

The Moral ~~Code~~
Curve

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Is the moral demand which American society makes on its members going up or going down? Nine American Catholics and an English visitor discuss the question.

THE

**MORAL
CURVE**

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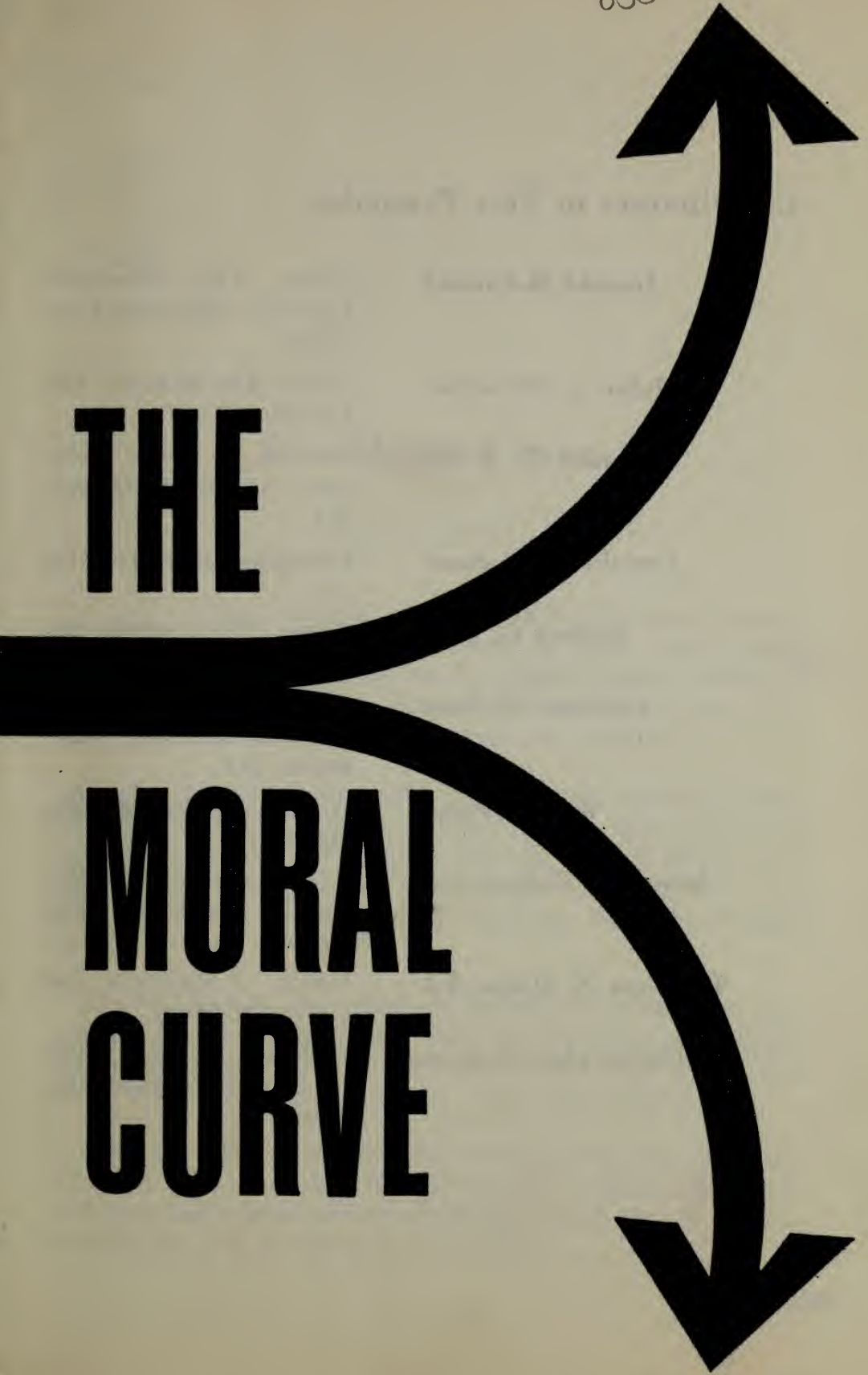
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The Moral Curve

Up or Down?

IS THE "MORAL DEMAND" of American society on an ascending or a descending curve? Are we as a nation going morally soft? Or are we on the contrary getting better in quiet and unnoticed ways—becoming more honest, more humane, more concerned with our neighbors' welfare?

Among Catholics, as among other people, opinions differ. One of the most stimulating debates that has appeared in the pages of *AMERICA*, the National Catholic Weekly Review, revolved around the question of our nation's moral health. It all began with DONALD McDONALD'S column, "The Descending Curve."

The ten Catholic journalists and writers whose names appear opposite have contributed their views to this debate. The reader may disagree with some or even all of them. But he will find their opinions interesting and, we hope, provocative.

All of the material included here is from *AMERICA* except for Fr. Davis's article, "Have We Gone Soft?" which is reprinted with permission from the *New Republic* (1244 19th St., N.W., Washington, D.C.), February 15, 1960.

I: The Descending Curve

DONALD McDONALD

IN THE TWO political conventions of July, 1960, speakers made frequent reference to the United States as a "Christian nation." While some of these references were obviously the well-worn coins of political rhetoric, some were also the currency of genuine conviction.

This conviction is reflected beyond the bounds of political action and oratory. It is expressed in our popular literature and by platform lecturers of all types and on all occasions. It accounts for the mention of God on our money and in our oath of allegiance. Even when it is not expressed, its presence is almost palpable. It amounts to one of the great assumptions of the American people.

And, of course, the further assumption is that if we are indeed a "Christian nation," then whatever we do vis-a-vis non-Christian and/or atheistic governments, is beyond reproach so far as moral principles are concerned. Christ must be on "our side" in any encounter with "the enemy," because we are on His side.

I think that in one sense we are a Christian nation, but that in another we are not. And while it would be pleasant to coast along in the comfortable assumption that in every respect the United States is thoroughly Christian, perhaps it would be the better part of wisdom to face some of the uncomfortable contradictory evidence.

The fact is that "Christian" has become a highly ambiguous term in the American context.

We are Christian by reason of our heritage. This nation was founded by Christians who were articulately conscious of their religion and of the relationship of religion to social and political life. If their first order of business was the erection of a town hall, the second (and often simultaneous) was the building of a church. And it was not unknown that forum and sanctuary were temporarily under one roof.

We are also a Christian nation in terms of religious affiliations, that is, church membership. Of the American people who admit to religious affiliation at all, the vast majority designate themselves as "Christians."

Whence the "ambiguity" of our Christianity? It enters, I believe, most obviously, in the moral order; and—less obviously but more fundamentally—in what Americans believe and hold as irreducible articles of their Christian faith.

There is not space here, of course, to examine the dilution and, in some cases, the disappearance of Christian belief among those who profess themselves Christians. But no discussion of the quality of Christianity in America would be complete without an historical and theological analysis of the credal condition of American Christians. All I want to suggest at this point, however, is that the ambiguity so discernible in our moral life is caused in great part by the ambiguity of our belief.

What is some of this "uncomfortable contradictory evidence" which brings into question the quality of Christian life in America?

Well, for one thing, Sunday is no longer regarded by increasing numbers of Americans as the Lord's Day, as a holy day which, if it was not always oriented to or completely saturated by things directly spiritual and religious, was a recreational and reflective pause in the commercial and economic activities of the people. Today, on Sunday afternoons, we see huge shopping centers thronged with people, their parking lots dense with cars, as buying and selling is carried on openly, unabashedly and vigorously.

As a matter of curious and, I think, significant fact, the American people now reserve their greatest reverence and respect for national holidays. The supermarkets and furniture stores are shut down quite tightly on Memorial Day, July 4 and Labor Day, and city neighborhoods, on such days, are as quiet and tranquil as Sundays once were twenty years ago.

Other evidence? A very distinguished Catholic theologian—certainly not a prude by any standards—told me a few months ago that the popular level of moral acceptability has been in a decline for a generation in this country. He mentioned, as a single example, the summer dress of American women, in town

or on the beach. While he fully recognized the distinction between modesty and chastity and acknowledged the subjective elements which must be considered and accurately weighed in any objective moralistic evaluation of women's clothing, nevertheless it seemed to him that the American community has relaxed what he calls its "moral vision."

"Relaxation of moral vision, at some moment, is going to become immoral," he said. "I don't know where that moment is. I don't want to state that what we [now] have is good morality or bad morality. All I am saying is that the moral demand is being relaxed continuously. At some point—maybe we've reached it, maybe we still have to reach it—the moral demand will no longer be a moral demand. It will be complete license in morality."

I asked him whether such moral relaxation corresponds to a "descending curve." "Yes," he said, "At some moment, somewhere on that curve, morality as a public concern is no longer effective."

More evidence? The serene and unstrained tolerance of many Americans so far as cheating, bribing and "rigging" of all kinds is concerned. Reliable, though not necessarily 'scientific,' polls of American attitudes in this area reveal a most "relaxed" moral vision.

There is other evidence. Our public book and magazine racks, for instance. These reflect almost unrelieved sex mania. Our "mass audience" motion pictures and the near-pornographic illustrations in the newspaper and billboard advertising of these films. Our divorce and juvenile delinquency statistics. The medical profession's general attitude toward abortion: the American Medical Association recently refused in a convention at Miami Beach to pass a resolution condemning abortion.

I do not want to suggest that we have become, in fact, an anti-Christian or even a non-Christian nation.

But I do suggest that if we use the term "Christian nation" when referring to the United States, it might be a sign of health, not weakness, to do so with a little less confidence and a little more anxiety, a little more recognition that at some place along the line of a descending moral (and credal) curve, not only morality but Christianity itself will cease to be effective.

II: Seven Laymen Comment

John A. O'Connor

OF COURSE, Donald McDonald's theologian friend is quite right: the moral demand *is* being relaxed continuously by the American community. However, Mr. McDonald is being a little timid, in my opinion, in calling it a "descending curve." It is more of a sharp and accelerated decline. We are on a moral bobsled course—slick, frightening, dangerous.

I do not say that all Americans are individually doom-bound. Far from it. But publicly—as a community, with group voices, acting as groups, projecting the group image—we Americans are swiftly hurtling downward from the lofty heights of national character that we once clung to.

In listing a few examples of evidence that uncomfortably contradict the assumption that the United States is a "Christian nation," Mr. McDonald was very kind. He might have asked what part the Christian has played in this departure from our inheritance.

Permit me to examine one piece of such evidence, namely, the metamorphosis of Sunday.

Mr. McDonald cited the change that has come over the Lord's Day, once a day that focused on churchgoing or, at least, on reflective pause, but which today is somewhere between a shopper's spree and a freeway stampede. This may be exaggerated, granted. Nevertheless, Mr. McDonald might have asked: What has Christian leadership, lay and clerical, provided to compete with Sunday's secularizing distractions?

For Catholics, this can be said: the Mass, central and thematic act of the Lord's Day, is still largely meaningless to most, and in many areas pastors are dragging their feet like recalcitrant schoolboys in response to the Holy Father's call to help the people participate more fully in the Holy Sacrifice.

At one time American Christians were allied in maintaining some sort of moral front against the encroachments of recog-

nized evils. A good deal of this arrangement's success must be attributed to the longevity of New England Puritanism, the unflinching Yankee backbone of American Protestantism. But the new American suburban Protestantism appears neither as staunch nor as robust. Its entente cordiale with organized birth-prevention disciples, its frequent alliance with secularists in the public education field, and its retreat before the wicked and withering fire of the atheistic materialists and neopagans in the communications and entertainment arts all demonstrate the change in the character of American Protestantism.

All Christian religions have suffered in their contest with the religion of secularism.

American Catholicism, on the other hand, has been snugly moldering in its cocoon. The idea of a mission-to-the-community has not caught hold widely. The Catholic as a self-sanctifier rather than as a community-leaven is still predominant. Catholic leadership still manifests a marvelous ability to appear only self-interested, not community-interested.

Robert T. Reilly

This nation's concept of sin seems to have narrowed as the possibilities of sin have expanded. Motor-vehicle homicide, therapeutic abortion and even excessive installment buying have joined the roster of traditional errors. But while these mortal opportunities multiply, everyone seems to think venially. Emphasis is seldom placed on the justice of God. It is His mercy that is contemplated.

Our affluence is one cause of this dilemma. Our sophistication is another. Perhaps never before have the consequences of original sin been so happily and readily accepted. The common reaction to the testimony of Francis Powers was not an evaluation of his conduct but an unwillingness to judge, based on doubts of one's own frailty. Moral principles are independent of any individual's strength or weakness, but we have made them the fluid residue of the law of averages. There is, even among many Catholics, a Kinsey-like belief in the statistical justification for immorality.

We are constantly tempering our own right conscience because we find it out of keeping with the times. We react against censorship and we criticize the parochial school system. We condone cheating, adultery, indolence, profanity, anticlericalism. Canon law on such subjects as Catholic education and church support is seldom taken seriously. Many parents fear less the loss of their child's soul than the demise of her popularity. In fact, in some quarters, the mark of a man may be his proficiency in the seven capital sins—just so long as he is discreet. There are courageous examples of young people today who are bucking the tide. But they are in the minority and they are under fire.

It all adds up to a strange desire for conformity and statistical normality. Few people want to be holier than their friends. They would prefer the company of the nine lepers to the lonely embarrassment of the one.

Donald J. Thorman

Donald McDonald's comments on the fact that "the moral demand is being relaxed continuously" struck a responsive chord for me.

Some months ago I wrote an article, on a more popular level, which I titled "Sin Is On the Way Out." The incident that precipitated the article symbolized for me the moral dilemma we have gotten ourselves into by the separation of religion and daily life. On a train trip, I had chanced to meet a respectable and sincere businessman who related to me the great difficulty he was having teaching his son (and business heir apparent) the facts of economic life.

"All my life," he told me, "I've taught my son to be scrupulously honest. One time when he was a boy I even walked back a mile with him to return a dollar a tailor had given me by mistake. My boy never forgot that and still talks about it today."

"But," he continued, "I just can't get my boy to understand that things are different in business. He just doesn't seem to get the idea that such a thing as a 'white lie' in business, for example, is not the same as a lie in your family or personal life."

I've often wondered since then how this man's son has or has not been able to reconcile a schizophrenic personal and social morality. I suppose he will eventually work out the same kind of rationalization his father did.

This is only one example of how the moral demand is being relaxed, but I think it is a symbolic one.

The crux of the problem, it seems to me, is mainly institutional. This is not to gainsay the demands of personal morality, which are always with us. But when the economic system itself demands that salesmen, for instance, misrepresent their wares, or that a bus or truck driver must break the laws on speeding to keep his schedule, personal morality becomes somewhat academic.

The institutional aspects of moral problems today do not, of course, shave down our personal responsibility one iota; but I suggest that they add an obligation in every area where the moral demand is being relaxed. It is the obligation to mobilize the social forces of morality so that one day the social and personal demands of morality will coincide.

Robert G. Hoyt

Donald McDonald's piece on the "descending curve of morality" did not seem to me nearly so significant or useful as some of his other recent contributions.

He presents a familiar thesis, supported by familiar evidence. Because of the dilution of our Christian beliefs, our moral standards are declining: witness the laxity of Sabbath observance, the scantiness of women's clothing, public indifference to payola, the emphasis on sex in the mass media, etc. A quotation from a theologian sums up the evidence: ". . . The moral demand is being relaxed continuously"; eventually it may reach the point where there is "complete license in morality."

Maybe this is true. I don't know, and I haven't been helped toward a conclusion by Mr. McDonald's article; it tells me nothing but his opinion. Though I respect his judgment (rather more than my own), I still don't want to swallow so huge a

generalization only on his authority and that of an unnamed theologian.

It strikes me that articles of this type are altogether too easy to do. There are 180 million people in this country, all afflicted with a negative inheritance from Father Adam and Mother Eve. At any given moment, past or future, using one's own observations and the resources of the nation's press, it would be possible to gather a batch of vivid illustrations for the assertion that we have returned to the days of Sodom, only worse.

But to illustrate is not to prove. Maybe this approach would be appropriate at Stage One in the annual parish mission, but it doesn't qualify as a considered evaluation of the moral tone of our society. Because the evidence of moral decay has been so carefully chosen, and contrary evidence carefully excluded, the verdict sounds too much like the perennial lament of the older generation passing shocked judgment on the doings of the younger set.

And there *is* evidence to the contrary. Despite the erosion of Christian beliefs, I think I see signs of a much keener and subtler appreciation of the meaning of human personality, of the rights man has as man. In business it's no longer taken for granted that a man can act like a bully in the school yard, doing unto others as much as he can get away with under the circumstances. Isolationism no longer controls our policy internationally; though the change may have been forced upon us, it has brought about a broadening of our moral vision. Fr. Lucius F. Cervantes has turned up evidence to indicate that family life isn't so rotten as the unanalyzed statistics would tend to show; most of the trouble comes from a small minority. We have writers who specialize in perversity, but we have others (like Salinger) whose passion against "phoniness" gives meaning to purity. Not only are the churches crowded (a phenomenon not to be dismissed too casually), but the religious press is vigorous as never before.

I don't offer these items as proof that things are getting better and better, nor even to disprove Mr. McDonald's contention that things are getting worse and worse. I want only to show that the question is complicated. An "answer" like Mr. Mc-

Donald's is inappropriately simple; it therefore looks as rigged as any quiz show. Even worse, it is not really serious, but petulant; it sounds like somebody's maiden aunt scolding the world. I say this, knowing it is harsh, because I agree with Mr. McDonald that we have to make and communicate a genuine prophetic judgment of how Christian or un-Christian this country has become. When we issue this judgment, we should take all pains to avoid giving the impression that the "descending curve of morality" exists in the eye of the beholder.

Clarence M. Zens

Donald McDonald's figure of moral standards plotted on a "descending curve" forces one to look backward. For me the chart begins with my first serious observations of the adult world, about twenty-five years ago. It covers the Depression, pre-war, hot-war, postwar and Cold-War periods. There is not a "normal" year anywhere in the span, nor are there any in prospect now.

I mention this because I believe public morality is determined by at least three things: the strength of the principles of the individual, the force of group pressures upon the individual, and contemporary circumstances. As I see it, each of these tugs away at the direction of the line on Mr. McDonald's chart.

I would support the professor who is quoted on the continuous relaxation of the "moral demand." He is referring to the group pressures that exert beneficial effects upon all of us. Today, beyond a doubt, this pressure is slackening. The public shrugs off dress, speech and forms of behavior it would have censured not too long ago.

Talk to people about Francis Powers, or about the earlier cases of the Korean defectors. They will express dismay, humiliation, sorrow or even rage. But they invariably hold off from a final moral judgment. Why? Because they feel there is more to these events than they know. What is the truth, they ask, about brainwashing? It is the same with discussions of atomic fallout, or anything in the nuclear field. Who has the information upon

which to base a sure judgment? Very few; possibly no one.

Confusion, I should add, is a circumstance of our times even in the normally simple areas. Mr. McDonald begins his indictment of today's Americans with an observation on the commercialization of Sunday. I, too, share his distress over the crowded shopping centers on the Lord's Day. But he pictures the proper observance of Sunday as recreational, opposing that to commercial. I wonder if our present mode of life sustains the distinction. Recreation today is heavily commercial in itself. I ask Mr. McDonald, in all seriousness, how he can expect to persuade the man who spends \$25 for tickets, food, souvenirs, etc., at the ball park, and then stops on the way home to spend \$10 for a bargain lamp at the highway furniture mart, that he was keeping the Sabbath in one instance but breaking it in the other? Sunday is surely being lost by laxity, but also—let's be honest—by bewilderment.

It may be that the accurate picture of our present moral condition is a descending curve, guided downward by relaxed demands. I suggest, however, that the line on the chart may resemble a series of gyrations, following the confusion of our times.

Walker Percy

Essays like Mr. McDonald's are salutary now and ever will be—anyhow, as long as Christianity has "won" and most people are born and raised Christian and think of themselves so. He might have carried the attack further and gone on to say with Kierkegaard and Chesterton that it is much easier to become a Christian if one is not already a Christian.

But the times themselves give to Mr. McDonald's article an urgency beyond this perennially valid criticism.

There is not much question that the moral demand is being relaxed continuously. The real question is whether the letdown is the recurring ebb of a Christian culture and is, as such, remediable by the usual reforms. That it may be something a good deal more ominous is suggested by the apathy with which charges like Mr. McDonald's are received. After all, Democrats

and Republicans (and preachers) talk a great deal about such things as the need for regeneration of moral fibre and recovery of national purpose. I do not notice that these exhortations are received with anything but self-congratulations about our being a "Christian nation." Accusation or congratulation, it is all the same.

Mr. McDonald speaks of the relaxation of the moral tone of movies and newspaper advertisements and magazine racks. Here, it seems to me, is a clue. The unprecedented role of the mass media in everyday life suggests that it is not enough to bring the usual charge of moral evil. It might be helpful to inquire into the peculiar problems of a culture in which ever larger areas are being surrendered to the self-regulating mechanism of the marketing mentality.

If the mass media conceive their proper function to be the "researching" and the supplying of what the consumer wants, and the consumer in turn looks to the media for what he should do and be and like, then it is a case of one mirror seeking its image in another. Certainly there is a general exodus of responsibility from the market place, by producer and consumer alike.

We may indeed still be a "Christian nation." Church membership may be greater than ever and the polls may report that this year not 97 but 98 per cent of Americans believe in God. It is also true that the social organism may continue to give lip service to the old pieties long after the high centers of control have been abandoned.

In the neurological laboratory, the decerebrate cat is still a cat in a manner of speaking, but there is a certain deterioration of function, and in the end the little beast digests itself in its own juices.

Reply of Donald McDonald

Mr. Hoyt wants proof. I am afraid it is impossible to prove what he correctly labels opinion. The fact that the other five commentators attest to the accuracy and acuity of my vision dispels, at least for me, some of the doubts Mr. Hoyt raises.

It is true that I brought forward only evidence to support my opinion, but I did acknowledge the existence of areas of Christian strength. I might point out here that my evidence of Christian weakness by no means exhausted the available supply. I might have called on John K. Galbraith, Mortimer Adler, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., John LaFarge, S.J., Charles Malik, Adlai Stevenson and Walter Lippman—not a petulant maiden aunt in the lot.

I stand by my generalizations. I do not think the pockets of Christian vitality and strength are significantly comparable to the general moral decline we are now experiencing. I think the assertion that we are a “Christian nation” is becoming more and more an unverified assumption. I think that term (“Christian nation”) has become at least ambiguous in its most radical sense.



III. Too Much Pessimism

JOSEPH H. FICHTER, S.J.

ONE OF THE positive characteristics of the American people is their concern about moral values. European observers are struck by this fact, and social scientists never weary of telling us about the "moralistic" tone of the American culture. Men like Robin M. Williams Jr. and William L. Kolb, the late Howard Becker and Clyde Kluckhohn, studied deeply the core of moral values in America. The focus of Myrdal's classic analysis of American race relations, *The American Dilemma*, was that the conscience of America cannot put up with discriminatory treatment of people who do not deserve such treatment.

Donald McDonald stands in this tradition of both observed and observers when he writes about the moral trends of our country. What is disturbing about his comments is his negative generalization about the "descending moral curve." What is even more disturbing is that there should be only one dissenter, Robert Hoyt, among the six men invited by the editors of AMERICA to discuss the McDonald article. It would be presumptuous to predict what six (or sixty) other Catholic commentators, priests or laymen, would have to say about current American morality, but I have a vague suspicion that the proportion would run about the same: one positive to five or six negative. The moralistic pessimists among Catholics seem to outnumber vastly the moralistic optimists.

Catholic editors, columnists and commentators ought to come to realistic grips with this problem of morality in the American society. A more balanced appraisal needs to be made of the values, standards and behavior of the people. Comparisons with our own past and with other peoples show that we are not suffering a moral collapse. Then why do Catholic writers and speakers generally take a negatively critical view of the moral aspects of the American culture?

After years of teaching a college course in social problems one cannot conclude that all is well with America. There are sore social spots that are patently unjust and uncharitable, as well as unintelligent. The incidence of delinquency and alcoholism, the maldistribution of medical and educational facilities, the shortage of adequate housing, the pattern of discrimination against Negroes and other minorities, and many other social problems can be cited. These are immoral in the sense that they indicate our failure to live up to our high moral norms.

The persistence of these social problems must stand condemned as both socially inefficient and morally reprehensible for two reasons. First, we have the sociological know-how to alleviate most of them. Secondly, our standards of moral and social values are constantly rising. We are steadily elevating the "lofty heights of national character" and we are now responding to greater "moral demands" than our forefathers deemed possible.

The statistics—that is, the known facts—on moral and immoral behavior, especially in regard to "crime rates," are notoriously spotty and difficult to interpret. Daniel Bell has made a good case on what he calls the "myth" of the crime wave and has shown that Americans are much less criminal than they were fifty years ago. At the same time, the late Edwin Sutherland extended the definition of crime to include numerous shady business practices and coined the term "white collar criminality." This too is an index of our refined moral sensitivity, for we now condemn business practices that were accepted as a matter of course a generation or two ago.

What are the facts and how do we get at them? While there have been setbacks and fluctuations, the long-term moral trend has clearly been upward. We have set our values higher and we are behaving better than we did a half-century ago.

The evidence is vast, but only a few examples can be provided here. We have learned something about being our brothers' keeper. We now take it for granted that the community has a responsibility for the aged, the infirm, the dependent; that the exploitation of women and children is intolerable; that workers have the right to bargain collectively. This is a far advance

from the immoralities of laissez faire. The clamor that arose over even small gifts (like rugs, coats and iceboxes) to prominent public servants; the investigations of "payola" in industry and communications and entertainment; the expressed dismay over the antics of idle rich and much-married people—all of these reactions to immorality indicate a high sense of morality in Americans.

Some sociologists like to call ours a "contractual" society, in which the need for making agreements displaces the natural and spontaneous cooperation of a "familistic" society. One of the little noticed aspects of this kind of society is a moral one: the fact that trust and confidence have been laboriously built into the whole complex network of modern human relations. The stock market, the banking system, all of our economic institutions, would collapse without these dependable expectations of human behavior. In spite of aberrations, which will probably always appear in new forms, our regulations on pure food and drugs, on advertising, on stock manipulations, are fairly effective.

The social historian need only compare our modern society with the behavior that went on at the turn of the century. The big difference is that our public conscience has been sharpened. Certainly we cannot discount the savagery of two World Wars in which we piously and brutally engaged "for justice' sake," but neither can we discount the current valiant attempts to make the United Nations effective, nor the American willingness to co-operate with the defeated nations and the underdeveloped areas of the world. These high moral concepts would probably have been laughed to scorn fifty years ago.

This citation of examples could go on and on, dealing with questions of religious practices, of family life, of race relations, of job opportunities, and many others; but let us move to the second question. The printed material in AMERICA, which is the springboard for these remarks, seems to reflect a peculiar "Catholic" attitude toward the American culture and its problems. Prof. Thomas F. O'Dea sums this up neatly in what he calls the "moralism" of American Catholicism. It looks upon the created world as a place of moral danger which can be approached only with trepidation and fear. This moralistic ap-

proach sees the pathway to hell opening everywhere in the world, and gives the Catholic a distorted notion of created reality.

What makes the Catholic commentators—especially the ones who are widely popular among Catholic readers—so negative about the American culture? There are other kinds of people in America who are similarly, or even more, negative in their criticism. Various primitive and fundamentalist religious sects condemn the world outright and want no part of the dynamic and progressive American society. Small, vocal groups of reactionaries around the country (not limited to the rural Southeast) are almost compulsive in their rejection of anything that looks new, different or progressive. It would be calumny to equate most Catholic writers and commentators with these dismal and destructive kinds of people, but there is a dreadful kinship that can occasionally be traced. One popular priest preacher I know has a novel twist on this whole interpretation. He says that practically everything is wrong with the American culture; and Catholics are to blame for it because they do not live up to the noble principles of their religion.

There are certainly other factors behind such incredibly naive interpretations of the current social scene. It may well be that the defensiveness of American Catholics stems remotely from the older response to the Reformation, and more immediately from the American experience of immigrant minority status. One suspects here also a persecution complex which probably results in misplaced aggression, as the psychologists suggest. Perhaps Yves Congar was correct when he said that an outmoded medieval approach to the scientific and the secular cannot comprehend this changing society. Even when there are evils present—and there are many of them—a holding action makes no contribution to improvement. A retreat to the pat and eternal formulae of the Scholastic moralists is even more disconcerting and more fruitless.

What accounts for the fact that the most popular Catholic columnist in America is a crank, neither scholarly nor scientific, who takes a consistently disdainful view of the American culture? Clergymen seem to agree with this view even more than Catholic lay people do. What a contrast this is to popular propa-

gandists like Chesterton and Belloc. Neither of them could be called scholarly or scientific by present-day standards, but they went about their writing and lecturing jobs with a zest and a verve that was anything but pessimistic. They were not the “unhappy warriors” that one finds so much in evidence in the American Catholic press and pulpit and so widely applauded by Catholic people.

I have the feeling that the theological virtues are distributed quite unevenly among American Catholics: their faith is strong, their love is growing, but they are not a very hopeful people. This is an incongruity. Catholicism of its nature is not a pessimistic or fatalistic religion. The Incarnation means that the world is worth saving and sanctifying—not just able to be salvaged in some crude devolutionary sense. Without being chauvinistic or ethnocentric we might even believe, and also hope, that the American sociocultural system is the brightest and bravest attempt at moral progress that man has ever made. Its accomplishments overshadow its failures—and perhaps this is as much as one can expect in an imperfect, but perfectible, world.



IV. Have We Gone Soft?

THURSTON N. DAVIS, S.J.

LIKE A STRONG and vigorous person suddenly stricken in middle life, we appear obsessed with a fateful diagnosis which tells us we are sick and will surely die unless we somehow change the habitual pattern of our lives. And, as diseased people often do, we talk at great length about the latest chance remark dropped by the doctor. The malady is variously described. Columbia President Grayson Kirk's verdict is "spiritual flabbiness." Alan Drury, in *Advise and Consent*, writes of our time as the Age of the Shrug, and stresses the "dry rot" every perceptive American senses in the air around him. Professor Charles A. Siepmann, who heads the New York City branch of the American Civil Liberties Union, declared only the other day: "We're breeding a new type of human being—a guy with a full belly, an empty mind and a hollow heart. I see them walking about, and I don't like them one bit."

All this gives added point to John Steinbeck's letter to Governor Stevenson. To "dear Adlai," Steinbeck transmits his two first impressions of the USA of 1959-60: first, "a creeping, all-pervading nerve gas of immorality"; second, "a nervous restlessness; a hunger, a thirst, a yearning for something unknown—perhaps morality." Then, as afterthoughts, two further impressions: "the violence, cruelty and hypocrisy symptomatic of a people which has too much," and "the surly ill temper" that afflicts "humans when they are frightened." "Mainly, Adlai, I am troubled by the cynical immorality of my country. I don't think it can survive on this basis."

Where do we go to gather evidence on our alleged decadence, immorality and materialism? We might pick up the travel supplement in our Sunday New York *Times*, and glance at the mid-winter ads for hotels and motels along the neon-bright strip of Miami Beach. There, in one concentrated spree of vulgarity, we move from star-studded offers of *Fun, Fun, Fun, at Low, Low Rates*—with "authentic Polynesian Luaus" thrown in free

at one address—all the way to siren assurances that if we reserve *Now* (at \$16 daily per person) then *Paradise* (double occupancy) *Is So Near At Hand!*

Our Moral Miasma

This sort of thing, I suppose, is materialism, though it is somewhat too obvious to be named decadence. But it isn't merely the Miamis of the world that are at issue. If Steinbeck and all the other critics are to be credited, this moral miasma which afflicts us is well-nigh universal. It is the fly-now-pay-later urge. It's the itch for the fast buck, for the irresponsible pleasure, for the short cut to power or payola or prideful status. It's the clever dodge, the inside track, the deal, the gimmick, the angle, the guy we know who'll "fix" it. It is the "filter" mentality: have the fun, but avoid the lung cancer or the pregnancy. It is the omnipresent yen to push somebody else out of the way and become the fellow who's got everything. To quote Professor Siepmann again: "This amorality is endemic. Society is shot through with it. You'd be amazed at how many students said Charles Van Doren was right. Anything for No. 1."

How does one go about computing the moral strength or weakness of an entire society? Crime and delinquency statistics, the divorce rate, the blight of pornography, the rising rate of illegitimate births, the high incidence of broken homes, the surge of mental illness, the percentage of youth rejected by the armed services, phenomena like the current practice of cheating in college examinations—these and other data and studies give some sort of an index. What else is needed?

Eugene Kinkead, an editor of *The New Yorker*, has written a book entitled *In Every War But One* (Norton). It attempts to analyze the hundreds of cubic yards of documents that the Department of the Army assembled in its deadly serious effort to find out what went wrong with American prisoners-of-war in Korea. Kinkead reveals, amid much other data, that the 229 Turks who were captured and interned in Korea all managed to survive their imprisonment, and not a single one became a collaborator. One-third of our boys, on the other hand, became collaborators; and 38 per cent of them died. The Army found that GI's often abandoned fellow Americans who were wounded;

they cursed their officers; the strong took food from the weak; in certain cases Americans sick with dysentery were rolled out into the cold to die; and this was done, not by their Chinese captors, but by fellow GI's. Turks, however, kept a high morale, shared food and nursed their sick back to health.

Heaven knows, the image of America that is refracted through these and other available statistics is enough to shake the most complacent of us. Nevertheless, the picture is incomplete. The big, bold headlines—ah, dear, freedom of the press!—tell us about the mad bombers, arsonists, sex maniacs, kidnapers, juvenile murderers, junkies and extortionists among us. They rarely highlight the millions of hard-working and dedicated people still in the land: surgeons, nurses, nuns, civil servants, artists, social workers, public school teachers, clergymen, firemen, policemen, truck drivers, scholars—and plain, everyday, indispensable fathers and mothers of growing families.

Then, too, a certain aroma of phoniness creeps at times into these discussions, making it all the more difficult to assess our true moral stature. We could well have done without the tears and congratulatory salvos that greeted young Van Doren's public confession, which to many, by the way, was the most meretricious incident in the entire quiz-show mess. John Cogley, in the *Commonweal*, said Van Doren "did his greatest mischief and was guilty of the most shameful abuse of public confidence, not when he accepted money under false pretenses, but when he made his belated confession," which, he went on, while "humble" in the approved TV and Madison Avenue manner, "reeked with pride."

The Scapegoat

And, frankly, are we doing any better at genuinely unburdening our consciences than Van Doren did? We feel clean and noble when we excoriate the materialism around us. We manage to pin the blame on some scapegoat—working wives, or the New Deal, or high taxes, or John Dewey and the teachers colleges—leaving very little responsibility at our own doorsteps. Our excoriations would be far more convincing if we were readier with tax dollars for defense and for economic aid to less materialistic peoples; if we fought harder for the Negro;

if our consciences were a bit more troubled over irrationalities in our immigration laws; if we worried a little more about the lot of the Puerto Ricans in our cities; if, having done our excoriating, we were prepared to sacrifice a slice of our time or a touch of our comfort to the common good of the free world and the righting of injustices and inequities here at home.

A false note is sounded, too, by the realization that in large part our concern originates in fear that we may soon be overtaken, economically, by the purposeful Soviet Union. Can we honestly say our fear is the trepidation of God-fearing men—fear for ourselves and our souls and our fate, for the harvest of our sins and our wretched confusions? Or is it nothing but a camouflaged lust to cling on to the very possessions we protest are our undoing? There is reason to suspect that it may be the latter, that what we are really worried about is the whole kit and caboodle of our American way of life—missiles and credit



cards, Cadillacs and pop-up toasters, our freedoms, fun, filters and foolishness—is about to go down the drain. If so, then we do have reason to be concerned for ourselves and our future.

Our trouble is not simply that some Americans have air conditioners in their cars, or that an increasing number of our citizens are making down-payments on cabin cruisers. Their number is and will remain limited: even in our affluent society there is still plenty of personal poverty. The obligation of transcending and mastering material possessions presses harder on the few than on the many. The crasser brand of materialism, therefore, can be discounted as a real problem for the vast majority.

There is, however, a subtler problem which does touch us all. It goes by various names and is all the following things at once: a loss of faith, an obfuscation of reason, a failure of nerve, a loss of confidence, an intellectual and moral vacuum, a failure to maintain our grip on the Big Idea about ourselves and the world we inhabit.

Losing the Big Idea

What is really wrong, it seems to me, has to do with our loss of this Big Idea, by which I mean our loosening grasp on the meaning and purpose of human life in relation to a real order of objective and transcendent being. Our problem is that we no longer know who or what we are. We no longer collectively see ourselves as a people bound together by common affirmations, common loyalties to a commonly shared universe of values. For years we have viewed this American pluralism as a product of our freedom and as a source of immense strength. Now it is slowly dawning upon us that it can become a debilitating disease. This malady, which is now epidemic, affects rich and poor, young and old. It is as though all at once we had lost our identification papers. To make matters worse, we have not only let the Big Idea slip away, but it is no longer polite or even permissible to raise any of the Big Questions men have always asked about the Big Idea.

What are these Big Questions which, in the contemporary atmosphere of our official agnosticism, may be asked and answered only behind the doors of the "home, church and synagogue"? To paraphrase a list of such questions prepared by Father John Courtney Murray, S.J., for *Religion and the State University* (University of Michigan Press, 1958): Where does man rank in the order of being, if there is an order of being? What is the nature of man? Is it of a piece with the nature of the cosmic universe? Is it to be understood in terms of the laws of the universe, whatever they may be? Or is there a difference between man and the rest of nature? Is the nature of man spiritual in a unique sense? What is man's destiny? Is it to be found and fulfilled beyond time in "another world"? What is the "sense" of history? Does history have some kind of finality? Or is the notion of "finality" meaningless? What can a man know?

What do you mean when you say, "I know"? Are there varying degrees of knowledge and certitude? Can man's knowledge and love reach realities that are transcendent to the world of matter, space and time? Is there a God? What is God? Does God have a care for man? Has God entered the world of human history to accomplish a "redemption"? What is meant by "salvation"? What is meant by freedom, justice, order, law, authority, power, peace, virtue, sin, morality, religion?

Just now, in the United States and throughout the West, there is obviously no consensus as to how these and similar questions are to be answered. There is not even a shared language of words and concepts with which the separated components of our society might begin to be able to discuss them. Yet, as recently as 75 years ago, in the academic world as well as in the realm of public affairs, the ancient heritage of such words and concepts, products of the scholastic tradition, was still in uneasy but *de facto* possession. Today, except in some of our colleges, the lines that once bound us to that heritage have been broken.

Once the ancient words and ideas had been widely discredited, a new lexicon of discourse took their place. It was a tongue which had been coming into more and more common usage since the 18th century, the language of Modernity—of science, experimentalism and positivism. Until almost yesterday, who would have dreamed of disputing Modernity? And yet, though it was so firmly in control just a little while back, today, in Father Murray's phrase, Modernity is "dissolving in disenchantment." The disenthronement has created a strange new situation, a sort of ideological interregnum. The seals of legitimacy, so to speak, have disappeared from its head and tongue. Though it still exercises a kind of caretaker government in our universities and elsewhere, the modern idiom of positivism is reenacting the old story of the emperor's clothes.

Need for a Public Philosophy

It is this sudden turn of events in the world of ideas, this breakdown of the flimsy consensus of Modernity, that has brought us to that condition of moral vacuum which John Steinbeck and others perceive and deplore. More or less clearly we today realize that a post-modern era has commenced and that

we are entering it in a state of intellectual nakedness. The pressing need for some sort of revival of the “public philosophy” of the West has come home to us. This, it would seem, is what these gathering storms of protest and criticism are all about.

Half a dozen years ago, in his essay on *The Public Philosophy*, Walter Lippmann insisted that in our “pluralized and fragmenting society a public philosophy with common and binding principles” must somehow be salvaged and reinstated. If we fail to revive and restore the consensus we once possessed, Lippmann warned, “. . . then the free and democratic nations face the totalitarian challenge without a public philosophy which free men believe in and cherish, with no public faith beyond a mere official agnosticism, neutrality and indifference. There is not much doubt how the struggle is likely to end if it lies between those who, believing, care very much—and those who, lacking belief, cannot care very much.”

We know from the chapter he contributed to *Walter Lippmann and His Times* (Harcourt, Brace), a volume published last year to honor Mr. Lippman on his seventieth birthday, that Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., was more than a little scandalized by the stress the veteran columnist placed on the necessity of shoring up the “public philosophy” as a condition of the survival of our society. Mr. Lippman had written: “I do not contend, though I hope, that the decline of Western society will be arrested if the teachers in our schools and universities come back to the great tradition of the public philosophy. But I do contend that the decline, which is already far advanced, cannot be arrested if the prevailing philosophers oppose this restoration and revival. . . .”

Meantime, each fresh week and month of our now lengthening post-modern experience serves to sharpen the issue and drive home its urgency. If we are really determined to fill the present void, we shall rediscover the words and begin to conceive the ideas with which to ask once again the Big Questions that every generation must answer. Thus, conceivably, if time is given us, we may even reclaim the Big Idea. If war is too important to be left to the generals, this present dilemma of ours is too terrible to be entrusted to the professors.

V. A View From Abroad

CHRISTOPHER DAWSON to C. J. MCNASPY

SHUFFLING through the autumn leaves of Cambridge, Mass., one of AMERICA'S assistant editors, FR. C. J. MCNASPY, S.J., found the apartment of Christopher Dawson, cultural historian and critic, and first professor of Catholic studies at Harvard. It was Columbus Day and Mr. Dawson's birthday, and he had invited Fr. McNaspy, his student many years ago at Oxford, to have lunch with him and Mrs. Dawson. The following is the substance of an informal interview. "I'm glad I was born on Columbus Day," said Mr. Dawson with a twinkle. "He was a *Christopher* too. Won't you sit here? I always like an open fire. It keeps the feet warm and the head cool. That's good for thinking."

- Q.** *You have been in America for two years now, Mr. Dawson. What new impressions have you of our country?*
- A.** I am very much impressed with the strength of the Church in the United States. I expected something of the kind, but not nearly so much.
- Q.** *And what of our Catholic intellectual life here?*
- A.** There is a real Catholic intellectual revival here. It's a bit too early to speak of its lasting importance.
- Q.** *Where do you find signs of this especially?*
- A.** It seems to be strongest among the young in the universities. I am very much struck with this.
- Q.** *To get on to something that we hear a lot about—what do you think of the talk about pluralism?*
- A.** I think a lot of nonsense is being talked about pluralism

and the ideal of a pluralist society, and the United States as a typical pluralist society. Modern American society isn't pluralist, but monist.

Q. *“Monist” in what sense?*

A. In the sense of a uniform, middle-class, liberal secularism as compared with the uniform, working class, Marxist secularism of the USSR.

Q. *But what of our religious origins?*

A. Down to the great depression American society was not secularist in the modern sense. It might be described as a poly-Protestant society, since Catholics and Jews and recent immigrants were second-class citizens. Even so, it was uniform, since the American Protestant churches tended to one type and pattern. Today, however, Catholics and Jews and aliens are full citizens and Protestantism has lost its prerogatives. The resultant society is, however, secularist—not pluralist.

Q. *But surely there is some American pluralism?*

A. The really distinctive thing about the Anglo-American tradition was the doctrine of the *limited state*. The state was concerned with law and order and national defense, but with little else. This did involve a sort of pluralism since the churches and the regional societies had the main responsibility for religion and culture.

Q. *When did the change come about and how?*

A. The decisive change came 1) after the Civil War, by which the original States lost their traditional position, and 2) above all with the state increasingly taking over responsibility for education from the churches. Thus the state has acquired a paternal character, which was just what the old American tradition rejected. It is impossible for this

Schoolmaster-State to be pluralist, for it possesses in the common school an irresistible instrument for molding the minds of its citizens.

Q. *Is this largely responsible for our tendency to conformity, as the critics claim?*

A. Yes. Largely in consequence of what we have said, but partly owing to the uniform pressure of the technological order and the mass media of communication, America has become a conformist society. It is very hard for the individual or the group to maintain separate—pluralist—standards of value or independent ways of life.

Q. *This seems rather abstract. Where do you observe this concretely?*

A. For example, there is one great high road down which everyone must drive in the same kind of car, at the same speed, even though he does not want to go anywhere. The advertiser will tell him where to go and how to spend his time when he gets there. Thus the motel is the symbol of our modern mechanized civilization—all the same all over the States, burying the old regional differences under a uniform network of identical forms. If you don't like it, you have got to be either very rich or very poor, and these two minorities are steadily decreasing or taking cover under a semblance of conformity. For it seems to me that the rich man here is more tied to a common pattern of life than is the poor man in Europe.

Q. *Then there is no escape, as you see it?*

A. In England I have known men who were not at all rich creating their own pattern of life which was integrated with their beliefs, as Eric Gill did at Ditchling. I don't think that it is possible in America. It used to be possible. You had Brook Farm and Oneida and Walden. But it is not possible today. I recently read of a project for a modern utopian community by a professor of this university (Har-

vard) called "Walden II." But it was just the opposite of Walden I. It was a plan for the painless achievement of a state of total social conformity by the use of psychological techniques. Perhaps that is what we are all coming to. But it is not what I understand by pluralism.

Q. *Do you blame the intellectuals for this?*

A. No, I don't think it is the idealists, like this Prof. B. F. Skinner, who will be the main agents in producing this uniform mass culture. It is the businessmen, the publicity men, the advertisers, the television experts who are the masters of the age, and the scientists and the politicians only to the extent that they become the agents or servants of this new power.

Q. *You make our society sound rather totalitarian.*

A. The more or less free world is threatened by the challenge of communism, which offers or threatens to take us to the same goal of total social conformity by more expeditious but more painful means. As I see it, though, this is not a conflict between the totalitarian society and the pluralist society, but between two different forms of totalitarianism, one of which is bloody but efficient, while the other is humane but extravagant. When the bombs begin to fall, however, both systems will become bloody and extravagant, so that both sides may come together amid the debris on the basis of their common ends, undeterred by the ghosts of Jefferson and Karl Marx.

Q. *But in that case what becomes of Christian civilization?*

A. There is still a Christian element in our civilization, as we may see by the flourishing of Catholicism in this country and by the existence of a whole system of Catholic universities and colleges and schools, which stand in principle for the possibility of a Christian culture. But we cannot realize this if we accept the current image of a secular culture which grows steadily larger and richer and more

technically expert without any guiding principle. And to change this will involve a very formidable effort.

No easy hope or lies
Will bring us to our goal,
But iron sacrifice
Of body, will and soul.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

These questions are intended solely to stimulate discussion. That a question is asked does not imply that the proper answer to it is Yes rather than No.

1. Is the United States a "Christian nation?" In what sense, if any?
2. Is the "moral demand" of the American people being continuously relaxed? If so, in what specific ways does this relaxation show itself?
3. Are American Catholics responsible for the secularization of Sunday? If so, in what ways?
4. Is American society so structured institutionally as to discourage the observance of moral standards? If so, in what ways and to what extent?
5. Is the "sense of sin" disappearing from the conscience of the American people?
6. Do Catholic writers and speakers generally take a negatively critical view of the moral aspects of the American culture? If so, why?
7. Can we or should we "believe that the American sociocultural system is the brightest and bravest attempt at moral progress that man has ever made"?
8. Are our condemnations of materialism in American life inspired by a secret fear of losing the very possessions which we protest are our undoing?
9. Does the United States need a "public philosophy"? In a religiously-divided country, what could serve as the basis of such a philosophy?
10. Is American society really monist rather than pluralist?

SUGGESTED READING

The following books take different and provocative points of view on the moral condition of America today.

Bell, Daniel, *The End of Ideology*. Free Press, 1960

Fuller, Edmund, *Man in Modern Fiction*. Random House, 1958

Gibney, Frank, *The Operators*. Harper, 1960

Greeley, Andrew M., *The Church and the Suburbs*. Sheed & Ward, 1959

Kilpatrick, James J., *The Smut Peddlers*. Doubleday, 1960

Maritain, Jacques, *Reflections on America*. Scribner, 1958

Mills, C. Wright, *The Power Elite*. Oxford U. Press, 1956

Packard, Vance, *The Waste Makers*. McKay, 1960

Zimmerman, Carle C., and Cervantes, Lucius F., *Successful Families*, Pageant Press, 1960

A Check List of Other Timely Pamphlets

THE CATHOLIC AND HIS TRADE UNION by George E. Lucy, S.J.

The importance of the trade union for the individual worker. (A-8, 15¢)

CATHOLIC SOCIAL DOCTRINE AND THE LAYMAN by Ed Marciniak

The meaning of the Gospel in the social relationships of the Catholic layman. (A-20, 15¢)

CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS by Gustave Weigel, S.J.

A theological consideration. (B-61, 25¢)

THE LONELINESS OF MAN by Thurston N. Davis, S.J.

AMERICA's Editor-in-Chief explores the meaning behind contemporary concern for baffled, confused, modern man. (A-59, 15¢)

LET'S TALK SENSE ABOUT THE NEGRO by C. J. McNaspy, S.J.

(A-62, 15¢)

ONE FOLD, ONE SHEPHERD

A Christian exchange on the possibilities of unity of faith. (B-64, 25¢)

LIVING FOR GOD IN THE SIXTIES by Arthur V. Shea, S. J. and Robert T. Reilly

A symposium on Christian family life in the modern age. (B-58, 25¢)

AMERICA ON RELIGIOUS TOLERATION

"On Religious Toleration" and "The Voice of the Church in America." (B-57, 25¢)

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