NOTES

PUBLIC THEOLOGY IN AMERICA: SOME QUESTIONS FOR CATHOLICISM AFTER JOHN COURTNEY MURRAY

John Coleman's recent contribution to this journal, "Vision and Praxis in American Theology: Orestes Brownson, John A. Ryan, and John Courtney Murray,"[1] suggests that the legacy of these three thinkers stands as an invaluable resource for a Christian response to America's present social and cultural crisis. Coleman identifies Murray, along with Brownson and Ryan, as one of the few American Catholic "public theologians" of the past who are worth studying today.[2] These men were theologians because their intellectual work drew consciously from the wellsprings of Christian theological tradition. They were "public" theologians because their concerns emerged from the life of the *polis*—civil liberty, economic justice, Church-state relationships, etc. They are of continuing interest today, Coleman suggests, because they developed carefully-wrought "mediating concepts" which reveal the relationships between Christian belief and public events in a nuanced and intellectually rigorous way.[3] They were not content to say that the relation between Church and world or between Christian belief and human experience is a dialectical one in which Church and world, faith and experience, help interpret each other. In a distinctive way, each of the three made the attempt to describe the concrete shape of this dialectic of interaction and interpretation. They provided their times with a public theology which, especially in the cases of Ryan and Murray, directly affected the public life of many Catholic Christians. Their public theologies also helped to shape the general discussion in society of some of the most important moral and political issues of their day.

Coleman's conclusion from his study of the three thinkers is that appropriation of their insights and of their commitment to the concrete, action-oriented mediation of Church to civil society and civil society to Church is an indispensable component in the effort to develop a public theology for the very different America and the very different Catholic Church of today. Brownson's fundamental theology, with its emphasis on the integral relation between nature and grace, and on the providential direction of political life toward the fulness of human communion, Ryan's economic ethics, with its carefully specified canons of distributive

[1] THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 37 (1976) 3-40.

[2] The designation "public theologian," as Coleman notes, is borrowed from Martin Marty, "Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion," in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York, 1974) p. 148.

[3] Coleman, p. 3.

justice, and Murray's theory of Church-state relations, rooted in a broad theory of civil rights, are all resources for the development of a "liberation theology in North America" from indigenous sources.[4]

Coleman's proposal is a bold one, and it deserves serious attention by the theological community in the United States. It is bold because it runs a twofold risk. The first is the risk of being misunderstood by the left as a defense of the American *status quo* and as insensitive to the realities of oppression and systemic exploitation which are such central concerns in Latin American liberation theology. The second risk is that of being co-opted by the right as a legitimation for an uncritical merging of Christian faith with the American civil liberties tradition. The proposal deserves more serious attention than either of these responses would give it, however, because any theological attempt to offer a Christian vision of America's role in an interdependent world will be ineffective unless it is formed by a deep awareness of the chief roots of America's historical self-understanding.

This response, then, accepts Coleman's basic thesis. His analysis of the three authors lays bare some of the best of American Catholic thinking about the public role of Christian faith in the United States. Brownson, Ryan, and Murray do not represent the only stream of Catholic public theology in America. They do represent the mainstream. Coleman's article is of value as a reminder of those resources. Murray was fond of pointing out, however, that every tradition has a "growing end." "It is never finished, complete, and perfect, beyond need or possibility of further development. . . . It must obey one or the other of the alternative laws of history, which are growth or decline, fuller integrity or disintegration."[5] Coleman says little of this growing end, of the growth called for by the new problems and responsibilities facing a postindustrial, post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America and how they can be addressed by a post-Vatican II Church. Further, Murray's use of the organic image of the growth of tradition should not obscure the fact that remaining faithful to itself in new circumstances can lead a tradition to radical innovation and substantial discontinuity. Murray's own "development" of the theory of Church-state relations led Vatican II explicitly to affirm what Leo XIII had explicitly denied: the civil right of religious liberty. Murray's effort to uncover the roots of both Catholic social thought and of American political and constitutional theory led him to formulate a radical challenge to prevailing interpretations of both. The purpose of this Note is to present several questions which, taken

together, suggest the need for a critical re-evaluation of the American civil liberties tradition which Murray brought into creative contact with the Catholic social tradition. These same questions also suggest the need for a reinterpretation of some of the explicitly theological commitments in the American Catholic social tradition. These questions will be formulated primarily in response to Murray's thought.

Coleman has suggested that by integrating the concern for economic justice central in the thought of John Ryan, the openness to socialism uniquely developed by Brownson, and the theory of civil rights found in Murray, we might succeed in developing "a species of socialism with a human face . . . a socialism with a civil libertarian base."[6] The task is "to find a viable alternative to the false dichotomies of individualism and monistic socialism of the nineteenth century; to combine the goods of justice and liberty in a new synthesis."[7] I fully agree. But this new synthesis will not be brought about by the simple juxtaposition of ideas, rich as they may be, mined individually from the mother lode of our historical tradition. The problem is precisely that we do not have a clear vision of how to see justice and liberty in a unified way. Nor do we have a firm grasp of what it means in a highly interdependent society to say that the protection of the common good includes the protection of the dignity and human rights of every person.

Further, we are not fully clear—far less clear than we need to be—on how to describe and evaluate not only the moral dimensions of social and political activity but also the relation which exists between social morality and religious belief in a religiously pluralistic society. This lack of clarity about the relationship between the social, the moral, and the religious has produced considerable confusion about the proper role of the Church—both as the people of God in all its diversity and through its institutional agencies and official leadership—in the contemporary social and political life of the United States.

I

Murray's concern with the problem of religious liberty arose from his conviction that any serious attempt by Christians to address the social crisis of the post-World War II world depended on co-operation and joint action by all the Christian churches, and thus on overcoming Protestant suspicion of Catholic political goals. At the same time, adequate response to this crisis demanded that the freedom of the Church as an organized community be guaranteed in society. To this latter end, Murray produced his well-known refutation of the secularist interpreta-

⁶ Coleman, pp. 39–40.   ⁷ Coleman, p. 39.

tion of the separation of Church and state which would relegate religion to the sacristy or to the "private" sphere of individual conscience. In a real way, the concern with Church-state relations which called forth Murray's creative energies was derivative.[8] His interest in the question, he often stated, was to settle the religious-liberty question in order to move on to the more fundamental task of discussing the positive role of Christians and the Church in society. As he put it, referring to the Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom:

In itself it did no more than clear up a historical and doctrinal *equivoque*. Its achievement was to bring the Church, at long last, abreast of the consciousness of civilized mankind, which had already accepted religious freedom as a principle and as a legal institution. . . . A work of differentiation between the sacral and the secular has been effected in history. But differentiation is not the highest stage in human growth. The movement toward it, now that it has come to term, must be followed by a further movement toward a new synthesis, within which the differentiation will at once subsist, integral and unconfused, and also be transcended in a higher unity.[9]

How is the post-Murray Catholic community in America to achieve this higher viewpoint on the positive relation between the Church and the social-political sphere? The great danger of such an attempt is that of collapsing back into a kind of neo-Christendom style of thought which, at least in practice, denies the religious pluralism of both the United States and the world situation. Murray's strategy in this effort was to base the entire structure of his social ethic on the tradition of natural law and natural reason, rather than on directly and explicitly theological foundations. By appealing to the natural law and the "tradition of reason," Murray sought to cut right through the knot of pluralism and to weave an argument for the existence of the central human and civil rights that would be persuasive to all reasonable people.

This approach raises a second central question: What did Murray mean by reason, and whom did he consider reasonable? As Coleman points out, Murray was convinced that "The doctrine of natural law has no Roman Catholic presuppositions. Its only presupposition is threefold: that man is intelligent; that reality is intelligible; and that reality, as

[8] Donald E. Pelotte has made a persuasive case for this broader base of Murray's interest in religious liberty in his *John Courtney Murray, Theologian in Conflict: Roman Catholicism and the American Experience*, Ph.D. dissertation, Fordham University, 1975. Pelotte's important study is soon to be published by the Paulist Press. See especially Murray, "Contemporary Orientations of Catholic Thought on Church and State in the Light of History," THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 10 (1949) 231.

[9] Murray, "The Declaration on Religious Freedom: Its Deeper Significance," *America*, April 23, 1966, pp. 592–93.

grasped by intelligence, imposes on the will the obligation that it be obeyed in its demands for action or abstention."[10]

The demand of reality is the basis of Murray's notion of social obligation, of justice, and of all human rights, including the right to religious freedom. This demand is not laid on the human mind and will in an extrinsicist way. Rather it "dawns, as it were, as reason itself emerges from the darkness of infant animalism."[11] What Murray means by this dawning of the knowledge of obligation in reason is most evident in the experience of the foundation and root of all moral obligations: the experience of the fact that human beings have a dignity and worth which must always be respected, never suppressed or functionally subordinated to any nonpersonal reality. As reason emerges in a developing person, so does the recognition of the claim that all persons have to respect.

In this context it is clear that by reason Murray does not mean ratiocination or technological reason. In fact, it is clear that Murray's concept of reason (as in all Roman Catholic natural-law thinking) is vastly different from all forms of scientific reductionism which would shorten the reach of reason to chains of deduction concerning empirical fact. Murray's concept of reason contains within itself an orientation toward the transcendental, the metaphysical, and ultimately the theological. It is a concept of reason which was evolved by the theological tradition of scholasticism. Despite Murray's disclaimers about the lack of Catholic presuppositions behind the natural-law theory he employed in developing his social ethic, there can be no doubt that the theological concern to make belief intelligible in a distinctively Catholic mode was operative in giving shape to his concept of reason. As he put it in *The Problem of God:*

In the medieval period, the tradition of reason was considered a tradition of both faith and reason, within which the will to rational understanding harmonized with, and was sustained by, the will to Christian faith. Within the tradition so understood, therefore, reason refused to betray itself by running to atheist conclusions. The betrayal occurred when modernity chose to divorce the universes of faith and reason. . . . [12]

This modern self-betrayal of reason was, therefore, not simply an epistemological mistake as Murray saw it. It amounted to a form of religious apostasy, perhaps unwitting but nonetheless real. The constriction of the notion of reason, which appeared in Western culture as a form of "enlightenment" and emancipation, challenged the central doctrine of

[10] *We Hold These Truths*, p. 109.
[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 109–10.
[12] John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God: Yesterday and Today* (New Haven, 1964) p. 88.

Christian anthropology, Christian thought on the relation between the individual and society, and Christian thinking on the nature and function of the state.[13] This doctrine is that the human person is a "sacredness" (*res sacra homo*), intrinsically related to God:

There are sacred elements in the temporal order because there are sacred elements in Christian man. There is his intellectual nature, which endows him with a freedom beyond the reach of the power whose competence is bounded by the horizons of the terrestrial world. There is the grace of Christ, which endows him with a still higher freedom—a participation in the freedom of the Church, which is itself, as Leo XIII says, a participation in the freedom of the Incarnate Word.[14]

Thus, just as reason must remain open to faith and is fulfilled only in faith, the secular, temporal existence of human beings must be kept open to the grace of God and is fulfilled only through this grace.

There is a theological principle operative throughout the whole of Murray's epistemology and social philosophy which is more fundamental than the distinctions he draws between reason and revelation, nature and grace, state and Church. This principle, which he called "the primacy of the spiritual,"[15] shapes his notion of reason, his theory of the foundation of moral obligation in the dignity of the human person, and his defense of maximum freedom and minimum social control. It also provides the basis for his argument that the Church has a direct role to play in the social life of humanity and a proper mission in the temporal sphere. This mission is to protect and promote the dignity and freedom of the human person, the sacredness which humanity is. The Church pursues this mission in society in a way analogous to the way revelation guides and fulfills reason: not by coercing or overriding it, but by guiding it in the ways of its own proper freedom. In short, Murray's conception of the reality which is intelligible to reason and which makes a claim on human action is ultimately a Christian theological interpretation of that reality. That reality, which is the ontological foundation of Murray's social ethic, is the human person graced by God, redeemed by Christ, and summoned to the kingdom of God.

II

Murray's solution to the problem of pluralism is thus a quite carefully delimited one. The success of his appeal to reason as the basis of justice

[13] See, e.g., "Reversing the Secular Drift," *Thought* 24 (1949) 40, where Murray argued that the loss of Christian vision into the social process is due to "a disintegration of reason."

[14] John Courtney Murray, "Leo XIII: Separation of Church and State," THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 14 (1953) 208.

[15] See, e.g., *ibid.*, p. 206.

and human rights depends on the presence within society of a concept of reason which allows the sacredness of the human person to be widely experienced, publicly debated, and socially protected. It depends also on that society's ability to experience, debate, and protect this sacredness in its concreteness and with the specificity called for by the particularities of the social-historical situation. The sacredness of the human person has many manifestations in historical social life. From the writings of Leo XIII Murray gathered what is meant in detail by *res sacra in temporalibus*, precisely where he believed consensus must exist if a pluralistic society is to avoid disintegrating into anarchy.

The following are the chief items, merely stated: the husband-wife relationship, the parent-child relationship (including education), the political obligation, the human dignity of the worker, the equality of men as all equally in the image of God, the moral values inherent in economic life, the works of charity and justice which are the native expression of the human and Christian spirit, the patrimony of ideas which are the foundation of human society—the ideas of law, freedom, justice, property, moral obligation, civic obedience, legitimate rule, etc., etc.[16]

The question, then, is whether there exists in American society a shared language and a common intellectual heritage which allows concern for these dimensions of the sacredness of the person to become public concerns.

Murray formulated the question somewhat more succinctly: "does the United States have a public philosophy, or not?"[17] In other words, do the people of the United States share an understanding of the moral foundations of social life which is sufficiently broad and deep to enable them to communicate intelligently with each other about problematic areas of justice, human rights, the scope and limits of governmental action, etc.? For Murray, a public philosophy is primarily a universe of moral discourse rather than a detailed set of moral prescriptions. It is a commonly shared form of thinking about matters of public policy and their moral dimensions.[18]

In Murray's opinion, such a public philosophy had ceased to exist in the United States when he was discussing the question in the 1950's. In the face of this reluctant conclusion, his strategy became that of arguing that such a publicly shared set of moral beliefs *ought* to exist, even though it did not; for without such a public philosophy no nation could long survive. Basing his case on the proposition "that what is not true will somehow fail to work," Murray argued for the need to regain a true sense

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 209.
[17] *We Hold These Truths*, p. 79.

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 79–86.

of moral direction. His evidence for the need: without a public philoso-
phy, America "is failing to work."[19]

This shift of perspectives was a major admission on Murray's part. It
represented an implicit acknowledgment that the appeal to reason in
the sphere of social morality was not in fact carrying the weight which
Murray hoped it would carry in building bridges between the diverse
groups which make up a pluralistic America. Murray was clearly
concerned about the possibility of a breakdown of the "American
consensus" or the "American proposition" which he believed to have
been present in happier days. This consensus, though a form of public
philosophy, had originated and been sustained by a theological vision of
the human person as being of transcendent worth, and of the foundation
of society and government in a divine moral law. He feared that, lacking
this theological grounding and support, the public philosophy would be
too unstable to survive. The entire Murray project—and the precise form
the project took—is based upon the hope that there is enough life in the
American public philosophy effectively to establish justice, promote the
general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for all. But throughout
his writings runs the counterpoint theme of a fear that this may not be so.
For example:

> Granted that the unity of the commonwealth can be achieved in the absence of a
> consensus with regard to the theological truths that govern the total life and
> destiny of man, it does not follow that this necessary civic unity can endure in the
> absence of a consensus more narrow in its scope, operative on the level of political
> life, with regard to the rational truths and moral precepts that govern the
> structure of the constitutional state, specify the substance of the common weal,
> and determine the ends of public policy. Nor has experience yet shown how, if at
> all, this moral consensus can survive amid all the ruptures of religious division,
> whose tendency is inherently disintegrative of all consensus and community. But
> this is a further question, for the future to answer.[20]

This fear was present because Murray understood that religious beliefs,
or the lack of them, shape perceptions of the moral good, influence
interpretations of the social process, and consequently at least partially
determine what counts as a reasonable and intelligent argument about
justice and social morality.

III

What Murray was content to leave as a question for the future can no
longer be postponed to another day by Christians and Catholics in the
United States. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, for example, brings his monumental
study *A Religious History of the American People* to a close with the

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[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87.   [20] *Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.

conclusion that "In summary, one may safely say that America's moral and religious tradition was tested and found wanting in the sixties."[21] During the religiously and morally turbulent sixties, Ahlstrom believes, a fundamental shift in the "presuppositional substructures of the American mind" became evident. Ahlstrom believes this shift, in its most basic dimensions, constituted a movement of the nation's religious center of gravity. He describes it as having three dimensions:

1. A growing commitment to a naturalism or "secularism" and corresponding doubts about the supernatural and the sacral.
2. A creeping (or galloping) awareness of vast contradictions in American life between profession and performance, ideal and actual.
3. Increasing doubt as to the capacity of present-day ecclesiastical, political, social and educational institutions to rectify the country's deep-seated woes.[22]

Ahlstrom's reading of the situation is bleak, perhaps excessively so. If it is a roughly accurate analysis of the general drift of the *public* philosophy of America in recent years, it represents the fulfilment of Murray's darker fears.[23]

There has been considerable debate in recent years, stimulated largely by Robert Bellah's 1967 essay "Civil Religion in America,"[24] about the past and future role of religion in the public or civil life of America. A detailed analysis of this debate is unnecessary here. It does seem clear, however, that although Ahlstrom's conclusions are not accepted by all the participants in the debate, there is general agreement that the nation is in a period of religious transition or trial (depending on one's theological commitments) in its public life. One can no longer presuppose, as Murray did, that the American public philosophy is rooted in and supported by the broad theological tradition of Christian history. If it

[21] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, 1972) p. 1085.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 1087.

[23] I stress "public" here, for there are a number of counterindications to Ahlstrom's secularization thesis whose influences remain largely in the personal or private religious sphere. Note, e.g., among Roman Catholics, the charismatic-renewal movement, the marriage-encounter movement; among Protestants, a strengthening of the evangelical churches; and in society generally, an increased interest in mysticism, spirituality, the occult, etc. Whether these movements have the potential to influence American public life remains to be seen.

[24] Reprinted in Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York, 1970) pp. 168–89. Some of the more significant contributions to this discussion can be found in Richey–Jones (n. 2 above). Other recent contributions include Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York, 1975), and Richard John Neuhaus, *Time toward Home: The American Experiment as Revelation* (New York, 1975).

is seen as desirable that this theological perspective should be influential in shaping American public debate and ultimately public policy, then this perspective must be brought into the public arena in explicit terms. In other words, the presupposition that there exists a public philosophy and a public language for moral discourse common to all Americans which Christians can adopt as their own in public debate is no longer acceptable. In particular, American Catholics need to move beyond an approach to public questions based on Murray's version of the public philosophy to the formulation of a *public theology* which attempts to illuminate the urgent moral questions of our time through explicit use of the great symbols and doctrines of the Christian faith.

Murray was uneasy with all attempts to address questions of public policy from such explicitly theological perspectives. The most obvious reason for this uneasiness was his concern that his voice be heard throughout a pluralistic society and that, when it was heard, it not be perceived as an attempt to make a particular theology into public policy through the power of the state. Second, he was concerned, in his discussions of religious liberty, that any attempt to found the civil right of religious liberty directly on a theology of freedom would have the unacceptable effect of turning the First Amendment into a theological statement.[25] He feared that this approach would lead to a theological legitimation of religious indifferentism. Third, he was concerned to protect the proper autonomy of the secular sphere of social existence (the state, the economy, the law, etc.) and of those forms of thinking which analyze and organize this sphere with intellectual rigor (political science, economics, jurisprudence, etc.). "An immediate illation from the order of ethical and theological truth to the order of constitutional law is, in principle, dialectically inadmissible. If such an illation is to be made, it depends for the validity of its conclusion on the mediation of an historico-social middle term."[26] None of these three of Murray's major concerns is being questioned here. The reality of pluralism, the intrinsic dignity and freedom of all persons, including non-Christians, the unacceptability of a theology of freedom which subverts itself by legitimating the notion that conscience is strictly autonomous, and the

[25] For a discussion of these two reasons, see "The Declaration on Religious Freedom" in *War, Poverty, Freedom: The Christian Response* (*Concilium* 15; New York 1966) pp. 3–16. See also the study of Murray's participation in the drafting of *Dignitatis humanae* by Richard J. Regan, S.J., *Conflict and Consensus: Religious Freedom and the Second Vatican Council* (New York, 1967).

[26] This statement appears in identical form in "The Problem of 'The Religion of the State,'" *American Ecclesiastical Review* 124 (1951) 343, and in "The Problem of State Religion," THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 12 (1951) 170.

necessity of a genuine respect for the methodologies of social scientific thought and analysis must all be components in the kind of public theology which is envisioned.

There is a fourth reason, however, for Murray's caution concerning theological appeals in public argument and his stake in the regeneration of the public philosophy rather than the development of a public theology. There is a kind of dualism in Murray's thinking which, despite this stress on the presence of the sacred in the temporal through graced humanity, sets a great divide between the religious and the secular. This divide is not simply a stratagem for gaining a wider audience for Christian moral views which have been translated into nonreligious language. The relation between the sacred and the secular, as Murray understands it, becomes a relation of unity only within the experience of the individual person, not in the public sphere. The social order can protect this unity, and it can provide the possibility for the realization of this unity within the hearts of persons. The relation between the sacred and the secular is attained by the achievement of a "right order within the one man, who is a member of two societies and subject to the laws of both."[27] In the world of institutions, structures, power, and corporate action, however, the dualism is sharply drawn. Quoting from his great inspiration on this matter, Pope Gelasius I to Emperor Anastasius I, Murray wrote: "The new Christian view was based on a radical distinction between the order of the sacred and the order of the secular: 'Two there are, august Emperor, by which this world is ruled on title of original and sovereign right—the consecrated authority of the priesthood and the royal power.'"[28]

This mode of thinking, which begins with institutional dualism as its primary principle for understanding the relationship between sacred and secular in society, can, as Murray's work shows, provide an extremely strong base for a theory of religious liberty. In order to guarantee that this theory did not lead to a kind of separation which restricted the Church to the sacristy, Murray stressed the principle of the primacy of the spiritual. But the two principles, the Gelasian dyarchy and the primacy of the spiritual, could only be brought together in the individual person. In a culture where a public philosophy is present which gives the individual the support needed to act out of such a personal integration Murray's solution seems apposite. In other words, where a society exists in which Christian symbols and Christian faith stand as an implicit source of integration for that society below and behind the pluralism of public argument and the dualism of Church and state, Christians as individual

[27] "Leo XIII: Separation of Church and State," p. 211.
[28] *We Hold These Truths*, p. 202.

citizens may, in fact, be able to make the public case for justice, for the defense of human rights, and for the protection of *res sacra homo*, the sacredness of every human person. Where these symbols do not provide an operative, if implicit, base for an American moral community, the case is far from sure. The evidence on the present is discouraging.

Murray's conception of how the symbols of the Christian faith, especially the normative biblical symbols, function in the Christian tradition and in theology also predisposed him to prefer what he saw as the rational argument of the public philosophy to theological appeals in the public forum. Murray placed minimal trust in the concrete power of the biblical symbols to keep the Christian community faithful in interpreting its belief both to itself and to the non-Christian world around it. Symbols—for example, the concrete depiction of Jesus' identity through parable, dramatic event, and imaginative portrayal in the Gospels—are incapable of accurately stating who Jesus was and is. "Metaphors," Murray believed, "explain nothing."[29] To accurately answer the Christological question, it is necessary to move beyond the concrete, symbolic, biblical language to the technical, ontological language of Hellenic reason. Thus Murray could say that the primary question to be asked in the ecumenical attempt to clarify the identity and unity of Christians is not "what think ye of the Church? Or even, what think ye of Christ? The dialogue would rise out of the current confusion if the first question raised were, what think ye of the Nicene homoousion?"[30] One need not be a fundamentalist to suggest that Murray has gone too far here. In the definition of Christian identity, the biblical language and symbols can never be left entirely behind.

This preference for ontological thinking rather than for communication in the more symbolic, parabolic, and concrete language in Christology is paralleled by Murray's belief that the substance of the Christian vision of the human person in society can be more accurately captured in the ontological language of a natural-law theory than in a public theology that makes explicit use of the ethical teachings, behavioral paradigms, and morally revelatory events recorded in the Bible. Thus one never finds a serious example of biblical exegesis in the entire Murray corpus on Church-state relations.[31] In a pluralistic society such as contemporary America, an attempt to develop a social ethic which is rooted in

[29] *The Problem of God.* p. 37.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 53. See also "The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church," published jointly by Representatives of the U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation and the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical Affairs (Washington, D.C., 1965) pp. 16–30.

[31] This fact has been noted by James Gustafson in "Christian Ethics in America," reprinted in his *Christian Ethics and the Community* (Philadelphia, 1971) p. 53.

Christian faith *without* beginning with the biblical symbols and never leaving them entirely behind is, I think, doomed to failure.

IV

Movement toward critical thought and the accompanying pressure toward secularization is unavoidable in a society which is both pluralistic and highly interdependent. Thus, if one is to develop a Christian approach to American public life and to communicate that approach, the task is to develop a theology whose roots in the biblical symbolic vision are evident, and which then seeks to interpret the contemporary meaning and significance of these symbols in a rigorous and critical way. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, such an approach "starts from the symbols and endeavors to promote the meaning, to form it, by a creative interpretation."[32] This attempt to combine symbol and creative critical interpretation, Ricoeur points out, is based on a wager. It involves an act of faith that the symbols will in fact be fruitful and productive of new understanding of the being of human persons and their bonds with one another and with God.

The missing element in the public ethos of America is the sense of the sacred in history and in society and human interaction. It is the unique power of the imaginative, the parabolic, and the dramatic to evoke this sense of the sacred in human consciousness and to sustain it in the shared world of public discourse. Murray, and with him the entire American Catholic social tradition, clearly had a profound sense of the sacredness within time. But this sense has been obscured from public view by the almost exclusive reliance on critical philosophical reflection drawn from the natural-law tradition. This critical thought remains essential if a creative public interpretation of the American social process from a Christian perspective is to be produced. But the chief question for public theology in America after John Courtney Murray is this: How can the Church, with the aid of theologians, make the revelatory power of the biblical symbols public again through an act of creative interpretation?

This critical movement between the revelatory symbols and the creative interpretation of the demands of social obligation is, I take it, the new shape of the problem of the relation of faith and reason in the public sphere. Like Murray, this approach to a public theology will grant full scope to an analysis of historical, cultural reality and to the complexity of the moral situation. But, departing from Murray, it will make explicit its act of faith that Christian symbols have a power to help society understand its own life and appreciate its moral obligations. It makes explicit its wager that the reality which calls the nation to justice,

[32] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil,* tr. Emerson Buchanan (Boston, 1969) p. 355.

to respect for human dignity and rights, and to solidarity and social love is a reality which will be better understood if illuminated by Christian faith. It is this wager that is the basis of the whole effort to relate Christianity to the public life of American society.

This brief Note is far from providing a detailed description of the contents of such a public theology. In this regard it falls well short of achieving the concreteness and the detailed discussion of justice and human rights which Coleman so rightly admires in Murray and his predecessors. But this has not been the purpose here. The purpose was to raise some questions about the "growing end" of American Catholic public theology. If the analysis is correct, the task ahead is vast.

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