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THE CATHOLIC HOUR

DOCUMENTARY REPORT ON
CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL LIFE
IN AMERICA, 1958:

Part One. *Philosophy*

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This month THE CATHOLIC HOUR brings listeners selected portions of the Symposium on The Catholic Contribution to American Intellectual Life, co-sponsored by the Thomas More Association and Rosary College, and held in River Forest, Illinois, June 14-15, 1958

Participants recorded for this broadcast were Jerome Kerwin, Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, Rev. R. W. Mulligan, S.J., and Rev. Benedict Ashley, O.P., on the Pontifical Faculty at the Dominican House of Studies in River Forest.

Father Ashley's original talk has been abridged for CATHOLIC HOUR presentation.

Part One -- Philosophy

KERWIN: This year, on the fourteenth and fifteenth of June, a symposium was held just outside Chicago on what has probably been the most widely considered topic in American Catholic publications and among Catholic Scholars during the past year — the Catholic Contribution to American Intellectual Life. The chief questions were whether Catholics have contributed what could be expected of them to their country's reservoir of thought and whether the future will see an increased contribution. In order to examine the topic more clearly, it was broken down into six parts, and a speaker was found for each, Father Benedict Ashley, on the Pontifical Faculty at the Dominican House of Studies in River Forest, Illinois, spoke of our Philosophical contribution: the President of Hunter College, George Shuster approached it from the standpoint of education: Catholics' Humanities contribution was treated by Caroline Gordon Tate, while the eminent psychiatrist, Karl Stern, gave a foreign view of the topic: Jesuit Father Joseph Fichter, head of the department of Sociology at Loyola University of the South in New

Orleans, evaluated where we stand as regards Social Sciences: and Dr. James Reyniers of the Lobund Institute did the same with the Biological sciences.

After each address, the session's discussion chairman conducted a period of general questioning from members of the audience. Father Benedict Ashley, O.P., opened the symposium with an address on the Catholic contribution to American intellectual life in the field of Philosophy. Discussion chairman, Father R. W. Mulligan, S.J., introduced Father Ashley.

(Father Mulligan gives a brief introduction to Father Ashley.)

ASHLEY: Every culture is rooted in a philosophy about man, his relation to the cosmos, and the meaning of his life. Even in a pluralistic society culture has to rest on some area of compromise, and this compromise requires a philosophical defense.

The compromise on which our pluralistic American culture rests needs a philosophic defense of the dignity of the human person, of his inalienable rights, of the authority of a government of the people under God, of the duty of this government to encourage without absorbing religious, educational, scien-

tific, technological and economic institutions. I say that this defense must be *philosophical* because it must rest on truths which are presupposed by all these cultural institutions, and not merely created by them. We cannot justify a bill of human rights by the fact that it is a man-made law, rather we must justify such a man-made law by something presupposed to law.

The fundamental contribution of Catholics to the philosophy of our nation was made at its foundation. The source from which every basic element of the philosophy of American culture was drawn was the synthesis of Greek and Jewish culture produced by the Catholic Church. If we examine the contributions made to the foundations of American culture by Protestantism or by secularism, we will soon discover that what they contributed is just what they had derived from the Catholic synthesis. By this I do not mean to deny the originality of American culture, or the genuine contributions of many diverse traditions, but I assert that no single element of importance is new or is unaccounted for in the Catholic synthesis. If we ask whence the original character of this combination of old elements, I think that

we must answer that it does not lie in some new principle foreign to Catholic thought, but rather in the opportunity which the American environment gave to the realization of old ideals. Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Secularists have found an area of genuine compromise in American culture because all really originate in a common source

Our culture cannot survive or develop in a healthy fashion unless in our country there are those who can give a genuine defense of this common patrimony, and who understand it so well that they are able to see how it can be adapted to the changing circumstances of new times without destroying its vital balance.

Catholic philosophers do not believe in the total depravity of the human reason, nor do they concede that it is the mere product of evolution. Catholic philosophers are not afraid to hold that the values on which our culture rests can be defended rationally and scientifically without appeal to faith and without surrender to mere custom. They would like to share the work of defending the philosophical basis of American culture, and of developing it still further with non-Catholics, but they cannot

escape the responsibility of taking the lead.

We have now to ask whether Catholics are really giving this leadership, and what they must do to improve their influence. By what standard should we judge this degree of success?

The current controversy has proposed a standard in the form of a *catch-word* which seems to me very unfortunate. We are told that what Catholic philosophers need is to devote themselves to "scholarship". No doubt this bears a charitable interpretation. Certainly "scholarship" is a necessary element of a great culture. No doubt too, American Catholics have not contributed their quota to "scholarship". But scholarship is not the main task of philosophy. We may grant that a philosopher whose scholarship is unsound is probably not a good philosopher, but he may be an excellent scholar and not much of a philosopher. The term "scholarship" ordinarily implies historical research. We do not commonly praise a physicist or a mathematician as a "great scholar", unless he has added the study of history as a side-line to his main work. Philosophy is not a historical discipline, and it is not concerned primarily with histo-

rical facts, or the reporting and analysis of what philosophers have said. As a teacher of the history of philosophy, I would not wish to belittle the very real services of history to philosophy, but I would never want philosophy judged by its degree of "scholarship". Such a standard is common today because mere philosophy seems unimportant. It manages to maintain itself by adopting the pose of scholarship which is considered respectable.

On the other hand, philosophy also cannot be judged by the standard of "research" in the sense that such a standard is recognized in the natural and social sciences. The philosopher does engage in research, but it is only of secondary interest. The philosopher is not concerned with what is old as is the scholar, and he is not concerned with what is new as is the research scientist. The philosopher is concerned with wisdom which is neither old nor new. He realizes that the wise men of the past knew all that is really important for man to know, and that in the future nothing comparable will ever be added to this perennial treasure. Like the truly wise man of the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, the philosopher is convinced that fun-

damentally "there is nothing new under the sun". The great truths of human life are unchanging and it is they that give meaning and form to all that does change. The philosopher can only smile quietly at the enormous efforts which are expended by men in digging up the past and building up the future. His smile is not patronizing and it is not disillusioned, it is the smile of one who sees the humor of the human situation in which everyone must run very fast, like the White Queen, in order to keep in the same spot.

The philosopher loves wisdom. He is trying to court for himself that beautiful wife, which every generation of lovers must win anew. We do not think that love must be new and original in order to be worthwhile for every generation. The philosopher knows that his courtship may take a life-time, but that the important thing is that he win wisdom for himself, not that he produce some new truth.

Hence our judgement on the Catholic contribution to American culture in the field of philosophy must be in terms of whether it is producing lovers of wisdom, men and women who have the habit of wisdom, not by any other standard.

Certainly our expectations should not be naively optimistic. Lovers of wisdom have never been many, and American culture as it has developed since the Civil War has not produced many such lovers.

From this point of view three very obvious facts about the role of Catholic philosophy in American culture appear at once. They are so obvious that they go unnoticed:

First, Philosophy cannot be very influential in a society where philosophical pluralism is carried to exaggerated lengths as is today in the United States where it is difficult even to classify philosophers into schools.

Catholics have a reasoned remedy for this extravagance, namely the acceptance of Thomism as a *common* philosophy. This does not mean that only Thomism is taught or permitted among Catholics. It means that there is a common patrimony which makes possible mutual communication and a solid educational foundation. Other schools are forced to attempt the impossible, namely to teach *all* philosophies.

Second, Catholic seminaries have

produced some 50,000 priests who have fundamental training in philosophy which they must constantly bring to bear as leaders in local communities, which sociology recognizes as the real cradles of culture. The only thing comparable to this in American society has been the influence of the philosophy of Progressivism in our teachers' colleges.

Third, Catholic colleges (and to a considerable extent Catholic high schools) provide a study of basic philosophical principles much more extensive than that given in any other American system of schools.

If we compare these three facts with the common American situation we cannot help but be astonished. Perhaps non-Catholic institutions are producing many men of wisdom, but if they do so it is certainly not because they devote much direct effort at preparing either an elite or a wider public in philosophical truth. Indeed, their neglect to aim at this preparation is the best proof that it is not regarded as very important. Whatever may be said of the defects of Catholic institutions in developing philosophical thinking, there is no doubt

that they attempt it on a wide and very serious scale, and constantly bear witness to the conviction that it is of major importance.

I am, of course, under no illusion that giving courses in philosophy automatically makes men wise, but I am sure if we are trying to assess the condition of our culture, these three facts make clear that in the United States Catholics have the leadership in keeping alive an elite and a public which regards a philosophical point of view as indispensable and of ultimate importance.

The controversy about Catholic cultural contribution has arisen recently just because we are convinced of the importance of philosophy, and hence are shocked that our philosophy is bearing so little fruit in American life. Everyone will suggest his own answers to the question: Why is our cultural influence so weak, if our philosophy is so strong? To me the following answers seem primary:

Our first defect is the inadequate preparation of our clergy as well as religious and lay teachers in *theology* — Notice that I say in theology, not in philosophy. In line with the trends of American life, the Catholic seminary in

America is under great pressure to make its courses more practical. Lately pressure is being applied to make these courses more scholarly. An emphasis on scholarship, and the idealization of the theologian as a research scholar will only make it more apparent that theology is a very "impractical subject." Hence not a few of our clergy are inclined to regard theology as not very vital, a concern of specialists. When theology is neglected, philosophy cannot seem important to a priest.

The only remedy for this is the restoration of the authentic conception of theology as a wisdom which culminates in prayer and bears fruit in charity. St. Thomas envisioned theology not as scholarship, but as a profound penetration of the Word of God.

Another defect is our tendency to give easy answers to hard contemporary problems. Sometimes this takes the form of ignoring the contemporary problem altogether. We argue that if philosophy is timeless it can afford to neglect the passing problem of today. Although the antecedent of this argument is very true, as I have already indicated, nevertheless the consequent is false. The possession of truth must be fertile if it is to be

genuine. If we do not show our age that the answer to its problems lies in perennial truths, we are not bearing effective witness to the truth, and we cannot pretend to love it sincerely.

However, I do not think this type of easy answer is really a very prevalent one. Attendance at any meeting of Catholic philosophers or educators will reveal that they are perpetually worrying about how to meet contemporary problems. There is another type of easy answer which is much more common today.

This kind of solution aims at showing both sides to be right, yet also at dispensing the philosopher from the hard task of synthesizing them. We admit that both positions are right but at different levels. Or we admit that changing social circumstances or the advance of knowledge makes a new answer necessary without, of course, disproving the old. For example we are faced today with the obvious problem of reconciling modern science with our traditional philosophy. How do we do it? The solution is simple "philosophy and science operate on two different levels, therefore they cannot conflict, but do not have to be reconciled". When

it is pointed out that this was not St. Thomas' solution, we can quickly reply, "But he couldn't possibly have foreseen modern science." Again we are faced with the conflict between modern sociology and traditional ethics. The solution is simple. "Ethics deals with values and is based on a metaphysical analysis of man, while the social sciences are empirical and value free. Therefore, they cannot conflict and do not have to be reconciled." Again we are asked how to reconcile the Aristotelian view that art is imitation with modern non-objective art. We reply very simply that "Only in our age has art been freed from its representational function."

We are faced with the pluralism of modern society which seems so strikingly different from medieval society based on a common code. The solution is easy, "Times have changed"

Now I grant that there are many pseudo-problems in philosophy that arise by trying to put together problems that pertain to different levels of thought, and I also grant that changing times may change the application of principles. The reason I call these solutions facile is that once the distinction has been made, we feel that our job is done. "Distin-

guish in order to unite" is indeed a Thomistic motto, but where is this union our distinctions are supposed to effect? Can we honestly say that our neat distinction between philosophy and science has led to a lively cooperation between the two? No, I am afraid that we use such distinctions as another way of saying that since we have the truth that really counts, therefore modern problems are not really important.

Why do we fear a more direct contact between philosophy and modern difficulties? Is it not because this would require us to pass judgement on our times? A judge is not going to be very popular unless he always gives a verdict of acquittal. It is a grave responsibility for a philosopher to look at his own age and to decide what is false and what is true in its culture. We are haunted by the spectre of Galileo, and we fear to correct modern science and modern thought lest we should make a mistake. Yet this is the role of the philosopher and he cannot escape it. He must judge every field of knowledge and of culture by the permanent and unchanging principles which it is his duty to maintain, and he must fit whatever proves true into a synthetic picture. This synthesis

does not have to be made anew in every age. It is already made in its broad and permanent outlines. The philosopher's problem is to test the contributions of his age and fit whatever passes the test into its place in that outline. At present we have two pictures. The outline which we teach as "philosophy," and the unorganized details which we teach as "science". Nor can we look to the future for the coming of another St. Thomas. Why do we need another St. Thomas? His historical mission is completed; our mission is to fill in the details of the picture whose outlines he has firmly drawn.

KERWIN: And so began the Symposium on the Catholic Contribution to American Intellectual Life, which was held in mid-June this year, just outside of Chicago. On succeeding CATHOLIC HOUR broadcasts this month, we shall hear others as they addressed the symposium, as well as some of the discussion that took place there.

KERWIN: Before we close this part of our documentary report on the symposium in River Forest, it might be well to point out one fact — on another recent nationwide report on these subjects, the prevailing mood of American

education in 1958 was referred to as one of "agonizing re-appraisal". It is a significant comment on the re-appraisal that took place at this symposium that it was anything but "agonizing," though a frank and meaningful re-appraisal it certainly was. Here we had no long and haggard faces, no feelings of hopelessness or of imminent panic. In an atmosphere of joy and confidence, Catholics took stock of the situation, and while they by no means found the facts as encouraging as they might be, they, nonetheless, faced them squarely and made their resolutions strong for the future.

The symposium was sponsored by the Thomas More Association (a national organization designed to promote Catholic reading) and the department of Library Science, Rosary College, River Forest, Illinois.

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