

SEMINAR ON THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

For its eighth year the seminar worked with the question of how people appropriate their religious tradition and use it as a resource for religious and social critique and for creative novelty. Charles Moutenot chaired the session for convener, William Lindsey, who was not able to attend. Patricia O'Connell Killen summarized her pre-distributed paper, "Suspicion and Retrieval: The Voices of the Marginal in the American Catholic Experience." The paper's central claim was that social location influences how people appropriate their religious heritage and the strategies by which they relate to it for critical and creative purposes. Marginal communities, groups which have known oppression, seem more able and willing to engage their religious heritage with a dual hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval than do groups which have had the preponderance of political power and economic resources in a society. A second claim was that the preoccupation with assimilation in United States Catholic history drew the attention of institutional leadership away from noticing how shifting social location and rules for discourse grounded in social location have altered the way Catholics appropriate and interact with their religious heritage. Further, we can understand contemporary middle-class U.S. Catholics better if we recall that the assimilationist agenda achieved its greatest success at the point where the fit between Catholic communalism and sacramentalism and the culture's individualism became most strained—the 1960's. Assimilationist success for white European Catholics, Vatican Council II's call for renewal, and the radical critique and questioning of all institutions and authorities in the 1960's gave and continues to give both iconoclastic and individualistic tenor to the way many middle-class Catholics understand the renewal of the Church. Scholars need to explore the meaning of this convergence of events for the Church's self-understanding. It may help explain the instrumentalist, moralistic, and reductionistic use of tradition by many middle-class Catholics today.

Marginal groups, characterized by double-consciousness (W. E. B. DuBois' phrase) relate to religious and other cultural wisdom traditions differently than to middle-class people. They use a hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval to criticize and locate themselves within the tradition at the same time. More willing to accept the ambiguous nature of cultural wisdom traditions, they do connected critique. The writings of African American and Hispanic American Christians reveal a capacity to see and experience the limits of the cultural traditions within which one works and instead of choosing to despise or reject them, go deeper to

retrieve unnoticed or lost resources of creativity and insight within them. European ethnic Catholic immigrants had the same capacity, though it is difficult to retrieve through the fissures between the uncritical assimilation and extrinsic authoritarian critique of U.S. culture which mark their history. A significant ecclesiological and pastoral question, then, is how to nurture the capacity for connected critique among middle-class U.S. Catholics and how to identify where and how it now exists.

In the discussion which followed several themes and questions were raised toward sharpening and extending the analysis of United States Catholic history with attention to social location. The ambiguity of tradition as a category for nineteenth-century U.S. Catholics for whom ethnicity and religious heritage were conflated was noted, along with the fact that assimilation was much more an institutional concern than a concern of the people. It is important to distinguish between institution and tradition, though the two cannot be separated totally. Objection was raised to using the framework of margin-center, insider-outsider as a way to explain the historical and contemporary situation of Catholics in the United States. A revised understanding of catholicity which incorporates genuine difference was offered as a more constructive alternative. The process by which cultures are appropriated, given away, and taken away was identified, including the difference between the way people who assimilate from power and people who are conquered use hermeneutical strategies in relation to their religious heritage. The need was explored to expand DuBois' options for double-consciousness, violence or wisdom, to include a third category: choosing a new tradition. The need to identify the strategies by which liberal and conservative Americanists criticized Church and culture during the nineteenth century and how they do so today was observed. Also, the connection between the iconoclasm of the Romantic Movement in the nineteenth century and the iconoclasm of the 1960s was noted.

The discussion was curtailed to make time for a business meeting. The group discussed the name of the seminar and the need to clarify its distinctive task in relation to the North American Theology Seminar. The two groups use quite different methodologies. The program for Baltimore was also discussed. It is likely to focus on identifying and cultivating strategies for connected critique among contemporary middle-class United States Catholics.

PATRICIA O'CONNELL KILLEN
Pacific Lutheran University
Tacoma, Washington