

EXPERIENCE AND CULTURE: A POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR AMERICAN ATHEISM

MICHAEL J. BUCKLEY, S.J.

University of Notre Dame

THE PROBLEMS entailed in the affirmation or denial of the existence of God have historically embodied intractable paradoxes. Nothing could be more central to the meaning that constitutes a religious community and to the ideational continuity of its tradition, yet even the problems do not admit of unambiguous statement nor have they offered fixed and perduring patterns of resolution. Ambiguities characterize statement and argument in a fourfold manner: in the basic terms in which question or answer is framed; in the evidence offered for their advancement; in the methods by which this evidence is established, questions resolved, and answers verified; and in the fundamental principles by which question, evidence, and method are connected and rooted in reality.

One may introduce some coherence into this problematic situation, however, by recognizing that atheisms usually derive their character from the prevalent theisms. The arguments for and against the latter, in turn, depend upon the conditions of fundamental reflection of a particular period. Fundamental reflection determines and investigates the subjects whose construal, critique, or analysis provides the foundations for any subsequent sciences or arts or disciplined inquiry. The central arguments about the reality of God, then, change with relative consistency as belief and unbelief mount their own defense or explorations within a particular stage of intellectual history that furnishes for both their point of departure.¹

Accordingly, this paper proposes to deal with its subject in three stages. (1) It suggests something about the focus of contemporary fundamental thinking. (2) It discusses two thinkers of major influence upon the U.S. over this century, thinkers whose reflections move from this point of departure to diagnose the unreality of God. (3) It outlines three problematic areas which this situation suggests for Catholic theologians: the

¹ For the importance of "selection" in philosophic semantics, cf. Richard P. McKeon, "Philosophic Semantics and Philosophic Inquiry," to be published in *Freedom and History and Other Essays* by Richard McKeon, ed. Zahava Karl McKeon (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990).

appropriate question about the existence of God, the cultural resources for its exploration, and the ecclesial nature of the issue.

COHERENCE IN THE QUESTION ABOUT GOD

In the world of the 17th and 18th centuries, when philosophy sought its questions and terms in the processes of nature and when time, space, movement, and cause had their primary embodiment in the reality that surrounded the thinking subject, the theistic arguments of Descartes and Newton, Malebranche and Clarke found their evidence either in the ideas which confronted the subject or, more generally as the age progressed, in the world of nature itself. The "things" that served as warrant for the divine existence confronted the thinking subject with data other than thinking itself. When one charged Hobbes or Spinoza with atheism, it was not because they took another focus but because they gave an absolute character to corpuscular matter or to a God identified with nature. When the God of these centuries was actually contested by those who first claimed to be atheists—as opposed to being so charged by their adversaries—it was in the name of dynamic matter, matter necessarily in motion and development.²

The progressive refusal of the new physics to involve itself with the God-question was raised to methodological necessity by Immanuel Kant in a revolution that shifted all fundamental reflection into a new key. The 19th century subsequently required that all knowledge and science be grounded on prior critiques of thinking, epistemologies or cognitive theories or a phenomenology of spirit. Assertions must be established ultimately not by inquiry into the processes of things but by a prior examination of the processes of thought. Natural theologies or theisms or apologetics followed suit. Theoretic knowledge cannot establish the existence of anything, Kant argued, whose correlative is not given from the manifold of sensation and through the intuitive forms of space and time. The question of the divine existence was transferred to the second critique, the moral life of the human being. God became a necessary postulate if the ethical enterprise was to escape self-contradiction. It was not nature that warranted the divine existence; it was ethical human nature. Human nature could also be taken in its effective consciousness of absolute dependence—as in Schleiermacher—or writ very large indeed in the freedom or conceptual life of the spirit by Hegel. In all of these, one could not make sense of the human without maintaining the reality of God.

² The tracing of the dialectical history of this period as an experiment upon which theology might profitably reflect is the burden of the author's *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University, 1987).

This is precisely what the atheism of the 19th century denied. It agreed with its opponents that the point of departure was human nature—be that conceived as thinking or freedom. It argued from this same area of evidence to the contradictory conclusion. The projection of the divine, contended Feuerbach, was a stage necessary for the human to realize itself in otherness, but if one fixated theologically at this stage God became human alienation. Marx extended this further, introducing into the Hegelian dialectic a revolutionary principle that would destroy this alienation in its social source. Nietzsche brought this brilliant century of atheistic reflection to its completion with the madman who announced the death of God, the incredibility of belief itself in God—an inevitable necessity if human nature would become more than human.

As the century drew to its close, another revolution in fundamental thinking was gathering strength. Various epistemologies and idealisms had provided no escape from contradictions with their resultant skepticisms. In reaction, Western thought gradually turned from the processes of thought as foundational to human experience and its expression. The golden age of American philosophy saw the necessity of this turn to various philosophies of experience—pragmatism, realism, and naturalism. In Europe the same radical reconsiderations of focus would constitute phenomenology, existentialism, and linguistic analysis. In all of this diversity the common enemy was whatever made mind or mental entities or the processes of thought the fundamental reality.³ In all of their variations these philosophies affirmed the primordial character of human experience captured in its expression, whether that expression be language or human action.

Consequences, for example, became the actual meaning of conceptions in Peirce's pragmatism (later: pragmaticism), and Wittgenstein introduced the necessity for a prior critique of language for "the logical clarification of thoughts." Language was the "house of being" for Heidegger, while American naturalists redefined experience in terms of action. In a thousand different variations, language and action as human expression became the two foci of foundational thinking in the 20th century, and around them one recognizes the single ellipse that is human experience. The theisms and the atheisms again followed. While Langdon Gilkey has argued that there are human experiences that can only be thematized in religious language, Kai Nielsen, in basic agreement with Antony Flew and Paul Edwards, has maintained that the very term "god"

³ For the American schools and their major figures, cf. Paul Kurtz, ed., *American Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1966) 17-42.

conceals conceptual incoherences.⁴ No single essay could trace the triadic relationships among foundational thinking, theism, and atheism in the 20th century, but an indication can be given of one of the patterns it assumed within the United States.

Pragmatism, as ambiguous as any other major term, furnished both Peirce and James with devices by which the existence of God could be asserted. "I myself believe," wrote James, "that the evidence for God lies in inner personal experience."⁵ Religion itself became "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine."⁶ This last, vague phrase was necessary to allow for the Buddhist who could make no assertions about God and for an Emersonian worship of abstract law. Religious experience possessed its own integrity and defining lines; its object was indeterminate at very best. Charles Sanders Peirce agreed only that experience was foundational. To James he wrote that reflection upon "the Idea of God" brings the thinker to the determination of shaping his "whole conduct into conformity with the Hypothesis that God is Real and very near; and such a determination of the soul in regard to any proposition is the very essence of a living Belief in such proposition." This concrete experience, entailing profound practical consequences, constituted for Peirce the "humble argument"—one he thought had made "more worshippers of God than any other."⁷

As the theism, so the atheism. In 1934, six years before the appearance of the first volume of *Theological Studies*, John Dewey proposed to save religious experience by separating it from any religious object. Religious experience, he argued, has its own meaning and autonomy, and its importance could only be maintained by detaching it from religion and from supernatural objects. This contradiction between James and Dewey is an interesting one to trace, if only because it indicates again that atheism is shaped and generated by the prevalent theism. For both, experience constitutes the common point of departure.

⁴ Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969); Kai Nielsen, *Philosophy and Atheism* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1985) 83, 146.

⁵ William James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1978) 56.

⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1982) 31–34. For a searching criticism of James's understanding of religious experience, cf. Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1988) 38–83.

⁷ Charles Sanders Peirce to William James, June 12, 1902, as in R. B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James 2* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1936) 425. For the citation and a commentary upon it, cf. James Collins, *God in Modern Philosophy* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1959) 393.

Dewey figures critically in any consideration of 20th-century atheism in the United States. He represents the American version of this repudiation in as characteristic and systematic a manner as it was to receive. "Dewey's pragmatism," judged Cornelio Fabro, "can be considered at once the most radical and the most representative attitude in present-day American thought."⁸ In maintaining that experience is not only the starting point of the natural sciences and of esthetic or moral reflections, but also the method for dealing with all of these aspects of nature, and even more crucially the "goal in which nature is disclosed for what it is," Dewey takes the comprehensive nature of experience as the point of departure for his religious reflections, a stance that is central to some of the most reflective and characteristic thinkers of the U.S. over this past century.⁹ More than any other figure perhaps, Dewey provides the optic on the contemporary American mind: thought within the limitations of experience alone.

ATHEISMS OF EXPERIENCE AND CULTURE

Experience itself, maintained Dewey, must be redefined. The chief adversaries were those British philosophers from Locke to Russell who took experience as if it were the passive reception by the thinking subject of the bombardment of data and events.¹⁰ Dewey insisted on almost the contrary:

Experience becomes an affair primarily of doing. The organism does not stand about, Macawberlike, waiting for something to turn up. It does not wait passive and inert for something to impress itself upon it from without. The organism acts in accordance with its own structure, simple or complex, upon its surroundings. As a consequence, the changes produced in the environment react upon the organism and its activities. The living creature undergoes, suffers, the consequences of its own behavior. This close connection between doing and suffering

⁸ Cornelio Fabro, *God in Exile: Modern Atheism. A Study in the Internal Dynamic of Modern Atheism from Its Roots in the Cartesian Cogito to the Present Day*, tr. and ed. Arthur Gibson (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1968) 836.

⁹ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1929) 5.

¹⁰ For an accurate treatment of this point, see John E. Smith, *Reason and God* (New Haven: Yale University, 1961) 92-103. Smith, calling Dewey "the philosopher of experience," draws attention to Dewey's maintaining the fundamental link between human experience and the processes or functions of organisms that are disclosed in the biological sciences: "Unless we start with the conception of an organism interacting or carrying on transactions with the environment, we shall never understand Dewey's metaphysics of experience" (ibid. 97).

or undergoing forms what we call experience.¹¹

Scientific inquiry, then, whether mathematical or physical, takes on a correspondingly productive character, the transformation of a subject matter in the actual process of investigating it. The growth of modern science can be dated from the implicit acceptance of this direction: "Genuine scientific knowledge revived when inquiry adopted as part of its own procedure and for its own purpose the previously disregarded instrumentalities and procedures of productive workers. This adoption is the radical characteristic of the experimental method of science."¹² This development Dewey celebrated as a victory over classical Greek culture. Technology became of the essence of the scientific method, as that method itself took various forms by which experience could be controlled for productive purposes. Dewey's interpretation of experience and the productive procedures of inquiry would function influentially in American thought for the rest of the 20th century.¹³

This critical redefinition of experience allowed Dewey to draw a continuous line between experience and culture:

As the developing growth of an individual from embryo to maturity is the result of interaction of organism with surroundings, so culture is the product not of the efforts of men put forth in a void or just upon themselves, but of prolonged and cumulative interaction with environment. The depth of the responses stirred by works of art shows their continuity with the operations of this enduring experience. The works and the responses they evoke are continuous with the very processes of living as they are carried to an unexpected happy fulfillment.¹⁴

Experiences become enduring experiences, cumulative interaction with the environment; these enduring experiences issue in products that constitute human culture. Culture constitutes a complex whole comprising religion, law, fine and useful arts, science, philosophy, language, domestic and political relations.¹⁵

¹¹ John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (enlarged ed.; Boston: Beacon, 1966) 86. Doing, undergoing, and the perception of the interrelationship are critical factors in experience. "An experience has pattern and structure because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship. To put one's hand in the fire that consumes it is not necessarily to have an experience. The action and its consequence must be joined in perception. This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence. The scope and content of the relations measure the significant content of an experience" (*Art as Experience* [New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958] 44).

¹² John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1938) 94.

¹³ See, e.g., the judgment of John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (New York: Basic Books, 1957) 17-121, 172-74.

¹⁴ Dewey, *Art as Experience* 28.

¹⁵ Dewey, *Experience and Nature* 37 ff.

Just as culture is the product of enduring experiences, so it provides the perspectives that illumine problems and their subjects. Culture was the matrix within which all scientific inquiry was conducted. Though both the physical and the cultural constitute the environment for human beings, the former is so incorporated into the latter that human experience and the problems that arise out of it and the methods by which these problems are handled are all shaped by the culture.¹⁶

Beliefs and religious practices, then, could not be other than "relative to the present state of culture."¹⁷ Now a critical development in contemporary culture has entailed the growing persuasion that "the advance of culture and science has completely discredited the supernatural and with it all religions that were allied with belief in it."¹⁸ While this persuasion does not characterize the American ethos as a whole, its increasing influence has divided the national religious mind into two intractably warring camps. There are, indeed, still those who maintain "the necessity for a Supreme Being and for an immortality that is beyond the power of nature." The division between these two groups constitutes the present American situation, one to which Dewey addressed the proposals of his Terry Lectures as a *via media*.

He saw the 20th century as developing a new foundation for all religious discussion. This must be the active experience of human beings precisely as that experience was controlled by the logic of inquiry and as it issued in the products of culture. Whatever is to be asserted must be affirmed as the distillations of disciplined experience. Even the religious apologists recognize this new state of the question and attempt to utilize this shift: "The religionists rely upon a certain kind of experience to prove the existence of the object of religion, especially the supreme object, God."¹⁹ The issue can be decided, maintain the apologists, on the grounds of experience. Certain human experiences are properly called religious. These must bear the weight for any warranted assertions about the divine existence or else there is no warrant at all. This shift to experience as foundational does away with both "the cosmological God of speculative surmise or the christlike God involved in the validity of moral optimism."²⁰

On the other hand, experience among the educated is interpreted in

¹⁶ Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* 42-43.

¹⁷ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University, 1968) 6.

¹⁸ Dewey, *A Common Faith* 1. "Supernatural" in Dewey signifies simply a being superior to the human person, creator of the world, hence not found as a component in nature.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 11.

²⁰ For his preference for "warranted assertions" over "knowledge" or "belief," cf. Dewey, *Logic* 7.

some way through the perspective of the methods of the natural sciences or by their extension into social and esthetic inquiry.²¹ The rising universalism and credibility of the experimental methods have substantially changed the nature of the appeal to experience. "New methods of inquiry and reflection have become for the educated person today the final arbiter of all questions of fact, existence, and coherent assent. Nothing less than a revolution in the 'seat of intellectual authority' has taken place."²² On whatever side inquiry would attempt to settle the religious issue in a manner congenial to the 20th century, the resolution would have to be formulated in an argument that made experience its basis and culture its perspective.

Dewey framed his *via media* to emancipate religious experience or the religious dimensions of human experience both from a supernatural object and from organized religion. In a manner that echoed remarkably some of Auguste Comte's project but now in a very pragmatic American transposition, the religious element in experience would be freed from any connection with God or with religion. What does "the religious" look like when so abstracted from God and religion? It becomes an attitude toward ideal values. The "unseen powers," formerly revered as God, are now the productive functions that bring about that union between the ideal and the actual. This practical engagement also unifies the whole life of the artist, the scientist, the parent, or the citizen. Faith is the conviction not that something is, but that "something should be in existence as far as lies in our power."²³

These practical ideals exercise authority over the acting subjects, direct their lives toward productive achievements, and give them their unified sense of the whole, their religious character. "The religious is 'morality touched by emotion,'" Dewey takes from Santayana, "only when the ends of moral conviction arouse emotions that are not only intense but are actuated and supported by ends so inclusive that they unify the self. The inclusiveness of the end in relation to both self and the 'universe' to which an inclusive self is related is indispensable."²⁴ Whatever is valuable about the quality "religious" can be secured by this moral-practical translation, saving what is most critically important about religion—a sense of community and one's place within it, a sense of the whole with which one is uniquely connected.²⁵

²¹ Compare Dewey's brief outline of the work of the artist, scientist, or good citizen in *A Common Faith* 49–50.

²² *Ibid.* 31–32.

²³ *Ibid.* 21–22; for God as active function of uniting the ideal and the actual, cf. 51–52.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 22–23.

²⁵ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Random House, 1930) 301–2.

Breath-taking as such an emancipation might seem, this shedding of both divine object and institutional religion only furthers that "logic of the method of disposal" that has characterized the history of religions. Over the centuries, religion has left behind animal worship and human sacrifice as the remnants of past cultures for a progressive emphasis on an ideal or ethical content.²⁶ What is more, it saves the term "religious" for this integration of subjectivity and community around ideal values and transfers the term "God" to this unification of ideal values and possibilities to be realized.²⁷ Linguistically, little is lost. Methodologically, the world has been restored to nature and experience, and this restoration embodied in culture.²⁸ Morally, human purposes and human integration replace a discredited supernatural being and its history of divisive religions. Religious attitudes and the religious element in experiences can become autonomous from any system of beliefs and find their integration within a human community fostered by the new methods of knowledge.

This disposal of a supernatural object is certainly for the best. The culture that once sustained and interpreted doctrine and dogmas will no longer support them: "The growth of knowledge and of its methods has been such as to make acceptance of these [religious] beliefs increasingly onerous and even impossible for a large number of cultivated men and women."²⁹ This last phrase carries an important cultural judgment, one repeated insistently over this century. The American sociologist Thomas F. O'Dea, for example, has recorded that any form of thought that cannot be subsumed under the mathematical formulations of abstract science has tended to take on a mythical character.

Science came into existence as a part of traditional religious culture and as part of emerging humanism: it developed into their most formidable opponent. Today

²⁶ Dewey, *A Common Faith* 4–8. Interestingly enough, the original *Humanist Manifesto*, dated 1933, which John Dewey signed, proposed to save "religion" by shaping it anew "for the needs of this age. To establish such a religion is a major necessity of the present. It is the responsibility which rests upon this generation." Apparently it was a responsibility which this generation could not meet. The second *Humanist Manifesto*, dated 1973, noted that "some humanists believe we should reinterpret traditional religions and reinvest them with meanings appropriate to the current situation. Such redefinitions, however, often perpetuate old dependencies and escapisms; they easily become obscurantist, impeding the free use of the intellect. We need, instead, radically new human purposes and goals" (*Humanist Manifestos I and II*, ed. Paul Kurtz [Buffalo: Prometheus, 1973] 8 and 16). One has only to read through both manifestos to grasp how profoundly Dewey spoke for the spirit of American atheism over that 40-year period.

²⁷ Dewey, *A Common Faith* 43–52. "It is this active relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name 'God'" (ibid. 51).

²⁸ For a rich development of this theme, cf. Robert J. Roth, S.J., *John Dewey and Self-Realization* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962) 106–24.

²⁹ Dewey, *A Common Faith* 30.

allied with technology and central to our complex society, it represents an autonomous factor affecting our lives. Is there any wonder under such circumstances that, in W. H. Ferry's words, technology should become the theology of contemporary American society?³⁰

Dewey would evaluate this development very differently from O'Dea, but he would have no quarrel with this basic description.

Atheism in the U.S., one must further underline, is not a situation of the workers or oppressed classes or of the poor, alienated from belief by the usages to which belief has been put. Atheism in all of its strong or attenuated forms is far more present within the culture of the educated, perhaps more among the humanists than the scientists. Further, it seldom possesses the militancy that sounded in the previous century and still can be heard on other continents. The "eclipse of God" is much more a drift or conviction, as Dewey perceived, among "a large number of cultivated men and women," a horizon taken for granted in the perspectives and the disciplined sensitivity to be found in elite groups.

Dewey's transposition of the issue to experience and culture speaks for many educated Americans far more strongly than a number of European imports. The dialectical tradition of Marx and Lenin garnered few lasting advocates for its critique of religion, despite some heady influence in dogmatic social movements earlier in this century. Truth to tell, its very dogmatic character made it suspect within a broad intellectual climate of pragmatism with its heavy emphasis upon experimentation. The more dramatic appeals of Continental atheism, even with its revered roots in Friedrich Nietzsche, seemed similarly rhetorical and elitist. Jean Paul Sartre complained bitterly that "all the great philosophers have been believers more or less," and maintained that this lack constituted the opportunity and urgency of his own fundamental thinking. "It seemed to me that a great atheist, truly atheist philosophy was something that philosophy lacked. And that this was the direction that one should now endeavor to work."³¹ The demonstrations of the intrinsic contradiction between the infinite *en soi* and *pour soi* entertained students taken by the appeal of atheistic existentialism, but became something they outgrew like other enthusiasms. Sartre had his day in the U.S., but it was a day mostly confined to classrooms, cafés, and theaters. It perished without becoming either a tradition or a philosophy to live for.

Yet the sober, contained world that Dewey depicted has remained, symptomatically critical for the understanding of the contemporary religious situation within the United States. Dewey registered the crucial

³⁰ Thomas F. O'Dea, *Alienation: Atheism and the Religious Crisis* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969) 107.

³¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Adieu: A Farewell to Sartre* (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 436-38.

equivalence of any inquiry into truth with the scientific, experimental method: "The mind of man is being habituated to a new method and ideal. There is but one sure road of access to truth—the road of patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record, and controlled reflection."³² The revolution in the evaluation of religion is not merely through the emphasis upon experience as expressed in language and action. This revolution can constitute the point of departure for either affirming or denying the existence of God. The radical change is brought to its completion by equating a focus upon experience with the objective method whose value has been established by its use in the natural sciences and by insisting that both the beginning and the end of all inquiry are contained within experience. The distance from religious belief among many American intellectuals has found its point of departure in the comprehensive nature of experience interpreted by the experimental methods by which these beginnings and goals are realized. "There is but one method for ascertaining fact and truth—that conveyed by the word 'scientific' in its most general and generous sense."³³

The resultant indifference is not so much a deliberate act, a set of arguments that terminates in the denial of the existence of God. There are these arguments and periodically they are collected and brought out as a volume of essays for and against the existence of God. But they have a dated air about them, dusted-off pages from the books of previous centuries when passions and interests ran higher and the point of departure was quite different. The denial of the existence of God today is much more cultural drift and distance. It issues from a prior and unquestioned acceptance of the methods due credibility, whose constituents are "observation, experiment, record, and controlled reflection." The theological decision is already made, already implicit in the decision about the "one method for ascertaining fact and truth."

Sigmund Freud was another thinker who recognized that the issues of the divine reality had shifted to become those of experience controlled by scientific method and that religion had to be treated as an aspect of human culture. As a consequence perhaps, Freudian analysis of religion has exercised a far more powerful and enduring influence upon many in the U.S. than its European competitors. Freud interprets religion fundamentally as one of the four mental assets of civilization, and "scorn[s]

³² Dewey, *A Common Faith* 32.

³³ *Ibid.*

to distinguish between culture and civilization."³⁴ Paul Ricoeur draws attention to this shift to culture in Freud's later writings, among which are his critical works on religious belief:

In Freud's later writings a new theme makes its appearance, the theme of culture, under which Freud groups together various notions—esthetic, ethical, and religious—that phenomenology would split into different regions according to the intentionality of the object. It is in his elaboration of the concept of culture that Freud attempts to account for the economic function of religion.³⁵

In an earlier approach to the issues of religion, "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices" (1907), Freud had drawn the parallels between neurotic patterns and the ritual structures of religious acts. With *The Future of an Illusion*, he returned to the problems of culture which he had bracketed over the intervening years in order to devote himself to "natural science, medicine and psychotherapy."³⁶ The study of religion was his entree into the wider considerations of culture.

"Culture" comprises all the ways in which human life has emerged to differentiate itself from the life of beasts. Two categories collect all these elements of civilization: knowledge and regulations. Knowledge deals with the conquest of nature, and regulations govern the relationships among human beings. One deals with the extraction of wealth from nature to satisfy human needs, the other especially with the distribution of available wealth. Every individual is virtually an enemy of civilization or culture because of the sacrifice of instinctive satisfactions that civilization demands. "Thus civilization has to be defended against the individual, and its regulations, institutions, and commands are directed to that task."³⁷

Coercion is not adequate to this task; culture needs other "measures that are intended to reconcile men and to recompense them for their sacrifices."³⁸ These are the four mental assets of civilization: internalization of regulations by the superego; cultural or national ideals with

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Norton, 1961) 5–6: "Human civilization, by which I mean all those respects in which human life has raised itself above its animal status and differs from the life of beasts—and I scorn to distinguish between culture and civilization. . . ."

³⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1977) 248.

³⁶ In 1935 Freud added a "Postscript" to this *Autobiographical Study*, in which he registered this "significant change" that had occurred in his writings over the past ten years. *The Future of an Illusion* was written and published in 1927, at the beginning of that period to which Freud drew attention. Strachey notes that these concerns were to occupy Freud for the rest of his life. See "Editor's Note" to *The Future of an Illusion* 3.

³⁷ *Future* 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 10.

which the people can identify; art; and religious ideas, "perhaps the most important item in the psychical inventory of a civilization."³⁹

The Freudian analysis of religion is, in general, too well known to need repeating here, but there is a curious parallelism in this analysis which has not drawn much attention. Just as culture consists of two major constituents, knowledge and regulations, so religion consists of two major constituents, religious beliefs and prohibitions. These latter parallel the two aspects of culture, but in contradiction. Beliefs are not the results either of experience or of thinking; their source is "the strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. . . . The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes." Religious beliefs, then, are not knowledge and will never be knowledge. They are, by definition, illusions. "We call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfillment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification."⁴⁰ Religion masquerades as culture in those moments in which knowledge and regulations no longer obtain. Almost as an anticulture, religion reflects in its two correlatives to the constituents of civilization, illusions and prohibitions, two pathologies: Meynert's amentia and obsessional neurosis. Religion, then, is essentially a cultural phenomenon not only because it is the strongest mental asset that a culture has to reconcile human beings to the instinctive renunciation imperative for its continuity, but also because it reproduces on the pathological level the principal constituents of culture. Religion will eventually disappear because "in the long run nothing can withstand reason and experience."⁴¹

It is no accident that Freud and Dewey spoke so strongly to the American culture of the 20th century. They both worked out of a serious methodological commitment to an understanding of experience as self-enclosed, pointing to no realities beyond itself. The origins and goal of inquiry were experiences, and its horizon was culture. Both addressed a scientific consciousness which would prove itself by its products and would eventually displace blind religious faith with the discoveries and insights of the scientific methods they formulated and espoused. Both gave the primacy in the pursuit of truth to some form of a method called scientific. The final lines of *The Future of an Illusion* could have been written by either: "No, our science is no illusion. But an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere."⁴² Both recognized that they were offering methods, procedures, that must

³⁹ Ibid. 14.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 31.

⁴¹ Ibid. 54.

⁴² Ibid. 56.

be satisfied if genuine knowledge was to be obtained or warranted assertions made. Psychoanalysis was only "a method of research (*eine Forschungsmethode*), an impartial instrument, like the infinitesimal calculus."⁴³ Inquiry or the process of scientific investigation "in spite of the diverse subjects to which it applies and the consequent diversity of its special techniques has a common structure or pattern."⁴⁴

There is something of an anomaly about these two figures. Of the two, there is no doubt that the Freudian analysis of religious belief is more celebrated, more the object of advocacy and attack, while Dewey, together with many of the thinkers from the most vibrant period of American philosophy, has suffered temporary eclipse. On the other hand, perhaps Dewey is more genuinely symptomatic of the contemporary repudiation of religion and any supernatural object within much American intellectual culture. Possibly Dewey has more of the edge because of the apparent absence of doctrine or hypothesized substructures of consciousness within his theories. His emphasis was upon new investigations and upon the experimental method by which inquiry could move unhampered to its provisional conclusions.

Discovery and inquiry are synonymous as an occupation. Science is a *pursuit*, not coming into possession of the immutable; new theories as points of view are more prized than discoveries that quantitatively increase the store on hand. It is relevant to the theme of domination by custom that the lecturer said that the great innovators in science "are the first to fear and doubt their discoveries."⁴⁵

This modesty recommends itself *prima facie* to the skeptical wariness and to the autonomous creativeness that marks modernity and postmodernity in the United States.⁴⁶ Its inevitable religious effect is easily seen: "The religious function in experience can be emancipated only through surrender of the whole notion of special truths that are religious by their own nature."⁴⁷

The world of science and of the philosophical analyses of the methods and accomplishments of science has turned over many times since Dewey

⁴³ *Ibid.* 36.

⁴⁴ Dewey, *Logic* 101.

⁴⁵ Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (n. 11 above) xvii.

⁴⁶ Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1983). Blumenberg indicates that the idea of progress arises in the 17th century both from the formulation and adoption of scientific method and from the understanding of the arts as products of the creative spirit of particular ages. For a summary of Blumenberg's argument with Löwith, see the "Translator's Introduction." It is the spirit of this self-assertion that Dewey has transposed into an American mode, given methodological coherence, and universalized as the only general approach to truth.

⁴⁷ Dewey, *A Common Faith* 33.

set himself to the Terry Lectures or Sigmund Freud brought his *Forschungsmethode* to bear upon the mental assets of culture. But no two figures have spoken more prophetically or exhibited so symptomatically much of the denial of the reality of God as it is found in contemporary American culture. Whatever differentiations would obtain in scientific methods, the popular persuasion persists that such methods alone can deliver warrantable assertions, deserving serious commitments. Even when the scientists and the philosophers of science would speak more modestly of their accomplishments and much more fraternally to religious claims, the popular and especially perhaps the educated imagination enshrines some form of the scientific method with the powers given them by Dewey and Freud and locates it within the fiction of an intractable struggle with religion. The character of intellectual culture in the U.S. has been profoundly influenced by these dispositions, however much "experimental" would move in its meanings between "grounded on experience" and "tentative," and however much the results of scientific method have been interpreted instrumentally or realistically or even mythically. With a culture so shaped and the expectations upon productive experience so specifically formed, religion and religion's God would clash ineluctably.

CONSEQUENT THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY

The religious intellect must recognize that in the U.S. today it confronts a problematic situation paradoxically both unique and somewhat familiar. The situation is unique in that throughout the world the contemporary denial of the existence of God is not the persuasion of this or that idiosyncratic figure as in pre-Christian antiquity, nor of a particular philosophical tradition or movement as in the 19th century. "The eclipse of God" has come upon world culture, an absence from consciousness and living affirmation found within great masses of peoples—not everywhere but among great civilizations and social classes. Contemporary atheism, together with its cognate indifference, is unique in the public acceptance it has secured, in the ascendancy within particular cultures it has gained, and in the rapidity of increase it has enjoyed, becoming over this century the fastest growing religious conviction in the world.⁴⁸

In the U.S., by way of sharp contrast, it is more among the profession-

⁴⁸ Cf. David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Nairobi: Oxford University, 1982). Barrett estimates that over the century the atheistic and nonreligious masses will have risen from constituting 0.2% of the world's population in 1900 to slightly over 21% in the year 2000, whereas Christians, for contrast, will have decreased slightly over the same period of time, from 34.4% of the world's population to 32.3%. For chart of comparative statistics, cf. *ibid.* 6.

ally educated and intellectuals that one can find that temper of the modern mind described or encouraged by Dewey and Freud. This is not to say that it characterizes these groups as a whole, but that where it finds presence, acceptance, and even *Selbstverständlichkeit* is in the intellectual culture more than elsewhere. However pervasive the presence of atheism in world cultures, religious belief has persisted strong throughout the people of the U.S. as a whole. Relativism is certainly there, but disbelief or religious disinterest is in the main found within highly cultivated, educated, or elite groups. Indeed, the situation in the U.S. bears some striking resemblances to the status Rome accorded cult at the time of the Antonines. In the elegant summary of Edward Gibbon, "The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord."⁴⁹ The religious convictions that distinguished the people as a whole from an educated and cultivated elite, and both in turn from politicians invoking the securities of civil religion, is a situation not completely unfamiliar to contemporary America.

But there are differences. The great masses of people who would describe themselves as atheistic or agnostic form something of the international context for the religious commitments of ordinary Americans as well. The more liberal churches have become more threatened, more indefinite in their affirmations, while fundamentalistic reactions are provoked against "godlessness"—which in turn elicit a commensurate contempt. Further, the massive connections worked by communication technologies foster those developments by which the persuasions of the educated have already privatized much of religion and have come to constitute a significant influence upon the culture.

Repeatedly Karl Rahner drew attention to atheism as a world phenomenon and to its roots in a technological, rational character peculiar to a contemporary cast of mind.

I venture the opinion that church-related Christianity has not yet become

⁴⁹ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* 1 (New York: Modern Library, n.d.) 25-26. Gibbon comments somewhat cynically that "notwithstanding the fashionable irreligion which prevailed in the age of the Antonines, both the interests of the priests and the credulity of the people were sufficiently respected" (ibid. 27). For the presence of religious disbelief or disinterest among a more educated class or elite groups in the U.S., cf. the following three studies: E. C. Ladd, and S. M. Lipset, *The Divided Academy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975); *The Connecticut Mutual Life Report on American Values in the 80's: The Impact of Belief* (Hartford: Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company, 1981); S. Rothman, S. R. Lichter, and L. Lichter, *Elites in Conflict* (to be published).

sufficiently aware of its radically new situation today, that it is conducting itself with more or less anxious defensiveness and that it is consoling itself by taking refuge in those social classes and areas into which the consequences of the new historical situation, which have given rise to the world-wide and now manifest atheism, have not penetrated to a sufficiently radical degree.⁵⁰

Rahner is remarkably like Dewey in his reading of a "technological, rational mentality which in ever new ways and on a global level is actually, if not necessarily, producing atheism."

The critical point to bear in mind, however, is that contemporary atheism does not emerge from an argument for the freedom of physics from theological assertions nor for the development of the human above the present state of humanity. Atheism in the U.S. arises spontaneously from a climate of mind which both segregates religious thought from serious inquiry and makes the authority of experience depend upon its codification in those experiential methods that took their rise from the physical and biological sciences. Religious denial or disinterest emerges from the unquestioned and unquestionable persuasion that only some such procedure enables human beings to move with honesty and respectability toward warranted assertions, that outside of these rigorous, objective procedures there are only enthusiasms, taste, and sentiment, mindless or ungrounded mythological thinking, and the projections of wish-fulfilment. The confused situation which confronts the contemporary religious mind in the intellectual culture of the U.S. is not so much argument or even hostility. It is dismissal—a cultural indifference to the entire and increasingly discredited theological enterprise itself. This atmosphere is such that even so emphatic a word as "atheism" seems oddly out of place, too assertive or strident, and is more rarely heard than in the previous century.

What one encounters in this present situation, then, is not a question demanding an answer. The absence of such demand is an index of pervasive indifference. Religious denial or apathy or contempt or disinterest in the intellectual culture of the U.S. is far too unexplored and indeterminate to present the precision of a question or a set of questions. What the Church must deal with here is much more a confused situation in which the constituents do not hang together so coherently that they frame a well-defined and particular problem.

This means that the immediate task of theology is not to attempt answers, which would be in any case inescapably premature. Theology must first clarify the religious problem lying hidden or unarticulated

⁵⁰ Karl Rahner, "The Church and Atheism," *Theological Investigations* 21 (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 138.

within the intellectual culture and raise to the level of understanding and expression what is still indeterminately contradictory to belief. Theology needs to enter into discussions and collaborative inquiry with such disciplines as science and the philosophy of science, the history of ideas, the sociology of knowledge, studies in contemporary culture, literature and art, and the sociology of religion in order to identify and understand the significant elements, structures, and preconceptual convictions that constitute the present situation as religiously problematic. For this collaborative inquiry, Catholic theology in the U.S. must continue to become a research and a university discipline.

What lies, for example, behind the equation of reliable experience with a method modeled carefully or vaguely on that of the physical sciences? What has become the dominant idiom for serious and productive thought? Why does religion possess so little respectability in many intellectual circles and make so little contribution to the educated conversation? What are the questions and resources which contemporary science suggests to religious reflection? What does the American version of the hermeneutics of suspicion embody as it is brought to bear upon religious convictions and institutions? What is the contemporary scandal given by the believers that *Gaudium et spes* places among the origins of atheism, a judgment very recently repeated by Pope John Paul II?⁵¹ What are the possibilities for faith in a world in which all commitments are increasingly provisional and all theories open to their own falsification? Such an inquiry into the culture is not an essay in forensic rhetoric, i.e. an attempt to determine what adversarial positions must be met. Much less is it a polemic against contemporary culture or the advance of science. Such a stance would be unwarranted, misguided, and finally disastrous. The theologian must examine the contemporary situation and come to articulate what the profound problems are that lie at the basis of religious denial and contempt.

Simply to formulate the problems that such a situation poses to religious belief would be a major accomplishment of theology—and of theology precisely as mediating between religion and culture and as gathering other disciplines and sciences into a unity of discourse. The converse is equally true. If theologians do not undertake such a collective reflection with the current forms of science and artistic expression in a painstaking attempt to transform a problematic situation into a problem, there is no other community upon which the Church can call. Such a cooperative and long-term mediation does not anticipate naively a single

⁵¹ *Gaudium et spes*, nos. 19–21; John Paul II, Address to the American Bishops from Region XI, July 8, 1988, as in *Osservatore romano*, weekly edition in English, 29 (July 18, 1988) 1048.

description of the culture or a canonical index of the questions addressed at religious faith. It does presuppose that a probing for the influences which lie behind the atmospheric indifference, suspicion, disinterest, or (to call it by a starker name) religious despair will eventuate in a greater sensitivity for the contemporary religious problematic. Such a discovery of meaning and pattern would express itself in vital questions—questions that would in turn suggest fruitful lines of reflection and inquiry. To enunciate a real problem is no mean achievement. If the judgment of Rahner is correct that the efforts of the Church to deal with the contemporary situation have been ineffectual, may part of this not lie with the isolation of theology from a prolonged and disciplined attempt to mediate between religion and contemporary culture and to formulate the inherent problems correctly? Is not the initial and pressing question, what is the question?

Without this painstaking, careful interchange with the other disciplines, theology will be tempted to superficial analyses and responses wide of the mark. Catholic philosophers and theologians over the past 50 years have willingly repeated, modified, and transposed endlessly a set of classic arguments for the existence of God without equally careful analyses of the contemporary situation. Is it any great wonder that so much has been written, sometimes of great intrinsic value, and yet has made so little difference? Perhaps theology in the U.S. could borrow this much of the method of liberation theology and analyze the actual culture and secular traditions that confront it in order to formulate the problems that emerge out of and objectify the contemporary American experience.

Secondly, if the intellectual culture must be analyzed for the problems that it contains regarding the reality of God, it—together with American culture as a whole—must also be recognized for the resources it offers to religious inquiry. Some of these may lie undetected because the promise in novelty may be as hidden as it is unrealized. Others may have marked human experience over centuries. Movements toward self-transcendence, for example, are not absent from contemporary secular experience, however these moments may be unattended or reflexively interpreted in a manner that seems to deny a term that could legitimately be called "god." Throughout this essay John Dewey has been cited as the thinker most characteristic of the American intellectual ethos in the 20th century. Yet it was Dewey who insisted upon the unification of the self that was properly religious and the necessary self-transcendence of the human person.

It is pertinent to note that the unification of the self through the ceaseless flux of what it does, suffers, and achieves, cannot be attained in terms of itself. The self is always directed toward something beyond itself, and so its own unification

depends upon the idea of integration of the shifting scenes of the world into that imaginative totality we call the Universe.⁵²

This self-transcendence that lies at the heart of the painstaking, reverent scientific mind, with its courage, objectivity, humility, and sober honesty before the claims of truth—however technologically executed—is not that far distant from the humility which submits itself to the truth of the absolute claims of God.

When the truth is sought simply for itself, when all other more profitable or agreeable compromises are rejected as they come into conflict with this goal, when this search is prolonged through discouragement and at great personal cost, is a human being not in the presence of an absolute, a sovereignty whose claims govern life with an unsurpassable totality and relativize all other claims? However appropriate the vocabulary of “absolute” and “relative,” if this claim of truth upon inquiry and upon life is not an experience of the claim of God, what stronger claim could be that of God?⁵³ Is it simply interesting that Aquinas makes primordial truth, *veritas prima*, the formal object of the act of faith?⁵⁴

Self-transcendence and an accepted unconditional governance by the truth sought and acknowledged simply because it is the truth provide a common ground between scientific intellect and the religious. The issue is only whether this pervasive self-transcendence and the absolute it embodies is finally personal or abstract.⁵⁵ In contrast, Cornelio Fabro appears far too premature in his despair over the possibilities of Dewey and the world he represents: “For us there here appears a gulf that is bottomless and unbridgeable, between Dewey’s philosophy and even a minimum theistic position.”⁵⁶ On the contrary, the critiques of current religion which Dewey articulated, such as of an individualism and an abstraction from the human task, could well contribute to that cultural purification of the Church which would allow the presence of God more clearly to be seen in human commitments and community. Happily, this search for the religious resources within the contemporary culture has already engaged theologians as diverse as Langdon Gilkey, Louis Dupré,

⁵² Dewey, *A Common Faith* 19.

⁵³ For an extended discussion of this line of investigation, cf. Michael J. Buckley, S.J., “Transcendence, Truth, and Faith: The Ascending Experience of God in All Human Inquiry,” *Theological Studies* 39 (1978) 633–55. For the co-ordination of this with the thought of John Dewey, cf. William M. Shea, *The Naturalist and the Supernatural* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University, 1984) 134.

⁵⁴ *Summa theologiae* 2-2, a. 1, 1.

⁵⁵ See Lash, *Easter in Ordinary* 164 ff. Lash has done an extraordinarily valuable study of the religious dimensions of contemporary human experience. His brilliant retrieval of Martin Buber should be read as a much fuller treatment of the restoration of the personal.

⁵⁶ Fabro, *God in Exile* 855.

Paul Tillich, Nicholas Lash, John Dunne, and Karl Rahner.

In this search religion can also contribute something to a culture marked by its reverence for science: the restoration of the primacy of the personal. For all of the purported impersonality of the more objective scientific methods, the import of the subjective is increasingly recognized in the selection of interests, the inescapable alteration of the data, the elaboration of hypotheses, and the ethical evaluations of technical uses. Parallel to this is the growing awareness of the foundational personal knowledge of the self and of others that lies at the basis of even the more abstract, objective, and deliberately artificial methods. Here one also finds the peculiar life and unique cognitive richness contained in the intersubjectivity of personal relations and of human community. The educated as well as the uneducated must come to the same recognition: that human life poses questions to itself that technical science does not answer, that the more personal life becomes, the more pressing become these questions. They are questions of the subject and of the pluralism of intersubjective communities. Out of these and grounded upon them come the pressing questions of social justice and civil rights and a national commitment to a humane life for the wretched of the world. All of this experience with its attendant problems and challenges is personal and demands a disciplined reflection not exhausted by the technical treatment of productive objects.

It is not a great transition to move from recognizing the cognitive claims of the personal to question seriously whether the absolute within life may be fundamentally personal rather than abstract. Indeed, there is often an observable parallelism in developed attitudes toward the self, toward others, and toward God. All three bespeak a sensitivity to the primacy of the personal. All three recognize personal knowledge as having its own unique experiences and unique cognitive claims, its own patterns of inquiry and verifications.⁵⁷ This restoration of the personal must also figure strongly in any assessment of the religious resources to be disclosed within contemporary culture. For Christianity also respects experience as a point of departure for religious consciousness and assent, but that experience is primarily and irreducibly personal.

Thirdly, at this point the Church becomes the pivotal concern. The community of believers will be perceived either as scandal or as irreplaceable sacrament: as a scandal that discredits, by an intractable arrogance, narrowness, and pretense, the God with whom it is associated; or as a sacrament of the presence of Christ in its worship, in its word and

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958), and Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975).

sacraments, in the holiness of its saints, its compassion for human misery, its demand for social justice, its reverence for all that is of creation, its moral leadership, and its community of love, wisdom, and forgiveness. If atheism today is characteristically a dimension of culture, authentic religion must be embodied in an ecclesial community incarnate in the culture. The question of the assertion or denial of God in the contemporary world is profoundly ecclesial.

The First Vatican Council made much of the perdurance of the Church as a witness to its truth. Much more pertinently, the Second Vatican Council restored the understanding of its deeper ministry to the world and to the world's unbelief as the palpable presence of the holiness of Christ within contemporary culture. Just as the primary task for the Church in its ecumenical commitments is "to make a careful and honest appraisal of whatever needs to be renewed and done in the Catholic household itself, in order that its life may bear witness more clearly and faithfully to the teachings and institutions which have been handed down from Christ through the apostles," so also the principal duty of the Church in its encounter with growing disbelief may well be a similar purification from those failures in its manner of teaching and in "its religious, moral, or social life" which *Gaudium et spes* has insisted "must be said to conceal rather than reveal the true nature of God and of religion."⁵⁸

Here also the reflection of theologians must contribute to the general reflection of the members of the Church. If the point of departure of contemporary atheism is that of culture and experience, and if the mission of the Church is to be the visible continuation within culture of that Christ in whom the reality of God is supremely and humanly communicated, can one not assert theologically that the contemporary state of unbelief or skepticism or religious agnosticism in the U.S. is something of a judgment upon the presence of the Church itself within the culture—a judgment that demands prolonged and honest evaluation? Does not the needed analysis of the present common life of the Church, its structure, policy, teachings, and moral leadership, make heavy demands upon theology precisely as a discipline which reflects upon the common faith?

This theological reflection of the Church upon itself must address each of the elements Baron von Hügel listed as an essential component: the institutional and traditional, the reflective and speculative, the mystical, affective, and actional. The rising atheism has often been treated simply as a problem of philosophy or apologetics. But whatever one says about

⁵⁸ *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 4; *Gaudium et spes*, no. 19.

the solitary scholar or the individual argument, much more may be said for the interpersonal sacramental community itself as an embodiment of the givenness of God in the reality of Christ. Is not Jesus the human embodiment of the absolute that is already acknowledged however dimly and confusedly within cultural ideals and directions? Is there not something of more primitive force in the lives of holiness, in a common dedication to social compassion and to prayer, stamped as they are by the Spirit of Christ, that raise the question about God to an intensity that cannot be ignored if one is to be faithful to the light?

If so, the time may well have come to retrieve a deeper sense of an authentic Catholic communal culture within the U.S., one that incorporates into its collective meaning what the Church has become and reaches out to the world as did the council itself. Are there not religious dimensions of experience, especially those proper to our own time, to which such a community could give recognition and contemplative assimilation?

If the point of departure for contemporary disbelief is that of experience and culture, then both the questions and the resources of the culture must be explored. But finally, only the Church itself can bear the integral and complex witness of life itself to the reality of the Christian God—certainly through disciplined inquiry, but also both through its institutional reality as a holy community permeated and governed by the Word of God and sacraments of Christ, and through the experience of God discerned in daily living, in scientific dedication, in the lives of its saints, and in that growth in sanctity which is the effect of the indwelling Spirit. Only this community and the various smaller communities in which it exists—in its institutions, its thought, and the dimensions it offers to human experience—can give palpable testimony to the reality of God. Any argument without such a common religious life can only ring abstract and unreal, suggesting what Newman called “paper logic.” Inescapably necessary as a dimension of the culture must be a credible sacramental community and the authority that holiness of life intrinsically commands. How the Church is to become more obviously this cultural presence in the U.S. requires serious attention not only from its bishops and obvious religious leaders, but from its scholars and theologians as well.

Theological inquiry in the U.S., in summary, must address at least three aspects of contemporary atheism: (1) the accurate and sensitive formulation of the questions that lie beneath disbelief, apathy, and contempt; (2) the discovery of the resources within the culture which disclose something of the presence of God; and (3) the continual conversion and edification of institutions and life that allow the ecclesial community itself to become what it essentially is within every human culture: the fundamental sacrament of Christ which uniquely and irreplaceably witnesses to the reality of God.