

SEMINAR ON THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

For its sixth year of work the seminar took a comparative approach to theological reflection on the history of Catholicism in the United States. M. Christine Athans (School of Divinity, University of St. Thomas) opened the session with her presentation, "Search for American Religious Identity Between the World Wars by Jewish, Catholic and Protestant Thinkers." Athans contextualized selected readings from Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), Mordecai Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), and John R. Ryan's *A Living Wage* (1906). She selected the works of these Neo-Orthodox, Neo-Thomist, and Reconstructionist Jewish thinkers because they grappled with significant religious and social issues in the period between World War I and World War II.

Reinhold Niebuhr's work grew out of a disillusionment with Protestant liberalism's naive optimism. Niebuhr moved from an individual to a collective approach to social issues in a way he considered more realistic than that of both liberal Protestantism and Fundamentalism. His Christian Realism became influential as the nation continued to face the implications of the Great Depression and as international relations became more complex and strained.

John Ryan's work evolved from the convergence of *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and the Modernist crisis (1907). That convergence left the social arena as the largest sphere for creative Catholic theology in the first half of the twentieth century. Ryan wed natural law philosophy and progressivism to address the social issues of the time. His project helped Catholics develop a sense that their religious tradition provided badly needed moral resources to the United States.

Mordecai Kaplan's work emerged from a growing Jewish awareness of anti-Semitism and intensifying concern with the survival of Judaism in light of experiences of immigration and assimilation. Kaplan sought to reconstruct Judaism as a civilization, not a religion or a race, in an effort to sustain Judaism in the United States. His promotion of Jewish centers spurred the growth of Conservative Judaism. These centers provided an option for Jews to affiliate with Judaism without having to couch that affiliation in primarily theological terms.

Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism all came out of World War I looking for identity and all went back to historical resources to find it: Protestantism to Luther and Calvin; Roman Catholicism to the thirteenth-century Thomistic synthesis; and Reconstructionist Judaism to the historical Jewish experience of community. In this search, however, Judaism and Catholicism stand over against Protestantism in their accent on organic community and in their theological anthropologies which accent human action, deeds, more than does Protestantism. Athans interpreted both Catholicism and Judaism as building organic civilizations

to compete with a Protestant United States in the years between World War I and World War II.

The ensuing discussion developed and sharpened the comparison of the three thinkers and pressed the influence of religious and social location on their work. All three thinkers were concerned with their traditions' ability to shape a moral society in the United States. All three were also concerned with articulating and sustaining a clear identity for their respective traditions. Kaplan offered his program to Jews. Ryan offered his Catholic social agenda to the nation. Niebuhr offered his Christian realism to world political leaders. These intended audiences reflect the social locations of the authors. They also reflect the extent of assimilation and legitimation of the three traditions in the United States.

The question of Kaplan's and Ryan's representativeness was discussed. With Kaplan the issue centered around the extent of Reconstructionist Judaism's influence on Jews in the United States. Athans argued that the influence was greater than the numbers in the movement might suggest. With Ryan the issue focused on the tension between a natural law approach and a biblical approach to Catholic social teaching for the United States. As well, Ryan's work can be viewed as simply repeating the progressivism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and not offering a new option to the nation. This interpretation was highlighted by the comment that Niebuhr's work assumed the bankruptcy of progressivist assumptions and strategies. The question of how much we can extrapolate from these three major thinkers to the religious experience of ordinary Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish people of the period was raised but not resolved.

The session was a productive step in the effort to develop a mutually critical correlation between historical information on Catholics in the United States and efforts to construct an inculturated theology. The comparative approach promises a more nuanced understanding of Catholicism's experience in the United States. Comparison highlights common and divergent questions among religious communities. It sharpens our awareness of the distinctive character of particular religious traditions. Finally, it points up more clearly how the inner life of a religious tradition intersects with the events and concerns of its larger social and cultural context in a given historical period.

The session closed with a business meeting during which a number of possible topics for next year were suggested. The steering committee is pursuing these.

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