

## JOHN COURTNEY MURRAY: CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION WITHIN AMERICAN SOCIETY

John Courtney Murray attempted to demonstrate the mutual compatibility of (American) Catholicism and U.S. political and social self-understanding. An initial presentation by the moderator briefly outlined the compatibility Murray affirmed, discordant points that he confronted, his repeated attempts to reconstruct both America's and the Church's self-understandings, and the sources to which Murray appealed in his (re)interpretation and reconstruction of American and Roman Catholic social experience. It was noted that, depending on the issue, the audience, and the target, his writings ranged from outright rejections of the materialistic and individualistic cultural core of America (while accepting its structural freedoms), to the uncovering and affirmation of moral will in the "great act of faith in the moral powers of the People" (his later religious liberty argument), and to the daunting task of bridging chasms between social groups, professions, and manners of knowing in a highly differentiated contemporary America.

Tom Hughson then took up a core cognitional problem with Murray's reading of U.S. society, a difficulty implied by the title of his major work *We Hold These Truths*, namely, Murray's alleged insensitivity to the formative influence that experience exerts on theory (under Murray's claim for the "primacy of theory"). Relying on Matthew Lamb's judgment that Maritain's notion of natural law (and theology) places both natural and redemptive general value commitments in an absolute, permanent, non-challengeable space (thereby reducing practical reasoning simply to technique), Hughson turned to considerations of (1) Murray's treatment of developments in natural law anthropology and political theory, (2) his consistently prudential understanding of human law, (3) his notion of moral will that defined, but extended well beyond, the content of the Bill of Rights, and (4) Murray's late reliance on Berle's notion that public opinion inchoately guides American business practice (in Murray's discussion of the need to move from naive to critical realism). Hughson concluded that there are resources within Murray's work for deepening our appreciation of the critical role that experience plays in theory formation, the dialectic interaction between practice and theory, and the priority of grass-roots appropriation and development of civil and religious commitments. In subsequent discussion, it was suggested that Murray's treatment of the "great act of faith" in the moral potentialities of American society could serve as a model for an analysis of the priority option for the poor and the highly social notion of human dignity as found in *Economic Justice for All*.

While Hughson explored the critical function that experience (or praxis) did

have on Murray's theoretical formulations, Joseph Komonchak examined the critical role that theology had on both his natural law theory and American behavior. His starting point was a series of talks given in 1940 by Murray that, relying primarily on Dawson's critique of American practical atheism, suggested that the necessary and only sufficient grounding for American freedoms were the Catholic doctrines of the incarnation, Trinity, and cross. Komonchak suggested that this style of reflection often shaped Murray's own interpretation of the natural law theory he located in the American Founding Fathers. Further, this theology continued to shape Murray's reactions to American secularism. In discussion it was suggested that Murray's earlier, manualist, and later, Lonergan-based, trinitarian studies substantively shaped his understanding of the types of reasoning that are possible even within civil, pluralistic societies.

Theresa Moser then explored possible inconsistencies between the Roman Catholic Church's self-understanding (its ecclesiology) and various commitments that emerged during and after the Council. Using the term "right" not as a political trump but rather as a marker for a comprehensive value judgment concerning universal human dignity, Moser cited several examples of the Church's institutional-maintenance concerns apparently overriding a commitment to non-Catholic and Catholic human dignity, and its occasional hostility toward pluralistic moral and religious expression. A suggested source for the latter was a notion of freedom as emerging out of a truth, a truth conceived as ahistorical and institutionally localized (despite conciliar recognition that true moral and religious insight develops through time and emerges sometimes outside ecclesiological borders). The problem here is one of an ecclesiological theory that has not yet caught up with other general commitments nor, often enough, with Church practice. Moser closed with a suggestion that the American Catholic Church might find the educational forum as the best arena to express its commitment to universal rights, human dignity, and, one might add, its belief in a God who acts within universal history.

In sum, the workshop explored the interactions of practical knowing, theology, and philosophy as they spelled themselves out in the developments of Murray's own practical and theoretical works. This complex notion of an ongoing dialectic between theoretical formulations and behavior was brought to some issues facing contemporary civil society and the Church. The moderator, at least, is convinced that Murray's late uncovering of analogous cognitional operations and required virtues and structures for all realms of meaning and action offer a grounding for a more consistent social ethics within, and between, disparate communities.

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