

IMPRIMI POTEST:

JOHN J. MCGINTY, S.J.

Provincial: New York Province

NIHIL OBSTAT:

DANIEL V. FLYNN, J.C.D.

Censor Librorum

IMPRIMATUR:

FRANCIS CARDINAL SPELLMAN

March 28, 1961

The nihil obstat and imprimatur are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free of doctrinal or moral error. No implication is contained therein that those who have granted the nihil obstat and imprimatur agree with the contents, opinions or statements expressed.

Copyright 1961 by The America Press



THE

MORAL
CURVE

V. A View From Abroad

CHRISTOPHER DAWSON to C. J. McNASPY

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

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

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

- Q.** *"Monist" in what sense?*
- A.** In the sense of a uniform, middle-class, liberal secularism as compared with the uniform, working class, Marxist secularism of the USSR.
- Q.** *But what of our religious origins?*
- A.** Down to the great depression American society was not secularist in the modern sense. It might be described as a poly-Protestant society, since Catholics and Jews and recent immigrants were second-class citizens. Even so, it was uniform, since the American Protestant churches tended to one type and pattern. Today, however, Catholics and Jews and aliens are full citizens and Protestantism has lost its prerogatives. The resultant society is, however, secularist—not pluralist.
- Q.** *But surely there is some American pluralism?*
- A.** The really distinctive thing about the Anglo-American tradition was the doctrine of the *limited state*. The state was concerned with law and order and national defense, but with little else. This did involve a sort of pluralism since the churches and the regional societies had the main responsibility for religion and culture.
- Q.** *When did the change come about and how?*
- A.** The decisive change came 1) after the Civil War, by which the original States lost their traditional position, and 2) above all with the state increasingly taking over responsibility for education from the churches. Thus the state has acquired a paternal character, which was just what the old American tradition rejected. It is impossible for this

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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

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

SUGGESTED READING

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

- Bell, Daniel, *The End of Ideology*. Free Press, 1960
Fuller, Edmund, *Man in Modern Fiction*. Random House, 1958
Gibney, Frank, *The Operators*. Harper, 1960
Greeley, Andrew M., *The Church and the Suburbs*. Sheed & Ward, 1959
Kilpatrick, James J., *The Smut Peddlers*. Doubleday, 1960
Maritain, Jacques, *Reflections on America*. Scribner, 1958
Mills, C. Wright, *The Power Elite*. Oxford U. Press, 1956
Packard, Vance, *The Waste Makers*. McKay, 1960
Zimmerman, Carle C., and Cervantes, Lucius F., *Successful Families*, Pageant Press, 1960