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Virgil C. Blum, S.J.: The Making of a Culture Warrior

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ABSTRACT

Using archival and secondary sources, this paper traces Virgil Blum's (1913–90) intellectual formation and early career as a champion of religious freedom for children attending non-public schools. Entering public life in the 1950s, Jesuit Father Blum, a political scientist at Marquette University, was alarmed by the growing secularization of American society, and he believed parochial education was key to the survival of American democracy. Blum advocated, on constitutional grounds, for what a subsequent generation would call school choice. This paper offers a case study of a Jesuit formed in the pre-conciliar Society of Jesus who spent most of his ministry in a post-conciliar Catholic world. His experiences prepared Blum to fight in the culture wars of the 1970s and 1980s.

Keywords:

Virgil Blum; culture wars; Jesuit formation; religious freedom; school choice; secularization

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“At the risk of being a nonconformist, I would like to suggest that the most pressing problem that faces America today is the secularization of American society.”¹ So wrote Father Virgil Blum, S.J., a rising political scientist at Marquette University, to his esteemed confrere Father Leo Brown, S.J., director of the Jesuits’ Institute of Social Order (ISO), their think tank for the social apostolate. The year was 1959 and the elder Brown had invited Blum to St. Louis to participate in a two-day conference of social scientists, “The Church and the Social Order.” In calling himself a nonconformist, Blum acknowledged that he was among a minority of Catholics deeply alarmed by a perceived decline of religious influence in American life and where this might lead the nation. For Blum, the philosophy of secularism, which sought to eradicate the influence of religious beliefs in public life in favor of human reason and science, posed a grave threat.

Blum’s acceptance letter contained a passionate lecture on the peril of secularization and revealed his independent streak and his willingness to question other Catholics and his own religious order. He did not name names in his complaint, but he was probably thinking of Jesuits like Louis Twomey and Claude Heithaus, who focused on race relations, or Brown himself, a champion of unionization and the rights of workers in an industrial economy. These issues were important, but secularization, not race or labor relations, was for Blum the most pressing social problem. And the best solution was for Catholics to influence American social development; more specifically, for Jesuit social scientists to bring their philosophical and theological principles into contact with American society. Blum viewed the Jesuits’ track record as lamentable: “I simply do not think that Catholic thought is effectively influencing the direction in which American society is moving today. While our society is being secularized we are exerting very little influence in the way of positive contributions that will moderate, if not stem, this trend.”

The day Virgil Blum wrote his acceptance letter to Brown was also his forty-sixth birthday. He had received his PhD in political science five years earlier, a credential he completed only after finishing the standard fifteen-year formation process for a priest in the Society of Jesus. The Jesuits formed Blum to assume a place in their vast educational system—a role he performed with distinction—but Blum also used his position at Marquette as a base from which to develop an identity as a public intellectual and political activist. He understood his own role to be that of social

1 Virgil C. Blum, S.J., to Leo C. Brown, S.J., March 27, 1959, Subseries 2, Box 2, Folder “Correspondence, Incoming and Outgoing, 9/1958–8/1959,” Virgil C. Blum S.J. Papers (hereafter Blum Papers), Department of Archival Collections, Marquette University.

influencer, finding ways of applying the Catholic system of thought to American society. As a political scientist, he tried to articulate Catholic-inspired solutions to the problem of secular drift, focusing on what he knew best—church-state relations and the preservation and strengthening of religious schools. Though not a lawyer himself, Blum embraced law and religious freedom as the means for staving off secularization. This set him apart from many Jesuits associated with the ISO. Compared with racial strife or industrial relations or family economics, secularization was more of a cultural issue than a social one. Instead of seeing Blum as an aspiring social influencer, it may be more accurate to interpret him as a potential influencer of political culture.

Largely forgotten today, Virgil Blum was a household name in some quarters beginning in the mid-1950s when he embarked on a public career devoted to furthering the constitutional rights of US Catholics, a battle he waged ceaselessly until his death from cancer in 1990.² Blum taught political science at Marquette from 1956 to 1978, specializing in constitutional law and civil liberties and touching the lives of thousands of students. A tireless laborer, he found time to engage in a vigorous public life. He produced hundreds of publications, delivered speeches across the United States, lobbied in legislative corridors, and maintained a vast correspondence with other activists concerned about safeguarding religious freedom in a pluralistic democracy. Blum's own understanding of religious freedom was more corporate than individualistic. He opposed the absolute separation of church and state, believing that government should cooperate with churches for the common good, which might include disbursing public funds to religious institutions.

Blum's animating concern throughout his career was the advancement of parochial education in the United States. Not all Catholics agreed with him, but he saw Catholic schools as key to the long-term survival of American Catholicism—indeed, as key to the survival of American democracy. Blum understood that many Americans opposed taxpayer dollars going directly to parochial schools and so he focused on the constitutional right of children to receive public money as an exercise of their religious freedom. Blum became a pioneering advocate of school choice, a cause he always couched in constitutional terms. How he had become a culture warrior by the 1970s and 1980s is an interesting story, offering insight into the

2 Significant scholarly contributions on Blum can be found in Jim Carl, *Freedom of Choice: Vouchers in American Education* (Praeger, 2011); William M. Fliss, "Born in Defiance: The Public Career of Virgil C. Blum, S.J. (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2022); James V. Shuls, "The Father of the School Choice Movement," *Journal of School Choice* 18, no. 3 (2024): 334.

Society of Jesus, the Catholic Church in the United States, and American political culture before the Second Vatican Council.

Raised in Defiance

Virgil Clarence Blum came from a large German Catholic family in a verdant western Iowa populated by pious farmers committed to hard work. Born in 1913 in the small town of Defiance in Shelby County, he was the fifth of twelve children. The family were active members at their local parish. Blum's mother, Elizabeth, was the religious center of the family, inculcating devotional habits in her offspring. Under her watchful gaze, the family knelt together every evening to pray the Rosary.³ She poured her piety into her progeny to great effect: three of her children would discern religious vocations. Virgil followed his eldest brother, Victor, into the Jesuits.

The piety of Defiance's Catholics was strengthened by a curious demographic anomaly. Iowa had been one of the most Protestant states in the Midwest, making the small cluster of Catholic farming communities in Shelby County a distinct oddity. Referred to locally as the Colony, the small towns at its center were overwhelmingly Catholic, but when one reached the peripheral town of Defiance, Catholics and Protestants in the early twentieth century approached parity. Religious traditions coexisted uneasily.⁴ Catholic families like the Blums knew they were part of a minority living in a Protestant county. Many Protestants viewed their Catholic neighbors as alien others; some took to calling them "Cat-Lickers"—a pejorative play on words that suggested Catholics were like kittens whose eyes had not yet opened.⁵ The outsider status of Catholics may explain the stunning number of vocations produced by the Colony. By 1953 over two hundred of its sons and daughters had entered religious life out of a population of only a few thousand, suggesting that devotion to the Catholic Church grew particularly well in soil under hostile conditions.⁶

Young Virgil Blum attended his parish's grade school and high school, taught by Benedictine Sisters sent from their motherhouse in Atchison, Kansas. He would have known that his parents were paying local school taxes that educated the Protestant kids in town and that none of this tax money supported his own education or that of his siblings and friends. At school Blum read the Catholic equivalents of the famed *McGuffey Readers*.

3 Marilyn Munchrath, interview by William Fliss, September 10, 2017.

4 For more on the Colony and religious strife in Defiance, see Fliss, "Born in Defiance," 31.

5 James Scheuring, interview by William Fliss, August 26, 2017.

6 The number of vocations appears in Steven M. Avella, *The Catholic Church in Southwest Iowa: A History of the Diocese of Des Moines* (Liturgical Press, 2018), 46.

Like their generically Protestant counterparts, these Catholic versions stressed patriotism, but they linked Americanism to biographical profiles not likely to be found in public schools such as the Maryknoll Missioners and the Jesuit martyr, Isaac Jogues.⁷ An impressionable Virgil Blum would have lifted his nose from these readers with a growing pride in his American identity and with a sense that being at once Catholic and American bore no contradiction. His abiding belief that he was no less an American citizen than his Protestant neighbors took root at an early age, paving the way for an adult life spent railing against what he saw as a second-class citizenship imposed on Catholics by a Protestant, and later secular, mainstream.

From the religious crucible of Shelby County, Iowa, emerged a man extremely sensitive to criticism of the Catholic Church, intensely devoted to Catholic education, and one who believed Catholics to be an embattled minority in US society. The master of ceremonies at Blum's fiftieth anniversary celebration as a Jesuit in 1984 captured him perfectly and provoked howls of laughter from his audience when he joked: "Virg Blum was born in Defiance, and he's been living in defiance his entire life."⁸

Formed in the Pre-Conciliar Society of Jesus

Virgil Blum entered the Society of Jesus in 1934. One of his nieces remembers her father commenting that Virgil was the last person the Catholics in Defiance ever expected to become a priest. He had a reputation for being ornery and a fighter.⁹ The Jesuits took this fighter from the Colony and molded him into a highly disciplined and pious man, yet one who carried a sizable chip on his shoulder.

Blum was in formation when the Jesuits celebrated their 400th anniversary. The Society of Jesus was young compared with Catholic orders like the Benedictines or Carthusians, but it could celebrate a history that had been unfolding since the beginning of the modern era. This history was controversial, and it inspired love and hate in others. Had Virgil Blum wanted an order that reflected his personality, he could hardly have chosen better than the Society of Jesus, both being capable of provoking strong emotions in others, positive and negative. For centuries, the rigorous Jesuit formation process had produced erudite and disciplined men to support

7 For example, School Sisters of Notre Dame, *The American Fifth Reader for Catholic Schools* (D. C. Heath and Company, 1930), 87.

8 Rev. Francis Wade, S.J., spoke humorously about Blum for a few minutes, but this is the line that stuck in listeners' memories. See interviews by William Fliss of Thomas Caldwell, S.J., January 18, 2017; Thaddeus Burch, S.J., January 18, 2017; Gregory Carlson, S.J., April 1, 2017.

9 Marilyn Munchrath, interview.

its various ministries, especially its educational charism. Jesuit formation had experienced some changes in the decades before the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), but it would alter dramatically in the Council's wake. Virgil Blum was a product of the pre-conciliar (i.e., pre-Vatican II) Church and Society of Jesus. Like other Jesuits of his generation, he straddled both periods, living much of his ministry in a post-conciliar world.

At the rural novitiate in Florissant, Missouri, Blum became immersed in the culture and history of the Society of Jesus. He was provided a new self-identity as a member of the corporate body. More important, Blum and his *fratres* nurtured an authentic interior life of the spirit grounded in *The Spiritual Exercises* of their founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola. The chief purpose of the novitiate appears to have been the forging of a spiritual foundation that could guide the Jesuit through periods of consolation and desolation that would fill his future ministry.

Life in the pre-conciliar novitiate was one of seclusion and isolation. The novices' lives were highly regimented; the long black line of young men wearing the distinctive Jesuit cassock trooped to their appointed places. English could be spoken only at certain times when the prevailing silence was lifted; otherwise, all communication was in Latin. After two years, Blum joined his fellow novices in making simple vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Following the novitiate, Blum plunged into the juniorate. If the novitiate developed the young Jesuit's spiritual life, the juniorate trained him in the classical humanities both for his own intellectual and moral development and for the benefit of his future students. For two years, Blum and his fellow juniors consumed a main course of Greek, Latin, and English writers accompanied by side dishes of history, art, and modern languages. Blum's efforts culminated in 1938 with the customary AB degree in Classics and English.

From the juniorate, Blum's cohort moved to the campus of St. Louis University, where for three years they studied philosophy through the lens of Neo-Scholasticism, the normative Catholic philosophical-theological system during the interwar years. Neo-Scholasticism represented a revival of the writings of the Catholic Church's towering intellectual figure of the Middle Ages, St. Thomas Aquinas, and the application of Thomistic ideas to a rapidly changing world.¹⁰ The Jesuits had played an important role in the Neo-Scholastic revival of the nineteenth century, embracing Thomism

10 The classic treatment of this theological method is found in Gerald A. McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (Seabury Press, 1977). For an account of its diminution among Catholic theologians in the US context, see Gerald A. McCool, S.J., "The Tradition of Saint

as an antidote to the errors of modernity—nationalism, liberalism, and skepticism. For Catholics confronting a nineteenth century in the throes of massive change wrought by industrialization and urbanization and beset by an intellectual milieu that challenged religious truths, the writings of Thomas Aquinas offered reassuring stability.

In brief, Neo-Scholasticism represented the realism of the Greek philosopher Aristotle filtered through Christian revelation. Aquinas's great achievement was to synthesize Aristotelianism with Christianity. The latter posited an objectively true divine law by which God governed creation. The former championed an objectively true natural law intelligible to human reason. The Thomistic synthesis held that through natural law, which God had also created, human beings could reason their way to an understanding of aspects of divine law that governed the natural world. Philosophy was the gateway to theology in Jesuit formation.

Classroom instruction in philosophy was rigid and abstract, focusing on theses that the men systematically proved by reason. The process amounted to exercises in regurgitation.¹¹ Some students warmed to their philosophy classes more than others did. Those possessing a mind suited to rapid navigation of abstract concepts combined with the ability to articulate objections and defenses, in precise Latin, tended to prosper. Others struggled and felt alienated. One frustrated scholastic of the period recalled his classes as “a dialogue between the masters and a ring of bright students blinking back and forth brilliantly, delighting each other.”¹²

Virgil Blum did not occupy a place in the bright ring around the masters.¹³ He never took part in the fall and spring disputations, where select students faced off publicly in Latin in the debating tradition of the medieval universities. Blum's mind did not revel in the abstract. Ideas mattered insofar as they found application in resolving real-world issues. Years later he told a fellow Jesuit at Marquette University that Catholic education must connect students' knowledge of philosophy and theology with knowledge of society and its problems. He urged Marquette to avoid providing courses where information was “swallowed and as readily regurgitated as proof of ‘knowledge’ at exam time.”¹⁴ After philosophy, Blum spent three years of

Thomas in North America: At 50 Years,” *The Modern Schoolman* 65 (March 1988): 185 (esp. 199–201).

11 William J. Leonard, S.J., *The Letter Carrier* (Sheed & Ward, 1993), 54.

12 George R. Riemer, *The New Jesuits* (Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 17.

13 Transcripts, Blum, Virgil Clarence; Office of the Registrar, St. Louis University. The author thanks the US Central Province of the Society of Jesus for permitting access to Blum's academic transcripts at SLU.

14 Virgil C. Blum, S.J., to Adrian Kochansky, S.J., May 2, 1959, Blum Papers, Subseries 1, Box 1, Folder “Correspondence, Miscellaneous, Political Science Department.”

regency teaching at the Jesuits' Campion High School in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, before detraining at St. Mary's, Kansas, for three years of theological training that led to his priestly ordination in 1947. At the theologate, the Thomistic synthesis reached fulfillment as the scholastics looked beyond human reason to reason's cooperation with grace and revelation (as interpreted by the Catholic Church) in plumbing the depths of God's divine law. Coursework at the theologate followed the thesis method. A Jesuit who entered the Society around the same time as Blum later summed up this method of learning as "a conclusion stated at the very beginning, proven primarily from affirmations of the magisterium, confirmed by scriptural texts interpreted by dogmatic theologians, bolstered by selected passages from the Fathers of the Church."¹⁵ The curriculum completed construction of an intellectual system intended to guide the men throughout their ministries. In the words of historian Philip Gleason, it was "a stable, universal and certain system of thought."¹⁶ It provided the intellectual foundation for a comprehensive Catholic worldview that unified and rendered intelligible all facets of creation. It was a worldview that the fully formed Jesuits were expected to develop in others.

Following ordination, Blum undertook a customary fourth year of theology before traveling to St. Joseph Hall in Decatur, Illinois, for the final stage of Jesuit formation, a ten-month period called tertianship, which was essentially a return to the novitiate for spiritual reinvigoration after so many years of intellectual study.¹⁷ On the heels of tertianship, Blum took his Final Vows in the Society of Jesus, completing fifteen years of development that in the minds of some American Catholics conferred elite status on the Jesuits. The famed Trappist monk Thomas Merton, researching the Jesuits before his conversion to Catholicism in the 1930s, came away, he said, "... breathless with the thought of so many novitiates and tertianships and what not—so much scrutiny, so much training. What monsters of efficiency they must be, these Jesuits."¹⁸

An important moment in formation occurred during philosophical studies when a Jesuit's superiors determined whether the scholastic would pursue the Long Course (*Cursus Major*) or the Short Course (*Cursus Minor*) when he began studying theology after completing his regency. Superiors

15 Walter J. Burghardt, *Long Have I Loved You: A Theologian Reflects on His Church* (Orbis, 2000), 26.

16 Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 119.

17 Joseph M. Becker, S.J., *The Re-Formed Jesuits* (Ignatius, 1992), 331.

18 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain: An Autobiography of Faith, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 233.

marked out the best students in philosophy for the Long Course, a more rigorous curriculum on the path to priestly ordination. The rest entered the less demanding Short Course. Significance lay in the fact that only those in the Long Course would, at the end of their formation, be invited to take the Jesuits' fourth vow: special obedience to the pope. Taking the fourth vow enabled these men to hold high leadership positions in the order. Short Course Jesuits assumed a subordinate position, receiving the title spiritual coadjutor, "coadjutor" meaning assistant.

The distinction meant little in the day-to-day reality of life in a Jesuit community. Those who had professed four vows did not lord it over the spiritual coadjutors, yet the latter knew that doors were shut to them. They would never be entrusted with certain leadership roles such as rector or provincial. Spiritual coadjutor status could result in psychological harm to the Jesuits, manifested in a humiliating self-perception that they lacked what it took to be "true Jesuits."¹⁹ According to a former rector of the Jesuit community at Marquette University during the 1980s, consignment to the Short Course with denial of the fourth vow was sometimes a source of pain or anger that a Jesuit might carry with him for decades.²⁰

Virgil Blum was assigned to the Short Course, and it would not be surprising if he harbored some resentment. He was highly intelligent, but his intellectual gifts did not find their fullest expression in what the pre-conciliar Society valued most: he was not one of the stars in philosophy and theology. One senses that throughout his public career Blum was always trying to prove himself to the Society of Jesus. His gifts lay in the political realm, and he grew frustrated that American Jesuits were not being educated in the processes of US democracy. Blum spoke very little about his past, but in a 1972 letter to the editor of the *National Jesuit News*, a post-Vatican II newspaper originally intended to be a frank forum among Jesuits, Blum vented: "The negative theme of my generation's whole training was 'God deliver us from sociology and politics, from the social and political problems of man!' We were trained in irregular Greek verbs, philosophy and theology, not in the problems of our inner cities, of war and peace."²¹

Blum may have been overreacting; after all, the Society of Jesus had permitted him to pursue a PhD in political science. Moreover, the Jesuits' creation of the ISO think tank in 1939 and its establishment of the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS) in 1944 as its research and teaching complement reflected their growing realization that professional training in the social

19 Mark A. Lewis, S.J., "Unfinished Business: The Spiritual Coadjutor in the Society of Jesus Today," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 47, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 3.

20 Gregory Carlson, S.J., interview by William Fliss, April 1, 2017.

21 Virgil C. Blum, S.J., "Work not Words," *National Jesuit News*, May 1972, 7.

sciences was needed to confront modern problems.²² Although at mid-century the Society of Jesus still held the study of theology and philosophy in highest esteem and directed its brightest scholastics toward those disciplines, it had begun encouraging training in the social sciences. The Jesuits allowed their men, while studying philosophy, to take coursework in another subject that interested them. Blum took advantage of this opportunity to acquire a master's degree in history with a minor in government, laying the groundwork for his future doctorate at St. Louis University in political science and US history.

Several memoirs have been published by Jesuits and former Jesuits describing their time in pre-conciliar formation, but these recollections represent only a tiny fraction of the men who experienced it.²³ Most Jesuits, including Blum, left no account of their formation experience. One suspects that they were too busy in their ministries to dwell on it. Besides his grounding in *The Spiritual Exercises*, Blum benefited greatly from the mental discipline and time management skills the Jesuits inculcated. Although he thought the Jesuits put too much emphasis on philosophy and theology in formation, the Thomistic synthesis remained at the center of his intellectual universe.

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- 22 On the ISO and ISS, see Peter McDonough, *Men Astutely Trained: A History of the Jesuits in the American Century* (Free Press, 1992), 12. McDonough's treatment of these entities is insightful, but his narrative of their history is partial and disjointed. A thorough history of the ISO/ISS remains to be written.
- 23 Examples include Daniel A. Lord, *Played By Ear: The Autobiography of Daniel A. Lord, S.J.* (Loyola University Press, 1956); Joseph T. McGloin, S.J., *I'll Die Laughing* (Bruce, 1955); John J. McNeill, *Both Feet Planted in Midair: My Spiritual Journey* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); Leonard, *The Letter Carrier*; F. E. Peters, *Ours: The Making and Unmaking of a Jesuit* (R. Marek Publishers, 1981); Daniel Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography* (Harper & Row, 1987); Burghardt, *Long Have I Loved You*; Donald L. Gelpi, *Closer Walk: Confessions of a U.S. Jesuit Yak* (Hamilton, 2006); William A. Barry, S.J., "Past, Present, and Future: A Jubilarian's Reflections on Jesuit Spirituality," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 32, no. 4 (September 2000): 1; John W. O'Malley, S.J., "How We Were: Life in a Jesuit Novitiate, 1946–1948," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 51, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 1; Riemer, *New Jesuits*; Richard J. Murray, *Seen and Unseen Worlds* (Hamilton Books, 2014); Gary Wills, *Why I am a Catholic* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002); McDonough's *Men Astutely Trained* offers a collective portrait of American Jesuits of Virgil Blum's generation, but it must be used with caution. McDonough alludes to over 200 oral history interviews in his preface, but he does not list their names. He cites only a few of them in his notes and these anonymously, leaving the reader wondering about his criteria for selecting data.

The Secular Threat

By the time Virgil Blum entered public life in the 1950s, he had identified secularism as the greatest threat to the nation. He did not come to this conclusion on his own and he was certainly not a lone Catholic crying in the wilderness. The US bishops had emerged as a powerful anti-secularist voice after World War II.²⁴ In a 1947 statement, they defined secularism as “the practical exclusion of God from human thinking and living.”²⁵ From secularism issued dire consequences for every unit of society, from the individual to the international community. Peace and prosperity depended on acceptance of God’s dominion over the world. Secularization was an insidious solvent dispersing the natural law. The consequence had been the rise of pernicious ideologies such as fascism, Nazism, and Soviet Communism.

The bishops’ statement arrived at a pivotal moment for Blum as he neared the end of his Jesuit formation and faced a future full of personal potential. He would have agreed with the bishops that the greatest harm inflicted by secularism in the United States was in education and that public school leaders were beginning to exclude God, breaking with an historical American tradition that had recognized religion’s importance in the training of youth. Catholic schools were carrying on this legacy despite efforts to undermine them. The bishops warned that secularists “would invade the rights of parents and invest the state with supreme powers in the field of education; they refuse to recognize the God-given place that parents have in the education of their children.”²⁶ These ideas remained operative in Blum’s mind for the next forty years.

Earlier Catholic critics had pointed out the dangers of secularization. The historian and Catholic convert Carlton Hayes had emerged by the time of the Second World War as a leading critic of it in American life.²⁷ He was an early Catholic proponent of interdenominational alliances to oppose secularism, something Blum would strive to accomplish throughout his career. More resonant for Blum was another historian and Catholic convert, Christopher Dawson, whose core belief was that any society or culture that loses its spiritual roots, however prosperous it may seem, is actually

24 Susanna De Stradis, “Defending the Nation Under God: Global Catholicism, the Supreme Court, and the Secularist Specter (1946–1963),” *Religion and American Culture* 32, no. 2 (January 2022): 270.

25 *New York Times*, “Catholic Bishops’ Statement on Secularism,” November 16, 1947: 54.

26 *New York Times*, “Catholic Bishops.”

27 For more on Hayes and other Catholic anti-secularists see K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 109.

dying.²⁸ Dawson was one of the few thinkers that Blum cited often in his correspondence and writings. He was especially taken with Dawson's 1961 book, *The Crisis of Western Education*. Blum found himself in complete agreement with the author when Dawson stated that the First Amendment to the US Constitution had gone from securing religious liberty to being used to achieve the complete secularization of American culture.²⁹

The most eloquent Catholic voice on the danger of secularism in the United States, as well as the foremost commentator on church-state relations in the postwar era, was the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray.³⁰ Destined to play a major role at Vatican II, Murray had begun writing on political theory in the early 1940s, and he would elaborate on some of the ideas stated by the US bishops.³¹ Murray sought to alleviate Protestant fears that US Catholics were bent on establishing a Catholic confessional state. At the same time, he wanted to correct misguided Catholics who viewed the modern liberal constitutional system of the United States as irreconcilable with Catholic tradition. For Murray, the United States was the world's best setting for Catholic political freedom because its government derived from the Thomistic natural law consensus of the Middle Ages and not, as many European Catholics believed, from Protestant strains of social contract theory (e.g., Locke, Rousseau) that had produced the French Revolution with its disruptive legacy for the Catholic Church. Social contract theories reduced human beings to individual atoms motivated solely by self-interest and led Europeans to reject the existence of objective truths grounded in a common human nature that God made intelligible to human reason. By contrast, the founders of the United States had made such truths the foundation of their political system. The First Amendment to the Bill of Rights guaranteed religious freedom by recognizing the temporal sphere as being distinct from the spiritual sphere. Catholics could not legally hijack the state and coerce their neighbors into becoming Catholics, but neither could the state interfere with Catholics freely exercising their religion.

28 Christina Scott, "The Vision and Legacy of Christopher Dawson," in *Eternity in Time: Christopher Dawson and the Catholic Idea of History*, ed. Stratford Caldecott and John Morrill (T&T Clark, 1997), 11.

29 Blum to Rev. James L. Harrison, May 19, 1961, Blum Papers, Subseries 4, Box 2, Folder "Correspondence E-H, 9/1960–8/1961."

30 For an overview of Murray's political thought, see William R. Luckey, "The Contribution of John Courtney Murray, S.J.: A Catholic Perspective," in *John Courtney Murray and the American Civil Conversation*, ed. Robert P. Hunt and Kenneth L. Grasso (Eerdmans, 1992), 19.

31 Two influential articles were John Courtney Murray, S.J., "Religious Liberty—The Concern of All," *America*, February 7, 1948, 513; "Separation of Church and State: True and False Concepts," *America*, February 14, 1948, 541.

Blum was well versed in Murray's work, and there is no record that he objected to anything Murray wrote. He was channeling the elder Jesuit in 1954 when he impressed upon his own provincial the need for Catholics to defend democracy's fundamental principles: "These principles are grounded in the Natural Law to which Jefferson appealed in the Declaration of Independence. But these principles are almost universally, or at least very extensively, rejected by the exponents of secular liberalism and its offspring materialism."³²

For Catholics like Murray and Blum, a great danger with the American system lay in the possibility that Thomas Jefferson's phrase about "building a wall of separation between Church & State" might become absolute in judicial rulings. Separatists were on the march in postwar America as Protestants joined with some secularists in a new wave of anti-Catholicism. The education debate was at the heart of it. One target was the nation's public-parochial schools—"captive schools" according to their critics—in an arrangement whereby local authorities, especially in rural areas, relied on women religious to staff public schools and might use church buildings for publicly funded instruction.³³ Another target, of particular interest to Blum, were state laws that provided government aid to parochial education. In the wake of the Supreme Court's 1947 decision in *Everson v. Board of Education*, which upheld a New Jersey law providing free bus transportation to parochial school children, a group of Protestant civic leaders joined with like-minded Jews and sympathetic nonbelievers to form Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (POAU). POAU was a vocal organization, which Murray referred to mockingly as PU. The loudest individual anti-Catholic voice of the era belonged to Paul Blanshard, whose 1949 bestseller *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (based on articles he had begun publishing in 1947) defined Catholicism as a political and institutional problem that Americans needed to solve. Blanshard followed this up with *Communism, Democracy, and Catholic Power*, in which he drew parallels between the Catholic Church and the Soviet Union.³⁴

POAU and Blanshard represented an erudite form of anti-Catholicism popular with the liberal intelligentsia. It was light years away from the

32 Blum to Father Provincial, November 30, 1954, Blum Papers, Subseries 2, Box 1, Folder "Personal Correspondence, 1954."

33 For an outstanding treatment of this phenomenon, see Kathleen A. Holscher, *Religious Lessons: Catholic Sisters and the Captured Schools Crisis in New Mexico* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

34 Paul Blanshard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (Beacon Press, 1949); Blanshard, *Communism, Democracy, and Catholic Power* (Beacon Press, 1951).

lowbrow, prurient, nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism of Maria Monk. Historian John McGreevy has argued that Catholicism helped define the terms of mid-century American liberalism, operating as a foil for an emergent liberal consensus about the meaning of American democracy. Liberals viewed Catholicism as a significant threat to democracy, ranking it alongside racial segregation and communism/fascism. By the postwar era, culture had emerged as a vital concept, having shifted since the nineteenth century from a focus on arts and intellectual cultivation to an understanding of the shared webs of meaning that wove through a society and knit its citizens together in communal life. For American liberals, democracy could grow only in a culture that was non-hierarchical and non-dogmatic, one marked by the scientific method and a spirit of open inquiry. An all-encompassing philosophical system such as the natural law tradition that Blum had imbibed during his long formation as a Jesuit and that Murray explicated in his eloquent writings could not be reconciled with democratic culture.³⁵

Exacerbating matters for liberals was US Catholics' historical tendency to separate from mainstream society. The early immigrant Catholic communities had responded to White Anglo-Saxon Protestant hostility by creating a kind of parallel Catholic society, replete with its own schools, hospitals, and professional organizations. Some liberals wondered how American democracy could resist fascist and communist threats if a quarter of the nation's population remained unassimilated, both spatially and culturally. The spatial separation was breaking down in the postwar era, but Catholics still possessed the wrong cultural mindset. The popularity among educated liberals of Theodore Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* attested to the Catholic threat, with Adorno suggesting that submissiveness to authority exhibited by German Catholics had enabled Hitler's rise to power.³⁶ Small wonder, then, that liberals who read Adorno's indictment of Catholicism in tandem with Paul Blanshard's work, which drew parallels between the authoritarianism of Soviet Russia and the Catholic Church, might come to question the capacity of American Catholics to be good democrats.

The Political Scientist

In 1949 Blum began work on his doctorate at St. Louis University, where a two-semester course in constitutional law changed his life. Taught by Dr.

35 John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 168.

36 John T. McGreevy, "Thinking on One's Own: Catholicism in the American Intellectual Imagination, 1928–1960," *Journal of American History* 84, no. 1 (June 1997): 118.

Carl Taeusch, a Harvard-educated philosopher and Baptist minister, the class captivated Blum, who would himself teach constitutional law to undergraduates at Marquette University for many years.³⁷ Blum credited Taeusch with inspiring his life's work as a legal scholar defending Catholic rights in American society, especially in education. Blum's earlier coursework in church history had familiarized him with Catholic efforts to establish a parochial school system amidst a hegemonic Protestant national culture, while his early years spent in Defiance had provided firsthand experience of the struggle. Although the First Amendment to the Constitution forbade federal legislation establishing a national religion, and despite individual states having disestablished any remaining state churches by 1833, the common schools that developed in the North during the 1830s included generically Protestant religious instruction. These state-supported, de facto Protestant schools offended Catholic leaders who sought without success public funds to build their own Catholic educational system.³⁸ Taeusch took this familiar narrative and reinterpreted it for Blum through the lens of constitutional law. He introduced the Jesuit to the idea that Catholic children attending parochial schools were being deprived of their constitutional rights by the fact that they could not enjoy the benefit of the taxes their parents paid to support public education. Legislation that prohibited the use of public funds for parochial schools violated the children's constitutional right to the free exercise of their religion.³⁹

Equally important for Blum's intellectual development was the year he spent as a student-at-large at the University of Chicago starting in 1950. The Society of Jesus was not averse to sending its men to secular schools provided the schools were top-rated, and Chicago boasted the best political science department in the Midwest, second only to Harvard in national rankings.⁴⁰ Two professors had an enduring influence upon Blum.⁴¹ The first was the department's chairman, C. Herman Pritchett, whose con-

37 Taeusch's scholarship focused primarily on business ethics, but he was sympathetic to natural law thinking, which may help explain why he was teaching at a Jesuit university. See Carl F. Taeusch, "The Religious View of the Doctrine of Natural Rights," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 14 (January 1953): 51.

38 Harold A. Buetow, *Of Singular Benefit: The Story of Catholic Education in the United States* (McMillan, 1970), 138.

39 *The Harmonizer*, "Catholic Freedom Man," February 29, 1976, 5.

40 Albert Somit and Joseph Tanenhaus, *The Development of Political Science: From Burgess to Behaviorism* (Allyn and Bacon, 1967), 164.

41 Blum singled out these two men in a letter to his Provincial describing his academic pedigree while arguing for a new assignment. Blum to Father Provincial, November 30, 1954, Blum Papers, Subseries 2, Box 1, Folder "Personal Correspondence, 1952-1954."

troversial 1948 book, *The Roosevelt Court*, analyzed the Supreme Court's non-unanimous decisions during the long presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and employed rudimentary statistical methods to reveal voting blocs. Pritchett treated the court's decisions as what he later termed "value statements which could be examined as votes on public policy issues."⁴² He challenged the prevailing orthodoxy that judges acted primarily on their reading of the law when issuing opinions. Pritchett suggested instead that personal attitudes often shaped justices' positions. Justices brought their own policy preferences to the cases under consideration, and these largely determined their judgments. The book proved to be a pioneering text in judicial behavioralism and one that spoke to Blum even though it would be a mistake to classify him as a behavioralist given how the movement developed in subsequent years.⁴³ But within the context of Catholic religious freedom, Blum saw truth in judicial behavioralism. It fed his conviction, voiced often in later years, that American judges tended to eschew good law in deference to their own anti-Catholic biases.

Robert Horn was the second professor to influence Blum. His civil liberties classes exposed the Jesuit to ideas that Horn later published in *Groups and the Constitution*.⁴⁴ Horn argued that freedom of association was one of the most important civil liberties guaranteed by the Constitution. The right of citizens to associate voluntarily in pursuit of a common objective was central to the modern American political experience. Horn's affirmation of pressure group politics—including, notably, the efforts of religious groups—encouraged Blum to ponder how Roman Catholics might form political associations to safeguard their rights and identity in a society where they constituted a minority of the population yet a minority large enough (roughly a quarter) to be potentially quite influential in the nation's political affairs.

Blum's doctoral dissertation was a 757-page behemoth spread over two volumes and titled "Legal Aspects of Equality and Religious Liberty." It was very topical in the wake of the *Everson* decision. Blum offered a close analysis of forty-three court cases and sought to answer the central question: "To what extent have the state and federal courts denied to individuals the

42 Michael A. Baer, Malcolm E. Jewell, and Lee Sigelman, eds., *Political Science in America: Oral Histories of a Discipline* (University of Kentucky Press, 1991), 117.

43 For historical definitions of behavioralism, see Somit and Tanenhaus, *Development of Political Science*, 176; Raymond Seidelman, *Disenchanted Realists: Political Science and the American Crisis*, 2nd ed. (State University of New York Press, 2015) 149. Behavioralism developed a heavy emphasis on quantitative methods, which Blum did not use, as well as a belief that political science should not concern itself with moral or ethical questions, a notion alien to Blum's mind.

44 Robert A. Horn, *Groups and the Constitution* (Stanford University Press, 1956).

free exercise of religion guaranteed by state and federal constitutions?”⁴⁵ He concluded that most, though not all, courts had denied individuals their constitutionally guaranteed right of religious freedom. Despite the sweeping nature of the question, Blum’s conclusion was narrowly focused. Almost all the cases under review concerned freedom of religion in welfare legislation involving the education of children, particularly the use of public funds to provide them with textbooks, school lunches, and transportation.

The cases Blum examined flowed from an earlier landmark Supreme Court case, *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925). It declared unconstitutional an Oregon law that would have effectively ended private education in the state. *Pierce* was a resounding victory for Catholic education, and it rekindled in some American Catholic hearts the hope that state aid for parochial schools might someday survive legal scrutiny.⁴⁶ These advocates sought to chip away at public opposition by steering clear of direct legislative aid to church schools and focusing instead on welfare benefits such as free textbooks and transportation, a line of legal reasoning called the “child benefit theory” and first expounded in *Cochrane v. Louisiana State Board of Education*.⁴⁷ Legal challenges arose nonetheless, leading to many of the court decisions that Blum analyzed in his dissertation. Not surprisingly, Blum praised those rulings, a minority of the total, that upheld welfare benefits, and attacked the majority that struck them down, criticizing the latter from the civil rights perspective of religious freedom. Blum argued that these adverse rulings on welfare benefits violated the children’s right to freely exercise their religion by choosing to attend a school that supported their religious faith, but that truly free exercise of religion depended upon equal application of the laws, and here the laws were not being applied equally. The state was punishing children for their religious belief by excluding them from the benefits of the law based on their membership in a sectarian group, effectively treating Catholic children and their parents as second-class citizens. Important for Blum’s reasoning was the federal case *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, which had incorporated the free exercise of religion clause of the First Amendment into the Fourteenth Amendment, thereby protecting an individual’s religious freedom against violations by the states.⁴⁸ Almost all decisions Blum

45 Virgil C. Blum, “Legal Aspects of Equality and Religious Liberty” (PhD diss., St. Louis University, 1953), 11.

46 Timothy Walch, *Parochial School: A History of American Catholic Parochial Education from Colonial Times to the Present*, 2nd ed. (National Catholic Education Association, 2016), 159.

47 *Cochrane v. Louisiana State Board of Education*, 281 U.S. 370 (1930).

48 *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, 310 U.S. 296 (1940).

analyzed for his dissertation were state decisions, but because of *Cantwell* were subject to federal civil rights interpretation.

Equally important for Blum's line of attack was the legal principle that civil rights depended not only on freedom from prior restraint but also on freedom from subsequent restraint. He pointed out that freedom of speech meant little if, after being allowed to speak your conscience, your opponent was permitted to bash your head in. For Blum, an equivalent situation occurred when legislatures or courts withheld welfare benefits from parochial schoolchildren: in effect, they were denying them state-funded textbooks and transportation simply because they exercised their religious freedom in choosing to attend a school that promoted their religious values. By making benefits contingent on students *not* choosing to attend a parochial school, the legislatures or courts violated their civil rights. In other words, the children could not exercise religious freedom because they faced the negative consequence of denial of benefits.

Blum's dissertation pointed to a growing tension between the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause in the Bill of Rights. Tension lay in how these clauses should be interpreted. Blum argued that the Founders understood establishment in the narrow sense of prohibiting a federal church. He saw the Establishment Clause as predicated on the Free Exercise Clause and therefore secondary to it in importance. Blum opposed the idea of broadening the Establishment Clause to prohibit any government aid to religion. Instead, he endorsed what he believed to have been the Founders' original vision of church-state relations in which the state accommodated religion and cooperated with churches for the public good.

Blum was alarmed by a recent legal trend, evident in the *Everson* decision, toward a very high wall of separation between church and state that stymied any further progress toward state aid for parochial education. *Everson* seemed to reject any notion that government might accommodate religion and cooperate with churches for the public good. Its doctrine of no aid turned the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses into adversaries; moreover, it guaranteed dominance of the former over the latter. Blum shared John Courtney Murray's belief that the Free Exercise Clause was the foundation of religious freedom, but that the Supreme Court was now using the Establishment Clause to turn freedom of religion into freedom *from* religion. Blum predicted accurately that the court's interpretation would work "to secularize the public schools of our nation, to remove God and all things that directly suggest God from the classrooms of our public schools."⁴⁹

49 Blum, "Legal Aspects," 749.

Blum feared the Supreme Court was moving toward outright hostility toward religion in its First Amendment interpretation. Judicial behaviorism had resonated with Blum in Pritchett's classroom, and here he saw it at work in an alarming way, with justices taking their own antireligious values and imposing them on the nation. He thought they did this, either consciously or unconsciously, because of sympathy for a pernicious ideology, first propounded by Justice Roscoe Pound in the early twentieth century, called sociological jurisprudence.⁵⁰ It favored the interpretation of laws through the lens of the social welfare needs of the community. Blum labeled this approach pragmatic, a word freighted with negative connotation, suggesting John Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism, popular among America's secular intelligentsia. Unlike the Thomistic synthesis, which discovered truth in creation's participation with an eternal natural law, pragmatism found truth in careful investigation of data and experience without reference to anything transcendent.⁵¹ For Blum, sociological jurisprudence rested on a rejection of objective norms or absolutes. Law itself became nothing more than a social institution that changed and expanded in response to new empirical situations. He believed that such an ideology ultimately produced legal opinions based on jurists' own prejudices and their personal definitions of complex terms like social welfare and religion, a baleful development to a believer in a natural law against which positive (man-made) laws should be measured.

As a new political science professor, Virgil Blum settled into the Jesuit community at Marquette University, where in May 1956 he met John Courtney Murray in person for the first time. The older Jesuit was visiting Marquette to speak at a seminar where Blum also spoke. Murray had been the leading Catholic defender in the church's war of words with its political critics in the United States. William F. Buckley later quipped that Murray was the Jesuits' intellectual Big Bertha gun occasionally rolled out to blast anti-Catholics such as the popular Protestant writer Norman Vincent Peale.⁵² Blum tracked these exchanges in the media and by the mid-1950s was poised to add his own voice to the discussion, although he would keep it focused mostly on the constitutional right of Catholic schoolchildren to receive public education funds. Unlike Murray, Blum was not an advanced theologian or political philosopher. The difference between the two men

50 On sociological jurisprudence, see Donald R. Kelly, *The Human Measure: Social Thought in the Western Legal Tradition* (Harvard University Press, 1990); Morton J. Horwitz, *The Transformation of American Law, 1870–1960: The Crisis of Legal Orthodoxy* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

51 McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 139.

52 William F. Buckley, Jr. "Nihil Obstat," *National Review*, January 28, 1961, 56.

might be that of the thinker versus the doer. Murray voiced philosophical arguments in his urbane prose. Blum echoed these in his forceful rhetorical style and carried his own pugnacious personality into the public square, where he lobbied concrete policies that drew strength from Murray's sophisticated writings.

This is not to say that Blum lacked ideas. He was not a political philosopher, but he had a good grasp of how the American system of government worked. From the beginning of his public career, Blum emphasized the role of public opinion in determining what is achieved. He sought to shape a favorable public opinion of the Catholic position, and he believed that this was best achieved through the language of civil liberties. Blum abstained from pro-Catholic arguments based on simple justice or tradition; instead, he couched everything in terms of religious freedom and constitutional rights. In Blum's view, Catholics should receive public money to educate their children not because it was the fair thing to do or because Catholics deserved it considering their record of service to the nation, but because Catholics were fully American citizens who possessed a right to educational funds through proper interpretation of the First and Fourteenth Amendments.

Blum was adamant in making constitutional arguments the basis of any exchange with critics. A Protestant organization called the Christian Action Guild challenged him to a debate on public funding for parochial schools. It was clear that they would be emphasizing the well-worn notion that Catholic schools engaged in thought control, so he refused their challenge, stating that any debate would be a waste of time if the First Amendment was not the basis of discussion.⁵³ Blum recognized earlier than many of his Catholic contemporaries that postwar America had entered an era of increasing sensitivity to civil rights, and he stressed the need for Catholics to defend their religious freedom by adopting the constitutional language and tactics of the Civil Rights Movement.

An Activist in Academic Dress

Soon after receiving his doctorate, Blum published three scholarly articles in law journals in quick succession.⁵⁴ These were the kind of publications one might expect from a new assistant professor of political science with

53 Blum to Frederick Johnson, November 22, 1961, Blum Papers, Subseries 4, Box 1, Folder "Correspondence, J, 9/1961-8/1962."

54 "Church, State, and Freedom," *Georgetown Law Review* 43, no. 1 (1954): 134; "Religious Liberty and Bus Transportation," *Notre Dame Lawyer* 30, no. 3 (1955): 384; "Religious Liberty and the Religious Garb," *University of Chicago Law Review* 22, no. 4 (1955): 875.

an interest in constitutional law and religious freedom. But at the same time, Blum began writing pieces pitched to a popular audience. He knew that few people read law reviews, and he wanted desperately to be read. He had no desire to spend his career producing specialized articles and monographs that were fated only to be perused by lawyers or dissected by graduate seminars. Blum sought a wider audience in the hope he might win it over to his point of view and stir it to action. His first work in this vein was a 22,000-word pamphlet, *Your Child's Religious Liberty*, which was a plea to Catholic parents to get involved in the democratic process.⁵⁵

Blum began submitting shorter articles to popular Catholic magazines and newspapers with titles like *The Voice of St. Jude* and *Our Sunday Visitor*. Such publications had significant circulation, but their readers were almost exclusively Catholic. Blum was therefore delighted in October 1957 when the major national magazine *US News & World Report* chose to publish an excerpt of an article that Blum had recently published in *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review*. The article presented some of the ideas from Blum's dissertation, but it also contained public policy prescriptions.⁵⁶ Blum emphasized the right of parochial schoolchildren to receive public funding to attend the school of their choice. He repeated the constitutional argument from his dissertation that unwillingness to extend educational benefits to parochial schoolchildren violated the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause by demanding that they give up their religious freedom to receive welfare benefits. He turned the tables on anti-Catholic critics by arguing that public aid to nonpublic-school children, instead of undermining democratic culture, furthered democracy by ensuring the diversity and freedom that a healthy democracy needed. Blum argued that democracy was based on the existence of alternatives and was therefore threatened by an educational system that concentrated power in state hands and forced children to conform. Such a system encouraged totalitarianism.

Blum proposed two policies that would uphold children's civil rights, both based on the idea of providing a direct subsidy to each child. The first was to extend tax credits to parents of children in nonpublic schools, thereby relieving the financial burden of paying twice to educate their children. In the second option, parents would receive tax money in the form of a certificate (also called a voucher) that they could turn over to the school of their choice. Blum argued that the certificate plan was as constitutionally sound as the GI Bill of Rights, the enormously popular postwar legislation

55 Virgil C. Blum, S.J., *Your Child's Religious Liberty* (Catechetical Guild, 1955).

56 Virgil C. Blum, S.J., "Freedom of Choice in Schools," *US News & World Report*, October 25, 1957.

that had provided veterans with money to attend colleges and universities, including schools operated by religious denominations.

The article in *US News & World Report* thrust Blum onto the national stage. He received both fan mail and hate mail. Most of the letters were positive, and he was heartened by what he interpreted as a groundswell of support for his program. It was uncommon to find a Catholic voice, let alone that of a priest, in the pages of a secular magazine. An admirer from Union Grove, Wisconsin, wrote: "The joy which every Catholic feels when a printed article by a Catholic priest appears in a public magazine knows no bounds."⁵⁷ The article also benefitted from good timing. It is doubtful whether the publishers of *US News & World Report* would have excerpted Blum's piece had the Soviets not launched their Sputnik satellite into orbit only three weeks earlier. The Soviet Union had beaten the United States to this technological achievement, and much American handwringing centered on perceived deficiencies in its own educational system.⁵⁸ *US News & World Report* probably published Blum's article because he suggested a new way to invigorate American education.

Blum cannot take credit for devising the certificate (voucher) plan. He traced the idea to two articles published separately in 1955 by University of Chicago professors Proctor Thomson and Milton Friedman.⁵⁹ Thomson never built upon his work, but Friedman would go on to feature educational vouchers in his libertarian classic, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962). Blum seems never to have met Friedman directly, and only twice did he exchange letters with the future Nobel Laureate in Economics.⁶⁰ Both men favored the voucher plan, but they approached it from different angles. The academician Friedman dealt with the political economy of vouchers while Blum the activist concentrated on the constitutional issues and sought to mobilize grassroots support.

57 Patricia Bahan to Blum, January 6, 1958, Blum Papers, Subseries 2, Box 1, Folder "Correspondence, A-C, 9/1957-8/1958."

58 Alan J. Levine, *After Sputnik: America, the World, and Cold War Conflicts* (Routledge, 2018), 61.

59 Proctor Thomson, "Educational News and Editorial Comment," *The School Review* 63 (April 1955): 189; Milton Friedman, "The Role of Government in Education," in *Economics and the Public Interest*, ed. Robert A. Solo (Rutgers University Press, 1955), 123.

60 Milton Friedman to Blum, December 19, 1957, Blum Papers, Subseries 2, Box 1, Folder "Correspondence, G-L, 9/1957-8/1958"; Blum to Friedman, November 26, 1968, Blum Papers, Subseries 2, Box 5, Folder "Correspondence, 1968-1969"; Friedman to Blum, December 26, 1968, Blum Papers, Subseries 4, Box 6, Folder "Correspondence, E-M, 9/1968-1988."

Blum's *US News* excerpt was the distillation of a book-length manuscript, *Freedom of Choice in Education*, published the following year by Macmillan.⁶¹ It offered an in-depth justification for vouchers. Blum asked the Jewish intellectual Will Herberg, author of the recent bestseller *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, to write the preface. Herberg agreed but with some reservations. A firm believer in pluralism in education, he shared Blum's belief that nonpublic schools played a vital role in American democracy; but as a self-described conservative, Herberg believed that Blum's plan was too radical for widespread acceptance, concluding: "It is not (unless I am gravely mistaken) a real possibility."⁶² Nonetheless, he wrote the preface, downplaying any disagreements with Blum. Herberg's objection was a common refrain that rang in Blum's ears throughout his career. Many others would also dismiss the certificate and tax credit plans on the grounds that they were just not politically realistic.

Freedom of Choice in Education remained Blum's most well-researched and documented contribution to the literature on school choice. Most of his subsequent writings were shorter pieces. Blum produced hundreds of articles, speeches, and newspaper columns about educational topics, mostly having to do with public funding for children attending nonpublic schools. He published additional books in later years, but they tended to be glorified pamphlets, averaging perhaps a hundred pages in length and lacking citations. Over time Blum resembled a pamphleteer of the American Revolutionary era firing off his literary broadsides into the public square.

Unfortunately, Blum's salvoes sometimes hit friendly targets. Two of his early articles annoyed staff at the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), an ancestor of today's United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Blum had drawn the ire of Monsignor William McManus, assistant director of the education department, when he criticized President Eisenhower's 1956 White House Conference on Education. McManus had served on the conference committee. The second article cast shade on the NCWC for not confronting POAU at every turn and wresting control of public opinion on the education debate, implying that another organization was needed to do the job. The NCWC shared Virgil Blum's hope that Catholics could win their rightful access to public funding for education; however, in the delicate political climate of the 1950s, it viewed Blum's voice as more of a threat than a boon.

61 Virgil C. Blum, S.J., *Freedom of Choice in Education* (The Macmillan Company, 1958).

62 Will Herberg to Blum, November 3, 1957, Blum Papers, Subseries 2, Box 1, Folder "Correspondence, G-L, 9/1957-8/1958."

The NCWC found itself walking a tightrope. On the one hand, it was obliged to vocalize the Church's claim to a share of educational funds; but on the other hand, it realized that parochial education was a hot-button issue for many Protestants and did not want to undermine its own efforts by unduly provoking the opposition. The NCWC chose a quieter, behind-the-scenes approach that seemed to pay off in 1958 with passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). The NDEA was a response to the Soviet launching of Sputnik, and it included federal loans to nonpublic schools for instructional equipment and laboratory remodeling. It marked a victory for the NCWC even though it was only emergency legislation and therefore did not represent an ongoing commitment to federal financial support. Blum's bellicosity seemed poised to undo the church's quiet efforts in progress. NCWC Attorney George Reed summed up Blum as "an over-zealous Jesuit who has no legal background, but who considers himself and is considered by many as an outstanding authority on the Church-State relationship."⁶³ To Blum the NCWC staff was timid and defensive in temperament, failing to fully appreciate the constitutional rights of American Catholics and the importance of building a strong public opinion in favor of those rights.

The NCWC's legal department was concerned about Blum's lack of legal training because he couched his arguments in constitutional terms and often referred to court precedents in his polemics. In the wake of Blum's breakout article in *US News & World Report*, the department analyzed the case law that Blum cited to support his claim that the certificate plan faced no real constitutional difficulties. Reed and William Consedine, the NCWC's chief counsel, concluded that these cases could not be applied as Blum was applying them.⁶⁴ Blum may have possessed a doctorate in political science with an emphasis on constitutional law and civil liberties, but he had never attended law school. His dissertation at St. Louis University was essentially a legal treatise, and yet his dissertation committee contained no jurists, being filled instead with professors of political science and public administration. In other words, the legal foundations on which Blum drew his easy conclusions were not firm.

63 George Reed to Monsignor Carroll, November 30, 1956, Box 33, Folder 10 (Information Media Publications, 1956), United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Office of the General Secretary, American Catholic History Research Center, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC (hereafter ACUA).

64 Mr. Consedine to Monsignor Hochwalt and Father Hurley, November 5, 1957, and Mr. Reed to Mr. Consedine, November 5, 1957, Box 4, Folder 37 (Blum, Virgil C., S.J., 1955–1966), USCCB Education Department, ACUA.

The NCWC lawyers were especially concerned by how Blum conflated the certificate plan with the GI Bill of Rights. From a constitutional perspective, the two policies were very different, the GI Bill being based on an obligation owed for service to the state while the certificate plan rested on a debatable interpretation of the religious liberty of schoolchildren. The NCWC was not averse to the certificate plan in principle. It recognized the plan's simplicity and popular appeal, but it concluded that the necessary constitutional groundwork and public opinion were not yet in place. Echoing the concern of Will Herberg, the NCWC deemed vouchers too radical for the present moment.

The Society of Jesus granted Blum the freedom to pursue his educational advocacy work, seeing it as a form of apostolic service. Blum's primary *status* (assignment) as a Jesuit was to teach political science classes at Marquette and to participate in university life. If that work did not suffer, he was encouraged to take an active role in public life. Blum's superiors permitted him to travel for speaking engagements, and they allowed him to use the honoraria he received to print additional copies of his writings for widespread distribution. In the 1960s, the Jesuits granted Blum the use of his own telephone in his office so that he could stay in touch with a host of contacts lobbying for educational reform.⁶⁵

Blum was essentially working two full-time jobs—professor of political science and political activist. His workday in these early years began at 7:30 in the morning and continued until midnight, sometimes without a break for lunch.⁶⁶ He was not necessarily alone in these exertions. A Jesuit contemporary commented years later about the Jesuits of the 1940s and 1950s: "Well, most of us were still fairly young, we had plenty of energy, and apostolic opportunities seemed endless. Perhaps we were workaholics. It doesn't seem to me that we suffered from the self-questioning that came in with the sixties."⁶⁷

Blum wanted to fight against the nation's drift toward secularism, and he was dismayed to discover some of his own coreligionists aiding the secularization process. He disdained John F. Kennedy despite the Massachusetts senator becoming the first Catholic president of the United States. Mark Massa has suggested that Kennedy's speech before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association in September 1960 marked a turning point in the

65 Blum to Rev. John P. Raynor, S.J., December 6, 1965, Blum Papers, Subseries 1, Box 2, Folder "Correspondence, Raynor, Rev. John S.J., 1965–1967."

66 Blum to Dorothy Strake, November 17, 1965, Blum Papers, Subseries 4, Box 5, Folder "Correspondence, S-Z, 9/1965–8/1968."

67 Leonard, *The Letter Carrier*, 131, Subseries 2, Box 2, Folder "Correspondence, Incoming and Outgoing, 9/1958–8/1959."

religious trajectory of the country. Kennedy embraced a strict separation of church and state and encouraged secularization by portraying religious belief as a completely private affair.⁶⁸ Blum had joined other Catholics in criticizing Kennedy even before the Houston speech. Senator Kennedy made clear in a *Look* magazine article in 1959 that he supported the idea of auxiliary aid (e.g., transportation, textbooks) to Catholic schoolchildren as defined by the *Everson* decision, but that he was a firm believer in the strict separation of church and state as expressed in the exclusion of nonpublic schools from federal funding measures. One of Blum's Catholic admirers in Texas, the owner of a Dallas car dealership, wrote: "I wish some erudite person, proficient with a pen (yourself for instance) would take the 'pip-squeak' apart."⁶⁹

Blum criticized the separationist Kennedy in an interview for *The True Voice* in Omaha that was picked up and disseminated by the National Catholic News Service, but he held his heaviest fire for a wider outlet. After candidate Kennedy held a news conference on September 8, 1960, proposing a federal educational spending program that pointedly excluded nonpublic-school children, Blum prepared a withering rebuke for the *New York Times*. Cardinal Spellman of New York, the nation's leading Catholic churchman, intervened through his archdiocesan secretary of education to have Blum withdraw the letter, which Blum did, undoubtedly with reluctance.⁷⁰

The Jesuit also saw the specter of secularization lurking in a growing debate among Catholics around the question of whether parochial schooling was even desirable anymore. Mary Perkins Ryan launched the conversation with *Are Parochial Schools the Answer?* to which her own response was an emphatic no. Ryan interpreted Catholic schools in the spirit of *aggiornamento* (bringing the church up to date) that animated the Second Vatican Council. She saw these schools as relics of a bygone era, the reaction to an anti-Catholicism that no longer held sway in American society. Parochial schools shored up the siege mentality of the American Catholic ghetto, a mindset that ran counter to the spirit of Vatican II. Ryan held great hope that Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) classes would adequately form young Catholics who attended public schools.⁷¹ Blum's

68 Mark S. Massa, *Catholics and American Culture* (Crossroad, 1999), 128.

69 Ed Maher to Blum, February 20, 1959, Blum Papers, Subseries 4, Box 21, Folder "Correspondence, Maher, Edward, 1958-1960."

70 Blum to Monsignor John Voight, October 17, 1960, Blum Papers, Subseries 2, Box 4, Folder "Correspondence, M, 9/1960-8/1961."

71 Mary Perkins Ryan, *Are Parochial Schools the Answer? Catholic Education in the Light of the Council* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 40.

unhappiness grew when Monsignor James Donohue, education secretary at the United States Catholic Conference, shared Ryan's enthusiasm for CCD classes and published an article in *America* magazine arguing that Catholics should phase out their own school systems and turn the money over to African American schools in the inner cities.⁷² Blum's response was *Catholic Education: Survival or Demise?* in which he argued passionately for parochial schools and criticized the notion that CCD classes were an adequate substitute in forming Catholic youth. He believed that by abolishing their school systems, Catholics would merely be trading their own ghetto for a secular ghetto. Critical for Blum was the connection between Catholic schools and the religious life. He viewed vibrant school systems as an essential seedbed for religious vocations.⁷³

The Culture Warrior

When Virgil Blum replied to Father Brown's invitation from the ISO in 1959, his work as an activist was taking off. Blum had been contacted the year before by Catholic parents from the St. Louis area who had formed a lay pressure group, The Fair Share Plan, to lobby for public funding for nonpublic schoolchildren. Blum responded enthusiastically.⁷⁴ He guided the group into a new identity as Citizens for Educational Freedom (CEF), and he served as its mentor and chief strategist for the next fifteen years. Over that time, CEF established chapters across the country and a headquarters in Washington, DC. Although it remained a predominantly Catholic group—and became pigeonholed as such by politicians—Blum encouraged non-Catholics to join and to assume leadership positions in the organization. In so doing, he actualized ideas from Robert Horn's civil liberties classes at the University of Chicago. Blum envisioned a coalition of parents forming a political organization that lobbied in the public square to safeguard their right to choose how to educate their children.

Blum entered public life with a handful of political verities in mind that remained with him to the end: interest groups drive US democracy and shape public opinion; effective interest groups are grassroots efforts;

72 James C. Donohue, "New Priorities in Catholic Education," *America*, April 13, 1968, 476.

73 Virgil C. Blum, *Catholic Education: Survival or Demise?* (Argus Communications Co., 1969), 19.

74 Blum's response has survived: "You [sic] losing no time in organizing a private group to secure equal rights of children whose parents elect to send them to independent schools—nice going. Is this the idea that you wish to try out on me? Tell me more about your organization. . . ."; Blum to Martin Duggan, September 30, 1958, Blum Papers, Subseries 4, Box 19, Folder "Correspondence, Duggan, Martin & Mae, 1958–1973."

jurists look to the public opinion shaped by interest groups when deciding how to rule on the constitutionality of legislation. He concluded that the fate of Catholic education and the provision of public funding for nonpublic-school children would ultimately be decided in the courts. He believed that American Catholics deserved the same constitutional freedoms as any other minority group in society, especially freedom of religion as expressed in the right of parents to receive public funding to educate their children in God-centered schools.

At the heart of Blum's concern was the threat posed by secularism and the process of secularization at work in the United States. The issue was cultural as much as social. His experiences in the 1950s and 1960s prepared him to participate in the culture wars that flared up conspicuously in the following two decades. James Davison Hunter proposed the culture war thesis in his 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. Building on the work of Robert Wuthnow, Hunter analyzed contemporary cultural conflict in the United States and attributed it to two contending systems of moral understanding. Adherents of cultural orthodoxy were committed to timeless truths rooted in an external, definable, and transcendent authority. Cultural progressives, on the other hand, saw moral authority in the rationalism and subjectivism of the modern age in which truth is a continuously unfolding process. Hunter tracked the conflict between these worldviews in battles over family, art, education, law, and politics. Although critics pushed back against Hunter's thesis as one might expect with any bold generalization, it remains a useful idea, especially with renewed cultural conflict in the twenty-first century.⁷⁵

Virgil Blum's enduring faith in the Thomistic synthesis placed him firmly in the ranks of the culturally orthodox. He saw the defense of nonpublic education through constitutional rights as key to preserving a true democratic culture in America, one grounded in transcendent principles and nurtured by a state that cooperated with churches for the common good. The strengthening of Catholic education always remained at the forefront of Blum's thought, but he was very open to interdenominational alliances. He did not embrace the narrow anti-Protestantism that afflicted some American Catholics, which was surprising given his upbringing in Defiance but indicative of how fearfully he viewed secularism. Blum

75 James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (Basic Books, 1991). His critics replied with *Cultural Wars in American Politics: Critical Reviews of a Popular Myth*, ed. Rhys H. Williams (Aldine De Gruyter, 1997). For further discussion and Hunter's response, see James Davison Hunter and Alan Wolfe, *Is There a Culture War? A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life* (Brookings Institution Press, 2006).

looked beyond the traditional Protestant-Catholic antagonism to confront a perceived drift in American society toward an absolutist secular state that used the public schools to indoctrinate future generations into believing that their rights came from the state and not from God. Maintaining God-centered schools through programs such as vouchers or tax credits provided a counterweight to keep the United States on the right course.

By the 1970s, Blum was embracing a more explicit role as a culture warrior. Years of lobbying by CEF had failed to bear the anticipated fruits. The Jesuit blamed an underlying anti-Catholicism in American society. To expose and uproot this prejudice and safeguard the freedoms of Catholics, Blum founded the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights in 1973. His association with the Catholic League has largely been forgotten, the organization having been identified for many years with its longstanding president, Bill Donahue. But it was Virgil Blum of the Society of Jesus who founded the Catholic League and led it for its first eighteen years. Blum saw secular humanism at the root of the new anti-Catholicism afflicting America. He hoped the league might rally a robust populist movement of Catholic democrats around its banner, forming a pressure group that could shape American culture. Why this failed to happen and how Blum's efforts brought him into tension with his own religious superiors is a story for another day.

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