The American Heresy

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We are forced now to return to an earlier, Pascalian pessimism, to a model of history whose logic derives from a postulate of original sin. We can subscribe today, all too readily, to De Maistre's view that the barbarism of modern polities, the regress of educated, technologically inventive man into slaughter enact a working out of the eschatology of the Fall. Thus George Steiner in his remarkable *In Bluebeard's Castle*. Unfortunately, the return and subscription mentioned are only a literary flourish, for Steiner does not imagine that anyone would seriously agree with Pascal and De Maistre. He is wrong. Those for whom the dogma of Original Sin is not mere metaphor have always seen the landscape differently. The believer lives in a world he finds familiar but in which he does not feel at home. Where does an alien go to register?

To find the American Catholic I basically am, I must engage in a psychological dig, down through the layers of theory and time to a parish in Minneapolis where our school faced the public school across a narrow street; one easily crossed by foot though one's loyalties remained behind on the curb, on the same side as the red brick school and the new Romanesque church. That church was the parish's third, the pride of a pastor who, sent by Archbishop Ireland years before, had arrived by buggy and served his people in two frame churches before he dared, with the coming of war and affluence, to build. His immediate successor as pastor was Bishop James Shannon, who would leave the Church and marry. Though no time intervened between their tenures, my sense of what it means to be a Catholic in America shaped itself somewhere between what these two men represented.

Owen Rowan was ordained a priest by Archbishop John Ireland, whose aggressive frontier personality was prominent among those activities which drew from Rome the Apostolic letter *Testem Benevolentiae*, condemning a heresy called Americanism. Bishop Shannon was, so to speak, the very type of the post-Kennedy American Catholic—talented, energetic, a man in the news. Before his consecration as bishop, he marched in the streets of Selma. But my Catholic mind had been shaped by that narrow street between the parochial and public schools. Set apart, unassimilable, a colony in a not wholly hospitable, basically Protestant land. Hurrying along dim morning streets to Lenten Mass with my mother and brothers, the sense of being a stranger was as palpable as the chill in the air. Later, when I read Chesterton and Belloc and Newman—if my Catholic heroes were foreign they were in their turn strangers in England—it seemed to me that America consoliated a breach that went back to the Reformation. Catholics, of course, were continuous with the Great Tradition, a yeast in the United States.

Also Graham Greene stirs in me this sense of isola- tion, of being set apart. He too is English and he too reminds me that I have little in common with early and later churchmen of my native region. Archbishop Ireland and Bishop Shannon had another conception of what it is to be a Catholic in this country. That Americanism might be regarded as a heresy comes as no surprise to me. After all, it was Sartre who said that you cannot talk with Americans because they do not believe in Original Sin. As with Steiner, that may be only metaphor; but Graham Greene means it literally:

Original sin under the spell of elegance has lost its meaning. Where, I thought, loitering on a bridge above the little tamed river, was there any sign of that “terrible aboriginal calamity” which Newman perceived everywhere? This—during the day—was the perfect ivory tower. The horror and the beauty of human life were both absent. It was a passing sensation, for the ivory tower has its own horror: the terrifying egoism of exclusion.

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Greene thus describes his thoughts as he stood at the border between the United States and Mexico before continuing south with his peculiar, almost Manichean, sensibility and acquiring the makings of two books—the wonderful travelogue, Another Mexico (source of the above passage), and the yet more wonderful novel, The Power and the Glory. (Each is known by another title as well, The Lawless Roads and The Labyrinthine Ways, respectively.) Already in the late thirties Greene had a way of looking at America which has been strengthened by the passage of time. His anti-Americanism is basically theological, stemming from a Catholic vision which seems to have gone out of style. When asked if the Christian belongs to this world, Greene replied that the question suggested another: Does the condemned belong to his prison? The spiritual well-being of the prisoner is not enhanced when his cell is decorated with flowers, when there is tennis in the courtyard and the jailer is an affable, well-educated man.

"The American Consul-General, called on by Dr. Braun, began to speak. He spoke of the spiritual links between the democracies—he seemed to number Cuba among the democracies. Trade was important because without trade there would be no spiritual links—or perhaps it was the other way round. He spoke of American aid to distressed countries which would enable them to buy more goods and by buying more goods strengthen the spiritual links. . . ." This passage from Our Man in Havana may seem standard stuff, but the connoisseur of anti-Americanism will find more than another joke about the way we tend to employ a religious terminology to speak of matters most mundane. There is a scent of flowers in the cell, the sound of tennis lifting from the prison courtyard. Love. Spiritual links. The echo of Pelagius. And the essence of Pelagianism is the denial of the doctrine of Original Sin.

Graham Greene was drawn to Mexico in 1938 by the spectacle of a persecuted Church. His predilection is for savage landscapes where good and evil are real, where the abstract rhetoric of social betterment is parsed by such conceptions as random terror, the plundering of the poor, and priests in mufti stood against a wall and shot. The persecuted Church is not an anomaly, but in the nature of the case. The world and the spirit are at war. We have here no lasting city. There is little to choose between capitalism and communism—Greene holds that both have come under papal condemnation—but if one had to choose it is preferable to be a hunted believer on the other side of the Iron Curtain than confused in the West by the political dilution of the vocabulary of salvation. In The Quiet American, the mordant Fowler says of Pyle: "He didn't hear what I said; he was absorbed already in the dilemmas of democracy and the responsibilities of the West; he was determined—I learned that very soon—to do good, not to any individual person, but to a country, a continent, a world. Well, he was in his element now, with the whole universe to improve."

Pyle is one of many good Americans who show up in Greene's writings: the man from Wisconsin in Another Mexico ("And suddenly—I can't remember how it happened—the good old face disclosed the endless vacancy behind. You expected somebody of his age—from Wisconsin—an honorary police commissioner with a badge—to believe in God—in a kind of way, a vague deistic way . . . and all the while behind that pinkness and that goodness eternal nothingness working its way through to the brain."); the presidential candidate in The Comedians; Pyle. What is wrong with all these good Americans?

Three things. The object of concern (not the individual but abstract groups: a country, a continent, the world); the means (trade, power and, worse, education, a technique which, without reference to the moral status of individuals, will propel us into a rational future); and, beneath it all, the assumption that the world is corrigeable, that problems arise from misinformation, clumsiness, mistakes. In such a view there is no room for evil, for the cruelty and terror and injustice which are compatible with knowledge. By his own efforts, by determination and technique, man can achieve the good. It is only a matter of time. When such claims are cast in Christian terminology we have the heresy against which Greene has been hurling anathema sit for over thirty years.

There is no nostalgia in the charge. When asked to comment on the danger to Christian civilization from World War II, Greene dwelt on the cruelties and injustices of the ages of faith, he quoted with apparent relish a twelfth-century chronicle on the terror and famine and injustice which had then ravaged Britain. What he was after was not the gore but the interpretation of it. These evils were regarded as a punishment for sin, the sins of individuals and so the sins of the chronicler too. Could we accommodate the thought that war is not the crime but the punishment? Would it not alter the familiar charge of national hubris, which is usually nothing more than a criticism of the State Department? If one were to regard large-scale evils as a function of personal sin, would he be less tempted to engage in righteous condemnation of the mistakes of others and more inclined to think of amelioration on a scale appropriate to the putative cause? Of course it is not only unbelievers who find it quaint to suggest that what the world needs is sanctity rather than a new foreign policy. Mea culpa is an odd explanation of the evils of the day, but then Christianity is odd.

America started from scratch, but the itch was European. From the beginning, politics in this country has been theory-laden, almost an attempt to deduce the concrete from the abstract, a transcendental deduction, as it were. Plato's Re-
public and his Laws were thought-experiments transacted in mind and imagination. Their influence, such as it was, had to be on real organic communities which, while sprung from necessity and happenstance, exerted the tug of tradition on attempts at more rational organization. If America is a country of the mind, its coordinates are in real space and time; it gave a local habitation and a name to the desire for a fresh start, an untrammelled beginning, Square One in a real game. Between the idea and the reality fell the shadow. Disillusioned dunners have always been able to point accusingly to those great promissory notes, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Sometimes the disillusion is complete, as in Ambrose Bierce's Ashes of the Beacon, an historical monograph purportedly written in 1930:

Of the many causes that conspired to bring about the lamentable failure of "self-government" in ancient America the most general and comprehensive was, of course, the impracticable nature of the system itself. In the light of modern culture, and instructed by history, we readily discern the folly of those crude ideas upon which the ancient Americans based what they knew as "republican institutions" and maintained, as long as maintenance was possible, with something of a religious fervor, even when the results were visibly disastrous.

But most critiques, even Bierce's, are internal, political in the narrow sense, in their own way further fruits of the Enlightenment. There are mistakes to be rectified, more or less radical alterations are demanded, but at bottom the belief persists that there is a technique which will lead to the good for man. That underlying belief is the target of theological anti-Americanism.

We are no longer surprised to find among us those whose face is launched from a religious vantage point. Judgments of American foreign policy and of domestic ills appeal to the Gospel, to what Christ would do, to our Judeo-Christian heritage. These judgments are ambiguous, I think, and not only because they so often imply innocence and righteousness on the part of the accusers. Far more puzzling is the implication that we are being recalled to the true American Way. It is as if the American Dream were born in dogmatic slumber, as if true Americanism and Christianity were one and inseparable. This assumption goes hand-in-hand with another, that we in the United States have achieved a clear and successful separation of Church and State. The latter has often seemed an article of a religious rather than a political creed, since much of its history involves Protestants and other Americans united against a presumed Roman Catholic aspiration to turn the Republic into a theocracy once the numerical consequences of a cunning anti-contraception doctrine made themselves felt.

Few appreciated the strangeness of John Kennedy's appearance before that ministerial court of inquisition in Texas during the 1960 presidential campaign. Those clergymen clearly considered themselves the custodians of Americanism. The candidate's task was to show that he was as good a Protestant as they. The episode was a tour de farce on both sides and the sequel among the country's Catholics worth pondering. Kennedy managed to convince his questioners that he owed loyalty to nothing higher than Americanism, that any conflict between that faith and his Catholicism would be resolved in favor of the former. What Catholic did not feel a pleasurable tingle at the thought that, through Kennedy as spokesman, he had been vindicated as an American like any other? It did not occur to many to wonder who had appointed those ministers the guardians of the national orthodoxy. Their obvious fear that the Church in the person of the Pope might sit in judgment on American policy obviously did not extend to themselves. The invited inference was that there is in this country a shared faith, whatever our confessional differences, and the name of the faith is Americanism. Why should ordained ministers show themselves so jealous of the prerogatives of the State if they did not somehow consider the tenets of their religious and political faiths to be the same?

Other interpretations are possible. Separation of Church and State could be grounded by appeal to natural law. That is, on the assumption that the supernatural builds on the natural, with the latter but not the former accessible to reason alone, one could say that the political order should concern itself only with natural rights. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, however God-given they are thought to be, are not rights granted by any religion. Freedom of worship is a right to be safeguarded by the political order, but no particular way of worshiping, or refusal to worship, is to be politically established. In short, one might contend for a layered view of things, with the political considered more basic and in no way conflicting with religious or supernatural beliefs which build upon and go beyond the political.

No doubt some such view as this enabled the Houston Ministerial Conference to interrogate a Catholic candidate for President. They could imagine no conflict between the political order and their faith because the political order in America was providentially conceived to permit the flourishing of religion while preventing its establishment. Archbishop John Ireland, and others involved in the controversy over the Americanist heresy, would have agreed wholeheartedly. When Ireland was asked by Rome to speak to his Republican friends in Washington in order to prevent the Spanish-American War, an effort which ended of course in failure, his mission was interpreted by his friend in Rome, Mon-
signor D. J. O'Connell, as prompted by European political considerations. On May 24, 1898, in a lengthy threnodic epistle to the archbishop of St. Paul, O'Connell wrote:

Again it seems to me that above all nations, moving them on along the path of civilization to better, happier modes of existence is the constant action of a tender divine Providence, and that the convergent action of all great powers is towards the common and destined end; to more brotherhood, to more kindness, to more mutual respect for every man, to more practical and living recognition of the rule of God. At one time one nation in the world now another took the lead, but now it seems to me that the old governments of Europe will lead no more and that neither Italy nor Spain will ever furnish the principles of civilization of the future. Now God passes the banner to the hands of America, to bear it—in the cause of humanity and it is your office to make its destiny known to America and become its grand chaplain (in Thomas T. McAvoy, The Americanist Heresy in Roman Catholicism: 1895-1900).

How drearily puerile this letter reads today. Manifest destiny, providence, this dear and Christian land. Nor is O'Connell reluctant to speak of the role of trade in America's providential role. Those spiritual links again. Between seeing a remarkable parallel of the natural political fact of America and the supernatural order, and the almost unconscious fusion of the two, there was a very thin line. In an Hegelian mode, providence and secular history become identified, and mankind is seen as crowding toward some lovely temporal apotheosis, moving as inexorably as the sun from east to west. Was it not a similar attitude that made the Messiah unrecognizable when he arrived?

I suspect that some such working identification of politics and religion always lay behind the believer's championing of the separation of Church and State. Against the grain of what that separation seemed to say, America was looked upon as the chosen vehicle of true religion in our time. No religion was to be established because the establishment already functioned as a religion; moreover it used, as in O'Connell's rhetoric from Rome, the language of Christianity. Only the meanings of the words had been changed, and changed radically. The whole country was conceived as a missionary society.

Now, when that identification is increasingly difficult to accept, we find the Gospels appealed to in negative judgments on America. On both Left and Right, the feeling grows that the believing American is caught in a necessary tension between his loyalties to Church and State. Once more the sense of being a stranger in his native land grips the believer. The Indochina war, civil rights, various domestic injustices, are spoken of bifocally, so that one gains the impression that our political institutions are, ideally, negative: They prevent the diminution of assumed values, they deny the denial of rights, they were not fashioned to implement a way of life but to protect us all from having a way of life imposed upon us. But, since negations gain their life from affirmations, the positive ideals have to be fed into our lives from another source. Even natural rights receive their effective sanction from a supernatural viewpoint. It seems clear that without the injection of specifically religious motivation the civil rights laws and judgments either would not have come about or at least they would not have been implemented to the very uneven degree they have been.

The peace movement too appeals frequently to the religious ideal. Yet the picture is often unclear. Is it to Christian charity or to the fundamentally good soul of America that the appeal is made? In a recent interview printed in Commonweal, Sister Elizabeth McAlister of Harrisburg trial fame displayed an antiaversion of Catholicism. As far as she is concerned, it seems to have nothing to do with bishops or episcopal warrants for the exercise of the priesthood. If there is emphasis on the Eucharist, the doctrine of the real presence is unimportant. "What's important as I understand it in Eucharist is the goal of the community, the community's call to Christ to be present within it and his response to that call. Whether people believe he's in the bread or wine is not the thing that's important. What's important is that they believe he is present with their community by virtue of their prayer." Islam, Christianity—it makes no difference. God with us is a reality we confer. The political vision has changed, but we seem to be back in the rut of identification. The very designation of Sister Elizabeth as one of the Harrisburg Eight stirs dusty memories of Dos Passos' USA, evokes a vista opening onto innumerable continental avenues: the Via Venti Settembre and the Avenida Cinco de Mayo.

The view is decidedly déjà. St. Paul urges us to war against principalities and powers. These are ideologies, Sister Elizabeth interprets. Communism, Marxism, Christianity are all ideologies. Ergo, etc. The logic would knock St. Paul off his horse again. The argument, such as it is, seems to lead us down the road to a denial of Original Sin. The human community is either basically good or else it can be made such by its very own efforts. God is an aspect of our deeds.

And how are things on the Right? An interesting dispute has arisen between the National Review and Triumph, a family quarrel, so to speak. If the National Review continues to hold that there is some less than contingent link between America and the Christian faith, that each in its own way promotes the true order of things, Triumph has begun to doubt. The disagreement is important.
What clearly puzzles many religious people is that, having accepted the wisdom of the idea that they have no right to impose their beliefs on others, they are in turn being asked to support laws and policies which enforce practices with which they are in profound disagreement. It is one thing to concede that a judgment about the immorality of contraception does not call for a public policy outlawing the use of contraceptives on the part of those who do not share the moral judgment. It is something else to have one's tax money used to disseminate contraceptive devices to "underdeveloped people" both at home and abroad. So too with abortion, day-care centers, euthanasia, etc. Public policy seems less and less a neutral protection of rights than the active promotion of a view of life incompatible with religious convictions.

It is tempting to think that the gap between Church and State—a gap which is not merely distance but enmity as well—is more easily seen in foreign affairs by those on the Left and more obvious in domestic affairs to those on the Right. One way or the other, the sense of antagonism increases, and with it comes a conviction expressed long ago by Maritain: The future of the faith may lie in diaspora. Thus all the talk of smaller communities, the peace community, and, from Triumph, the concept of tribal Christianity. Faith is no longer something which can be identified with the wider community, with America and its institutions. The State is no longer secular or neutral. It has become the enemy.

And so I return to the playground of the parish school, looking across a narrow street toward a country in which I do not quite belong. The euphoric patriotism of Archbishop Ireland cannot match my mood. The Kennedy truce, misconceived in the first place, is over. With Graham Greene one sees that the true condition of the Catholic in the world is constant, his temptation not to recognize it for what it is. Not everything that Caesar claims is his. Evil is real, Pelagius is wrong and, if there is fault, since there is fault, it must be placed where it belongs, on the shoulders of individual human agents. On us. On me.