *The Shape of Catholic Higher Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) 15-53. Gleason has long been at work on an extensive history of the Church's higher educational enterprise in America, and his book on the subject is expected shortly. William P. Leahy's *Adapting to America: Catholics, Jesuits, and Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), which has just appeared, is a beautifully researched and argued critical history of the Jesuit core of the higher educational system. Deeply informed by a knowledge of developments in the environing world of American culture, Leahy's study is a major contribution to understanding not only the history and current problems of Catholic higher education, but also the circuitry of the response of American Catholicism to modern culture more generally.

essarily conservative aims, in either theological or political terms, as is so often charged by the cultured despisers of religion. The question is whether the aims can be achieved without more confident address to the challenge of free inquiry in all the modern arts and sciences, theology most certainly included, and on this issue I have doubts.

Stated starkly as I have done it here, the unevenness of the contest of the two systems is apparent. In the most comprehensive and scientifically sophisticated survey yet conducted that set out to guage the quality and prestige of American scholarship and science in all departments in all universities, public and private, throughout the nation, a multimillion dollar project conducted under the auspices of the Conference Board of Associated Research Councils nearly a decade ago, the Catholic universities simply did not do well. With one exception, and that of minor importance, Catholic departments did not rank in the top twenty in any field of study. The Catholic University of America, which played such an important historic role in the attempts to upgrade higher education within the subculture, ranked in the lowest one sixth of universities involved in doctoral education.

Faculty members of the Catholic colleges and universities routinely have fared poorly in competition for the fellowships and grants provided by government and the major foundations. As Andrew Greeley, who since the 1960s has paid close attention to the interlocking problems involved, puts the matter in the nutshell, the Catholic universities are "thus far failures as research institutions" and have not "on the average even begun to approach what would be considered presentable mediocrity in the American academic marketplace."[10]

The second reason for the feeling of backwardness is related to the first, and helps to explain why the Catholic universities have been so half-hearted in their commitment to scholarly inquiry of the contemporary type. If one knows the truth, a joking friend once said to me, then why worry about research? No doubt there is much to be said for the contemplative life as something distinct from the life of academic inquiry, but to insist on the point *ab initio* is not a very promising approach to the mysteries of the scholarly disciplines as manners of being with a rigorous ethics of belief all their own. And perhaps it is too close to representing an official Catholic point of view on the vexations of scholarship. We are not alone in this, since all the great religions have had their problems in responding to the incessant challenges to belief and to the practices derived from belief that have

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[10]Data gleaned from Conference Board of Associated Research Councils, *An Assessment of Research Doctorate Programs in The United States,* 5 vols. (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 1982). The exception of minor importance I had in mind was the University of Notre Dame, which ranked 20th in philosophy. William P. Leahy points out (*Adapting to America,* 136) that in 1983 only 21 of 716 Fulbright scholarships went to faculty at Catholic institutions. That same year just four of 439 fellowship awards from the National Endowment for the Humanities went to faculty at Catholic institutions, and the following year just two of 283 Guggenheim fellowships. The faculty at any one of the top research universities may do better along these lines in a given year than the combined faculties of the entire Catholic higher educational system with its 230 colleges and universities. The quotation attributed to Andrew Greeley is taken from his *American Catholics Since the Council: An Unauthorized Report* (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1985) 146.

been thrown up by the growth of modern knowledge, and the Catholics are no exception.

But the Catholic response in the last third of nineteenth century and thereafter was so sweeping, so bent on authoritative teaching while so indifferent to secular learning, so centralized, so confident in identifying scholasticism as the proper way through the maze, so well communicated throughout the vastness of its ecclesiastical system, and finally so well and so publically policed at the cost frequently of silencing its most brilliant people, that Catholic intellectuals have been suspect in non-Catholic circles ever since. With good reason outsiders suspect that their loyalty to the church is stronger than their commitment to the life of the mind. Outsiders suspect that they do not really understand the depth and intensity of the struggle that modern secular scholarship at its best has been engaged in, the heroic side of it, and just how hard won its victories have been. A certain element of strenuousness is felt to be missing in Catholic intellectual life, and outsiders suspect that rather than wrestling with the real demons of modernity, too often Catholics have been wrestling with strawmen, under the approving gaze of their ecclesiastical superiors. With standards so low (for so it seems to the suspicious), it is no wonder that belief comes easily to them. But of course it is no great achievement, either.

The whole legacy of Catholic antimodernism has been especially problematic in this regard, because it cast doubt not only upon certain dead ends in modern religious thought, but on many trends in thinking devoted to live ends also, and thus drew attention away from the kind of mental and moral work that needed doing at the time.[11] A critical rethinking of the antimodernist heritage is important, I think, because we need to recover some more generous and capacious sense of modern religious thought in all its complexity if we are seriously to remedy the kinds of backwardness we have been discussing.

The recovery might well begin by paying more attention than we have to the writings of those who did wrestle with the demons of modernity. Such creatures exist, though we have some difficulty in knowing how and where to look for them. As I see it there exists beneath the manifest, contentious pluralism of American culture a rather limited number of powerfully opposed, basic outlooks on the whole complex of modernity itself. Of these fundamental positions two are especially important. There is a naturalist standpoint, on the one hand, and on the other a standpoint that appears in many forms of religious modernism. I understand naturalism to mean what John Herman Randall, one of its ablest historians and expositors intended it to mean, namely an epistemology, growing out of the premises and assumptions of scientific method, that "finds itself in thoroughgoing opposition to all forms of thought which assert the existence of a supernatural or tran-

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[11]The key Papal documents, of course, are *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (September 8, 1907) and *Lamentabili Sane Excitu* (July 3, 1907). For insight into the context of the antimodernist project, see Lester R. Kurtz, *The Politics of Heresy: The Modernist Crisis in Roman Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), and Bernard M. G. Reardon, ed., *Roman Catholic Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970). Gabriel Daly's *Transcendence and Immanence: A Study in Catholic Modernism and Integralism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) is a brilliant discussion of the episode and its retardant effects on religious thinking.

scendental realm of being and which make knowledge of that realm of fundamental importance to human living.''[12] It is the distinctions that matter, not the name, and naturalism goes under different names in different contexts—pragmatism, instrumentalism, deconstruction, structural functionalism, antifoundationalism, and others. Whatever the name, the important point is that theology has no place in the discourse. In American intellectual culture, naturalism remains the supposition of the major shapers of the discourse.

Though it may not be fully articulated as a system of thought by its adherents, some form of naturalism, which is a vast and complex body of thought, is the predominant common sense working philosophy on the secular campuses. John Dewey, America's greatest philosopher, was its most impressive and influential spokesman.[13] Plainly it fits comfortably with the methodological requirements of the natural sciences and with the most straightforward aspects of the social sciences and humanities.

Religious modernism on the other hand is a much more ambiguous thing than naturalism, polyvalent in its reference, difficult to define precisely, and as you will appreciate, for historical reasons it can be dangerous for Catholics to define it at all. Certainly the received notion that it represents ''the synthesis of all heresies'' is not as helpful a guide to critical reflection on the religious thought of the past century as one might have hoped for, and I am not clear myself on exactly where the post-Vatican II church stands with respect to the whole legacy of anti-modernist combat within the tradition.

Needless to say, I am speaking of modernism with a small *m* here. As I understand it, religious modernism would be nearly the reverse of Randall's definition of naturalism, that is, it would be a philosophical orientation comfortable with some of those forms of thought (a literalist approach to scripture would not be among them) which assert the existence of a supernatural or transcendental realm of being, and which make knowledge of that realm of fundamental importance to human living. Religious modernists, in other words, are not embarrassed by talk about the reality of God or even by the idea of the church as an institution implicated, historically speaking, in mediating that reality. The religious modernists do not simply condemn modernity. They take it seriously and share in its searching, even the searches conducted by those who regard religious commitment itself as a softheaded and intellectually irresponsible commitment to make. The modernists are not distressed by ambiguity; they can live with it, and they understand the sense in which they have to. It is a type of religious outlook or disposition that survives undaunted by the challenges of empirical science and critical history about which such a fuss was made in the latter part of the nineteenth century and, with diminishing intensity, long thereafter.The whereabouts of this disposition in the intellectual history of the twentieth century is an understudied subject, but it appears nevertheless that two important points about it can safely be asserted. First,

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[12]John H. Randall, Jr., ''The Nature of Naturalism,'' in Yervant Krikorian, ed., *Naturalism and the Human Spirit* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944) 358.

[13]Naturalism's most influential formulation as a metaphysics is Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1926). The most influential working out of its epistemology is his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt and Co., 1938).

there are religious modernists in all of the great historic religions and also among the unchurched who, because they are ashamed of the historic performance of the churches both socially and intellectually, prefer not to have anything to do with organized religion of any kind.[14] We know very little, for example, in historical and biographical terms about the religious views of American academics, but no doubt there are many in all of the scientific and scholarly disciplines who would consider themselves, if we knew how to put the question to them rightly, as modernist sympathizers.[15] Second, and in consequence of the first point, there exists an incipient and informal academic modernist community. Ecumenical relations, if you like, are possible, in fact they are ongoing in the form of personal ties, friendships, and shared intellectual interests that proceed unrecognized and quite independently of whatever happens at the level of officialdom within the churches. Leaders within the Catholic church show no interest in or knowledge of this community. But no matter—the modernists recognize one another when they meet. To put it differently, I believe there exists within the secular academic establishment an ill defined ecumenical culture of religious modernists that may represent some untapped potential for the future elaboration of religious thought. It is composed partly of Catholic academics in many scholarly fields other than theology. Perhaps the lack of any formal organization of Catholic intellectuals and academics means thay they, like some of their clergymen, perceive no relationship between the life of inquiry and their ecclesial life.

Naturalists and religious modernists can live amiably together and cooperate on many things. On some questions, however, mutual understanding is difficult because their basic viewpoints are so strongly divergent. Indeed, they are incommensurable. The most important difference is the fact that they look upon human history in very different ways. If we consider history to be, as I do, the stories that in some sense we inhabit (not simply because we like them, but because we believe them to be true), then it is clear that naturalists and religious modernists live in very different neighborhoods. Naturalists are likely to take a rather old fashioned, secularization view of history, generally of the Comptian family, in which the intellectual experience of the human race proceeds through three historic stages, the theological, which marks the infancy of the race, the metaphysical, which banishes theology, and finally the scientific, which banishes metaphysics.[16] The

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[14]The examples that come to mind would include for Protestantism Reinhold Niebuhr, Richard Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich; for Judiasm Martin Buber, Abraham Heschel, and Emmanuel Levinas; for the vaguely unchurched perhaps Charles S. Peirce, Josiah Royce, and William James.

[15]Biographical and autobiographical writings on the lives of academic intellectuals are plainly worth looking into within this context. Recent examples that come to mind with respect to the general notion of religious modernism would include Henry F. May's *Coming to Terms: A Study in Memory and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); John Ayre's *Northrop Frye: A Biography* (Toronto: Random House, 1989); and Denis Donoghue's *Warrenpoint* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

[16]Richard Rorty, one of the most influential naturalists on the contemporary scene, provides an excellent example. As the herald of a postmetaphysical culture, which he sees as no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable, Rorty speaks of his project within the Comptian framework. "Getting rid of theology as part of the intellectual

modern stage, of course, is the one in which the naturalists flourish, and the whole thing is felt by them to have been in some sense fated.

For religious modernists, on the other hand, history did not happen this way at all. Responsibly reporting on it results in a different kind of story altogether. While it is true enough that modern science followed on metaphysics and theology, it does not follow, from the religious modernists' standpoint, that either theology or metaphysics is obsolete nonsense. Secularization is for them, too, a reality, but not so decisive and triumphalist a reality. Religious thought is not routed by other kinds of thought, but rather awakened and challenged by them. Indeed, what finally counts in history is the dynamism of the exchange between the secular and the religious in the life of the mind. Working in that dynamism is what religious modernism is all about.

One implication of this clearly relates to the status of theology as an intellectual discipline. While all religious modernists are not theologians (in fact technically speaking few of them are), all would grant the foundational importance of the discipline itself. They understand its value. They would concede the sense in which it is the greatest and most difficult of all subjects. Theology is not simply another academic field, like psychology or the history of art. It is foundational in that it works with the most important of all claims, the reality of God. While theology is no longer conceived as the regulatory master of the other discourses, still it remains stubbornly committed to first principles in a manner different from the other discourses. Religious modernists have an interest in seeing that these stub-

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life of the West was not the achievement of one book, nor one man, nor one generation, nor one century. The end of philosophy-as-successor-of-theology, a 'pure' subject in which deep problems are attacked by appropriately pure methods, will not occur in our time," though he is hard at work to hasten its coming. See his *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) 34. For his delineation of a liberal utopia in which philosophy has been shorn of its pretensions and makes its way in the world simply as a form of writing with a special relish for irony, see his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

A polar opposite to Rorty would be John Courtney Murray. In his *The Problem of God* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1964), Murray speaks of the Godless man of the postmodern age. (It is interesting to note that Murray felt the need as a theologian for a new name to denote the cultural situation of the early 1960s, and selected "postmodern.") Murray describes the atheism of the postmodern age in a fashion that vividly foreshadows Rorty's undertaking. Postmodern atheism, says Murray, is the work of the "man of the Theatre," who inhabits a self-created world of dramatic fantasy and emotion that serve as the vehicles for his ideas. It is a world in which art and literature have taken center stage in the intellectual life and pushed other forms of thinking to the margins. The man of the theatre, says Murray, "is not a philosopher in the high classic sense or even in the diminished modern sense. He cares nothing for metaphysics or epistemology, the quondam ally but modern enemy of metaphysics. His work is phenomenology, the work of describing the 'situation' of man. He would like to go on to ethics, but he has so far been unsuccessful in constructing an 'ethic of the situation,' which is not an ethic at all. In any case, he will not go to anthropology if by this term is meant the science that deals with the nature of man. His postulate is that man has no nature; man is not an essence. Man is only a presence, a sort of process, or, if you give the word something of its primitive Hebraic sense, an existence, a continual 'standing forth,' an actual 'being-there-in-the-moment' in action and in freedom." (*Problem of God,* 102-103.)

born commitments persist. They want theologians to keep their own house in order, and would certainly be among the critics of those theologians who lose confidence in their own proper work and drift away from its peculiar, foundational exigencies.

It follows that while theology has no future in naturalist circles, it may have a future elsewhere, perhaps extending beyond the confines of the denominations, where for the most part it remains a very specialized discourse only imperfectly assimilated by those who are not religious professionals. In most places most of the time theology has been an element of priestcraft, and cannot be said to have been part of the literary and intellectual experience of the people, even the nonpriestly intellectual elites among them. The religious modernists represent the possibility that such may not be the case in the future. Perhaps they represent in embryo a new kind of audience which will help to sustain the whole theological enterprise, considered simply as a form of critical scholarly inquiry that depends for its cultural vitality on the degree to which it satisfactorily answers questions of interest to its readers.

No doubt these remarks on religious modernism are too vague to indicate the kinds of writing I have in mind, and perhaps a few examples will help to clarify what I mean. They are taken, necessarily so, from my own reading, and while I mentioned that modernists are found in all the great religious traditions and outside of them as well, the following examples are taken from contemporary Catholicism. Though my exemplars might not be happy with the label, all, I think, represent a modernist sensibility. The point I wish to register is that each of them has been doing intellectually exciting work with modernism, rather than simply prophesying against it.

For me personally Bernard Lonergan was the great central figure in all of this, and while he is not to everyone's taste, his writing still represents for me the most impressive response of any twentieth century religious thinker to the whole complex of modernity. Of course Karl Rahner and John Courtney Murray are authentic major thinkers and must be read, and I am glad to see that they are receiving so much attention at your convention this year. David Tracy is for me one of the most exciting minds in the American academic community today, and his style of theological interpretation as cultural criticism is new and important to American Catholicism, the sort of thing that no theologian other than Paul Tillich has managed well, and Tillich not so well as Tracy in my view. I think that William Shea's book *The Naturalists and the Supernatural* (1984), a sympathetic retrieval and critique of the thinking of American naturalists on religion, is one of the most impressive achievements of Catholic scholarship in the past decade and a model for how other deep currents in American thought might be usefully addressed. Leszek Kolakowski, the great critic of Marxist thought and practice, and commentator on contemporary philosophy and religious thought, a man who underwent the same kind of cultural "formation" that produced Karol Wojtyla, has written brilliantly on the problems of the modern scene. So has Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher, and Alasdair MacIntyre, now at Notre Dame, and the English theologian Nicholas Lash. Finally I would mention Denis Donoghue, the Irish literary critic, whose essays and reviews on the modern literatures and literary scholarship

of America, England and Ireland are so deeply yet unobtrusively informed by the most exacting theological and philosophical learning.[17]

Let me conclude on a personal and hortatory note. Like many of you in the audience this evening, I grew up in the 1950s and early 1960s at the tail end of that period in our religious history that students of it increasingly have come to call Catholicism's ghetto period—and without so much as a nod to Du Bois. It stretched roughly from the late nineteenth century to the Second Vatican Council. In sociological terms the period was about immigration, ethnicity, and the attempts of the church through its schools to forge and sustain a distinctively Catholic American identity. In cultural and intellectual terms, it was the period of neoscholasticism, our chosen path through the wilderness of modernity, which,

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[17]For Lonergan the starting points, of course, are *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) and *Method in Theology* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1972). I find Lonergan's essays on religion and theology especially pertinent to the religious modernism theme. See particularly those in *A Second Collection* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974) and in *A Third Collection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985). In connection with the theme of "twoness" or multiple identity, see his "Belief: Today's Issue," *Second Collection,* 87-99, for an elaboration of the idea that modern culture is the culture that knows about other cultures.

For Rahner, I would cite *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984). For John Courtney Murray, see his *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Kansas City MO: Sheed and Ward, 1960) and his *The Problem of God.*

For David Tracy, I would cite *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) together with *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1975) and his *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroads, 1981). For William M. Shea, in addition to his *The Naturalists and the Supernatural: Studies in Horizon and an American Philosophy of Religion* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1984) I would recommend his "From Classicism to Method: John Dewey and Bernard Lonergan," *American Journal of Education* (May 1991) 298-319.

For Leszek Kolakowski, see his *Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) and his *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). For Charles Taylor, see his *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). For Alasdair MacIntyre see particularly his *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

For Nicholas Lash, see his discussion of William James, Von Hügel, Buber, and others in *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986) and his analysis of Marx in *A Matter of Hope: a Theologian's Reflections on the Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1981). For Denis Donoghue, as an example of his style of theologically informed criticism of literary scholarship, see his review of Harold Bloom's *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present* (1989), "The Sad Captain of Criticism," *New York Review of Books* (March 2, 1989) 22-24. Of Donoghue's many books I would recommend particularly *The Sovereign Ghost* (Berkeley: University of California University Press, 1974), together with *Ferocious Alphabets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) and *Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

as historian Philip Gleason has noted, in fact did function for a long time as a kind of Catholic ideology that despite its shortcommings provided a common framework and vocabulary for Catholic scholars and intellectuals to make use of.[18]

But for most of us the ghetto period is over. Its fading coincided with the collapse of neoscholasticism, which went down to exhaustion after a long period of trial and seems to have died in its sleep. The end of the ghetto period also coincided with the onset of the Second Vatican Council and the vast social turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, and so it is no wonder that we all emerged confused and find ourselves at something of a loss about how to characterize the intellectual life that goes on within contemporary Catholicism. We have not sorted all this out, and any appraisal of the legacy of neoscholasticism is complicated business. At its best, the revival of scholasticism did help to keep alive the tradition of Christian realism and a corresponding openness to theology, and that was no mean achievement. It also kept alive in Catholic circles a concern with natural law as the grounding for thinking about human rights claims, an especially important matter given the widespread loss of conviction about the existence of any potent philosophical foundations for rights claims in the contemporary academy.[19]

Its failures were equally important, however. With rare exception it never really did engage the most influential currents in modern thought, though it tried mightily to refute them. We now know from historical study what we sensed all along, for example that narrow views on scholastic antimodernism could and did render pathetic the intellectual lives of many among our clergy, and seriously hobbled the progress of Catholic biblical scholarship as well.[20] Some among us would like to see scholasticism restored, in the hope that if only we tried harder perhaps we could make it work this time. Speaking for myself, I cannot imagine that any kiss of recognition, no matter who administers it, could bring this sleeping beauty back to life.

So where does that leave us, particularly with reference to those reasons for the feelings of cultural backwardness that have been cited, the Catholic ambivalence toward research at the top levels of the disciplines, and the ambiguous relation, historically speaking, of the church to the growth of knowledge? What we

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[18]See Philip Gleason, *Keeping the Faith,* 71-81, 166-77.

[19]For insight into the scope and importance of this situation, see Thomas Haskell, "The Curious Persistence of Rights Talk in the Age of Interpretation," *Journal of American History* 74/3 (December 1987) 984-1012. For insight into the twentieth century difficulties experienced by American legal theorists—from the legal realists of the 1920s through the various forms of radical, feminist, and minority perspectives of the 1980s—in trying to think about rights claims without address to the underlying problems of a properly grounded philosophical jurisprudence, see William W. Fisher III, "The Development of Modern American Legal Theory and the Judicial Interpretation of the Bill of Rights," in Michael J. Lacey and Knud Haakonssen, eds., *A Culture of Rights: The Bill of Rights in Philosophy, Politics, and Law—1791 and 1991* (in press, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[20]See in this connection Gerald P. Fogarty's *American Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A History from the Early Republic to Vatican II* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) and also Michael V. Gannon, "Before and After Modernism: The Intellectual Isolation of the American Priest," in John Tracy Ellis, ed., *The Catholic Priest In the United States: Historical Investigations* (Collegeville MN: St. John's University Press, 1971) 293-383.

are searching for, it seems to me as a layman, is a new idiom in which theological discourse can proceed beyond the circles of religious professionals, and can do so without the feeling that it is not fully honest in its workings as an intellectual discipline. Perhaps we are trying to develop a new kind of theological literacy, and looking for a new and broader conception of religious education, comparable in some fashion to the ongoing processes of civic education, as something we are all necessarily engaged in and which goes on throughout the whole of one's life as a routine aspect of participation in community.

One small part of this problem is the future of our higher educational system, which is plainly crucial to the continuing development of American Catholicism, and I have a closing suggestion to make about that. While we would all like to see our Catholic colleges and universities more vigorous and active as centers for research, there must be some way of accomplishing this short of the vain hope of bringing into being a "Catholic Harvard," as some have put the problem. The great universities are great *because* of their secularity, and this is a mixed blessing as many now recognize. There is no point in trying to imitate them in such a way as to compromise the continuity of the Catholic religious tradition, and this is what would surely happen if the standards and norms of the disciplines themselves simply and uncritically were given free reign in university governance. As I see it, there is nothing of value to be gained by Catholic higher education following the secularization process of the Protestant colleges and universities.[21] On the other hand, it is equally absurd not to acknowledge that ambivalence about the whole research enterprise is a deep problem within Catholic higher education, and that complacency on this score could become a kind of degenerative disease.

Much more money and time and attention should be spent on Catholic scholarship than is in fact the case, and if something is not done about this problem, there will be fewer and fewer reasons for scholars to think about devoting their lives to Catholic universities. There are institutional problems aplenty in this area, but I would recommend that rather than thinking simply in terms of gradually developing through marginal improvements a great, comprehensive Catholic university, we think instead about creating a more modest, more flexible, more

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[21]See in this connection James Tunstead Burtchaell, "The Decline and Fall of the Christian College," *First Things* (April 1991) 16-29, and his "The Decline and Fall of the Christian College (II)," *First Things* (May 1991) 30-38, for a careful discussion of the process of secularization undergone by America's Protestant colleges and universities, together with the pointed warning that the Catholic colleges of today may be stumbling down the same slippery slope. Burtchaell makes a powerful case for the need of more discussion on this problem. His dominant focus, however, is on the Protestant experience, and he assumes throughout his articles that the Catholic context is comparable in a straightforward way. Ironically he makes no use of the historical scholarship on American Catholic higher education, which has been involved in the combat with secularism from the beginning and in some ways more successfully than the Protestant schools. Yet they remain in trouble, academically speaking, and it is this experience that needs sorting out. On the vexing problem of academic freedom as a component of the evolving historical situation, Burtchaell's discussion is not so focused and systematic as the one offered by Charles E. Curran in his *Catholic Higher Education, Theology, and Academic Freedom* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

specialized, and altogether more modern institutional form. We ought to think about establishing some kind of institute for advanced study to be devoted to the needs of Catholic scholars in all of the humanities and the social sciences, and to involve the participation in governance of both clerical and lay people.

If theology is to be considered a mediating or correlational discipline, as Lonergan, for example, suggested it must be (and Lonergan, let us remember, was as committed to the foundational dimensions of theology as it is possible to be), it follows that theology must be not *simply* foundational, but rooted in something other than itself as well, namely knowledge of the culture in which it is functioning. That knowledge has to be earned and developed the hard way. Such an institute, if properly conceived and funded on a scale proportionate to the problem, might make this needed kind of address to the scholarly life of modern culture more feasible than it has been in the past. Given the institutional density of Catholic higher education in America—with the faculty of some 230 colleges and universities to work with—such an institute might address the needs of the system as a whole and not succumb to the underlying problems of localism, decentralism, and the embarrassing inability to cooperate that have beset the Catholic system from the beginning. For those who insist that problems of practice are somehow more urgent than those of theory and scholarship (a view I find confused and confusing), such an institute might provide a place where problems of the relation between knowledge and action could be brought into useful tension so as to make our mental and moral life more efficient than it seems to be at the moment. Most importantly, perhaps, such an institute might contribute to insuring that members of the rising Catholic intellectual community, whatever their personal disagreements and differences, had some sense of themselves *as* a community, which would be something importantly new to American Catholicism.

As for the intellectual as opposed to the institutional aspects of the current situation, I think it is a matter of looking afresh into the problems of religious modernism, of identifying a workable modernist history and community, and doing whatever we can to see that it is secured and expanded.

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