



# STUDIES

IN  
THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

# IES

Clenched Fist or Open Palm?

*Five Jesuit Perspectives on Pluralism*

PETER MCDONOUGH

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Peter McDonough

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STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

37/2 · SUMMER 2005

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## *The first word . . .*

The ice had but recently broken up on the Hudson River, when a small cortege made its way through the gates of St. Andrew on Hudson with the earthly remains of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. It was Easter Week of 1955, yes, fifty years ago. In one of those inconsequential decisions with classic unforeseen consequences, the rector, Lincoln Walsh, decided to let the juniors go ahead with their plans for a villa day rather than stay home to attend the burial of an obscure French Jesuit living alone in an apartment in New York. The novice master, William Gleason, concurred and let the novices have one of their rare "long walks" away from the property. The Lenten discipline of the old observance had made its inevitable mark on community morale, as had the relentless upstate New York winter, and they judged, probably quite accurately, that canceling the holiday would cause more harm than good. Years later, as Teilhard's reputation grew, some would surmise that he was buried quietly, as though in disgrace, attended by only a small, discreet band of his brother Jesuits. As one who arrived at St. Andrew's the next year, I can testify that it was a nonevent in the folklore of the community. No one mentioned it, or thought about it, and this in an environment where the "secundi" eagerly passed along the most insignificant tidbit of house history to the "primi."

Other misunderstandings over the next few years gave rise to further speculation of his being treated poorly by the Jesuit family. The brother in charge of the cemetery, not knowing the practice of the French family names, arranged for the inscription on the headstone assuming "Teilhard" as the first name and omitting "Petrus" altogether. (He was not alone. One of the larger residences at Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley is still called Chardin House.) No one recognized the mistake until sometime later when his fame had spread, and then the marker was quietly corrected. For years, those who found problems with both his writings and their mode of publication outside the customary channels of Society censorship remained uneasy about his living outside a community. Those closer to the scene realized that his apartment was a temporary arrangement provided by superiors while sections of the St. Ignatius residence on Park Avenue were being renovated. The stories grew simply because so few Jesuits knew him during his lifetime.

Not long after his death, as *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu* grew in popularity, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin became one of the most widely known Jesuits of the twentieth century. These recollections came streaming through my mind as I read Peter McDonough's observa-



tion that some Jesuits are better known and appreciated outside the Society and the Church than within. Some also increase in stature only after their deaths, when scholars have had the opportunity to sift through their works and see what they were really up to. Here's an interesting game to play sometime at liquid Vespers. Ask who are the ten foremost American Jesuits still at work, or to open the field a bit, of the last half of the twentieth century. Chances are that the list will be dominated by those engaged in ecclesiastical disciplines, and most of those seminary professors known to generations of scholastics. Few of us know very much about the biologists, historians, diplomats, lawyers, literary scholars, or sociologists among our number, much less the ichthyologists or theoretical physicists, yet these scholars may be precisely the bridge builders to the wider culture that makes the contribution of the Society of Jesus unique at this moment in the Church's history.

Although he had achieved substantial recognition in scientific circles, much of Teilhard's bridge building occurred after his death. His was a season for bridge building, and as such it must be admitted that his season was quite different from ours. At mid-century, the mass movements of armies during World War II, the birth of the United Nations and the rise of instantaneous communication through radio, newsreels and the airplane had truly shrunk the world. Television was in its infancy, and Marshall McLuhan, soon to be hailed as the prophet of the communications age and coiner of the catchphrase "the global village," first reached notoriety with the publication of *The Mechanical Bride* in 1951. With his work in Egypt, Europe, China, and then the United States, Teilhard embodied this change in our perception of global citizenship in a world suddenly grown much smaller.

The Church itself became self-consciously engaged in bridge building. Pope John XXIII succeeded Pius XII in 1958, and before long preparations began for the ecumenical council that would finally meet in 1963. Emboldened by Pope John's notion of *aggiornamento*, the council fathers tried to engage in dialogue with the contemporary world, with other Christian communions, and indeed with non-Christians as well. The Eurocentric Latin Church of Rome not only embraced local churches with their many diverse cultures and languages, but it also found a certain level of comfort with an autonomous secular society and the varied forms of governments that had evolved in the modern world. The Church and the secular state need not be antagonists; in fact they have a great deal to offer each other.

Teilhard's status as a priest-scientist made him a translator between two often antagonistic cultures or religion and science. During those years, science was hot, and so were reflections about its importance. The Russians put up Sputnik in 1957, the United States countered with its communications satellite Telstar in 1960, and an energetic young president of the United States goaded the scientific imagination with the prom-



ise to put a man on the moon before the close of the decade. The physicist-turned-novelist C. P. Snow was warning us about the rapid development of phenomena that he described in his *Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1959). Teilhard's scientific achievement, coupled with his poetic, if not mystical, writing provided a glorious bridge between Snow's two cultures, which he defined—perhaps simplistically, as some have later contended—as the literary and the scientific. To keep the chronology in focus, Harper put out English versions of *The Phenomenon of Man* in 1959, and *The Divine Milieu* the following year.

Teilhard represented in his own life the kind of catholic wholeness that scholars strive for. It seems sublimely fitting that as he articulated his own reflections, he stressed unities and reconciliations, from the combinations of molecules into amino acids to the rise of human thought in the noosphere, until all the world's energies converged at its Omega Point in Christ: "The universe fulfilling itself in a synthesis of centres in perfect conformity with the laws of union. God, the Centre of centres." His scientific work, coupled with his lyrical reflections on it, truly enriched our understanding of Ignatius's meditations on the Incarnation and the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love. His thought presented a splendid vision of unity in all God's creation in language beautifully attuned to modern readers in a scientific age.

Then something soured, not all at once but gradually and tragically. We once thought that all this conversation would lead to reconciliation and convergence, but when we grew weary with words, we found that we preferred our customary comfortable divisions. Teilhard, bridge building, and dialogue fell from fashion, and we entered into a new age of contentiousness, almost as though demolishing those newly built bridges had become a universally accepted strategy for protecting one's tribal or personal integrity. In its worst forms, various fundamentalisms—Muslim and Jewish, Hindu, Catholic and Protestant—have reemerged, and hurling anathemas or worse at those who disagree has once again become God's work. Personal, ideological, and class vilification have become the dominant rhetorical style.

What happened? Many things, no one of which can be singled out as the sole determinate cause. As the sixties sputtered forward, we had the Vietnam War. The issues were complex, but the media simplified matters for the nightly news by caricaturing the conflict as a pitched battle between hard-hats and hippies, hawks, and doves. Common ground and complexity had little room in the local evening news. "The Pill" brought a sexual revolution, and then subsequent waves of different forms of feminism and more recently the gay-rights movement have shaken many of our old conceptual categories. Again in their simplified form on television news shows these issues have driven people to the edges where they can indulge in doomsday fantasies without separating valid issues from nonsense.



In the Church, we surely had points of friction during the Council and its aftermath, but the controversies surrounding *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 opened the fault lines into a crevasse. It revealed two very different modes of being Catholic, and each side felt the other endangered the survival of the Church. With the rise of the new religious fundamentalisms, as societies at large succumbed to dogmatic secularism as the new orthodoxy, in the minds of many on both sides faith and reason regressed into faith vs. reason; church and state became church vs. state. In religious circles as well as in the disheartening politics of the red-state/blue-state polarity, it is simply enough to brand persons as liberal or conservative in order to reject whatever they stand for. What passes for balance in the media today consists of little more than having ideologues from opposite camps shouting slogans at each other.

While McLuhan thought that spread of worldwide communication would create a global village, in fact the multiplication of media has had the opposite effect. People who get their news from Al Jazeera know that everything on Voice of America is a pernicious lie. Those who watch Fox News dismiss everything from CBS and the *New York Times* as liberal bias. One's point of view and mind-set make facts irrelevant to the discussion: facts can be interpreted and discussed; challenging one's mind-set cuts to the core of one's being. In this climate one cannot even discuss a movie like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* or Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* without the conversation becoming a challenge to uncover the other's liberal, conservative, anti-Semitic, or pro-choice biases. Both sides see themselves as continually victimized by a hostile, powerful, and devious adversary. They must take arms against a sea of troubles and let the bodies fall where they may.

Without question, we've gone through a startling and unpleasant shift in rhetorical styles over the last thirty years. As the title of this issue of STUDIES suggests, we've traded the open palm for a clenched fist. Our contributor, Peter McDonough, a Jesuit watcher from his boyhood days at Brooklyn Prep, has assembled his own truly diverse list of remarkable Jesuits and has sifted out their varied contributions to help us understand how the extraordinary shifts in rhetoric have shaped dialogue in both the Church and civil society not only over the past few decades but over the centuries. One is Spanish: Balthasar Gracián, a seventeenth-century political philosopher, gadfly and all-purpose cynic who made the twentieth-century bestseller list of the *New York Times*. The rest are Americans. Two passed from the scene within living memory: Walter Ong, a scholar of literature and culture, and John Courtney Murray, a dogmatic theologian whose interests led him to Church-state relations. Still productive are Daniel Berrigan, poet and social activist, and John O'Malley, a distinguished renaissance historian.



Rather than provide a systematic commentary on each author, McDonough discusses the wider issues raised by prevalent rhetorical styles and perceptual frameworks and shows how the contribution of each of these men helps us understand the building and demolition of bridges in our own lifetimes. Like Teilhard, they contribute to the conversation from their own diverse backgrounds. It's a challenging essay, but one that promises enormous rewards.

*Richard A. Blake, S.J.*

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# CLENCHED FIST OR OPEN PALM?

## *Five Jesuit Perspectives on Pluralism*

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*The division between agonistic and irenic styles of settling differences goes back a long way in the history of the Society. Traditionally, the distinction has reflected a cultural separation between masculine and feminine identities, between the Church Militant and the Church Maternal. This essay considers various Jesuits who have taken up the theme in writing or expressed it in action. Changes in the treatment of the confrontational/conciliatory split emerge, particularly as we move from John Courtney Murray and Walter Ong to the recent work of the historian John O'Malley. These changes have implications for the dynamics of reform in Catholicism.*

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## I. Introduction

### The Jesuit Rash

"Tell me, Professor McDonough," the dean asked from behind her desk, "why do you study Jesuits?"

It had been a long day. The members of the search committee wanted to hear about my work in Brazil and Spain. Instead I gave a talk about a study of the Society of Jesus I hoped to get started. They made a few inquiries. None of my answers were very convincing, even to myself.

I paused for a moment. "Because if I didn't study the Jesuits," I replied, "I think I would break out in a rash."

"Oh, my," the dean said (she was English), salting alarm with drollery. "Don't do that."



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Britannic composure one, Irish impulsiveness zero. I didn't get the job. A few years later my first book on the Jesuits appeared—"Peter's midlife crisis book," a colleague observed. Then, ten years later, another book, written with Gene Bianchi, came out, this one comparing Jesuits and former Jesuits.

I'm still not sure why I study Jesuits. Two things come to mind, however. One is that I attended Jesuit schools for a total of nine years. I graduated from Brooklyn Prep (now Medgar Evers Community College) with the class of '57, from Saint Louis University in 1961, followed, after a couple of years in the Peace Corps, by a one-year stint of graduate study at Georgetown. These nine years are a treasure house. Dan Berrigan brought me to downtown Manhattan to meet Dorothy Day and shoot hoops with the Puerto Rican kids. When Dylan Thomas and the Beats were the rage, Walter Ong urged me to pay attention to the metaphysical poets. "Walter has a hundred ideas a day," the brethren used to say of him, "and ninety-nine of them are crap. But one is usually a humdinger." And so on.

In the second place, a good deal of my professional life has been devoted to studying authoritarian regimes and their undoing. It would be misleading to suppose that there is a straightforward connection between the Catholic condition and authoritarian politics, just as it would be odd to equate what the Church has been going through since Vatican II with democratization. But there are some parallels. These rough analogies, together with reentry into the Jesuit world after a long absence, produced a shock of recognition.

Transitologists customarily look at dual regime transformations. How do you get from non-democratic to democratic politics? And, in the case of communist regimes, how do you get from command to market economies? Alongside these political and economic shifts, there is a third dynamic, less commonly studied, having to do with cultural upheavals. These are sea changes in values and beliefs that condition the prospects of the more clearly tangible transitions. This is the sort of metamorphosis that attracted me to research on Catholicism and, because I had some experience with them, to the Jesuits in particular.



## **The Cast of Characters: Five Leading Players and Their Roles**

I am going to start by discussing three Jesuits—John Courtney Murray, Daniel Berrigan, and Walter Ong—whose names are known to most American Jesuits. I am also going to introduce Baltasar Gracián, a seventeenth-century Jesuit and a landmark of Spanish letters, who is all but unknown among English speakers.

Why Gracián? The quick answer is that his harsh realism about the ways of the world acts as a counterweight to the generally uplifting though far from uncritical tenor of what Murray et al. have to offer. We will see that there are stronger reasons for including Gracián, but this one can do for now.

I am going to conclude with a look at the recent work of John O'Malley, who may be better known among Jesuits for his research into the early history of the Society than for his ruminations on the course of Catholicism and of the "cultures of the West."

All these men bring distinctive approaches to a common problem: change in slow-moving institutions, including the Church. Gracián lays down a baseline. He is a thoroughgoing fatalist when it comes to changing anything. Next to him, all the others look optimistic, in varying degrees.

"Change in slow-moving institutions" is a broad topic. The significance of these five Jesuits, and the links between them, have less to do with how they might be arrayed at various points along a progressive-conservative continuum than with the specific facets of change they address. They view the same syndrome from different angles.

Murray's defense of pluralism concentrated on the outer, political perimeter of Catholicism. The Church could live with a variety of regimes—even, as Murray contended, with democracy. Issues involving the separation of church and state, though controversial, do not reach into the moral sanctum of the Church. Gracián sticks with this level, too, though he is more interested in interpersonal politics than the affairs of state.

Questions of social justice and welfare go deeper. Certain principles are to be upheld regardless of the political dispensation the Church happens to be operating under. Prudence if you can, prophecy if you must. A commitment to good works and an uncom-



promising stand against structural sin may rile benefactors and enemies alike. But in many cases social justice is a matter of degree, of what works, and less than utterly divisive. It is something that ecclesiastical authorities themselves can have a hand in implementing, and it has ample scriptural backing. This is the field that Dan Berrigan, and others less radical than he, have cultivated.

Both politics and social justice are usually construed as outside matters. For the most part, they are within the zone of honest disagreement rather than dissent. It is a third tier that comes close to the inner workings of the Church.

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*An instructive analogy for the political, social, and psychosexual tiers of Catholicism may be plate tectonics.*

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Moral issues, defined as those concerning sexuality and the role of women, cut to the quick of institutional Catholicism. Traditionally, the Church has viewed the family in much the same way as Marxism understood class. It is the center of a hierarchical system from which cultural beliefs and ancillary organizations

(like political arrangements) radiate. Sex held it all together. "The church," as Walter Ong put it, "is sexually defined."<sup>1</sup>

Held it together metaphorically at least. Loosely in fact. An instructive analogy for the political, social, and psychosexual tiers of Catholicism may be plate tectonics. The plates can drift apart, they can slam together, they can slide one on top of the other, or they move back and forth alongside one another. The shifting of one plate affects the others, but there is no reason to suppose that the plates should fit together in any particular way. Each of the Jesuits discussed here tends to focus on a single tier: Ong on sexuality, Murray on politics, Berrigan on social action, for example. The trick is to pick out the cross-level connections.

Is there a recurring element that runs through the varied insights of these Jesuits as they contemplate one or another layer? My argument is that the thread connecting not only Ong, Murray, and Berrigan, but these men to Gracián and O'Malley as well, concerns the distinction between "agonistic" and "irenic"—in English,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 172. The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance offered by Mr. Douglas McFerran.



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the difference between confrontational versus conciliatory—styles of settling conflicts. The distinction goes back to the roots of the Jesuit tradition. It is bound up with the supreme importance of rhetoric as a device for combat and persuasion—the “clenched fist,” as the ancients wrote, or the “open palm.”<sup>2</sup>

The divide has more than antiquarian interest. It is connected with what have been viewed as characteristically masculine and feminine traits and identities. All of the Jesuits under consideration, save one, partition the world in the essentially binary terms laid out by the agonistic/irenic split. But O'Malley alters the divide itself, and his revision has consequences for scenarios of reform in Catholicism.

If the agonistic/irenic theme forms a leitmotiv across the work and writings of several leading Jesuits, it is important to keep two reservations in mind. First, as I noted, they approach it in different ways and, second, the theme is more central for some, like Ong, than it is for others, like Berrigan. The agonistic/irenic tension matters because it is a ground bass running through the ideas of men who otherwise go their own ways. It matters, too, because this apparently common-sensical division, so long a part of the mental furniture of Catholicism, shows signs of coming undone. It is a form of symbolic capital, uniting beliefs and images of authority, that no longer seems as compelling as it once did. One of the “metaphors we live by” has begun to show its age.<sup>3</sup>

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*O'Malley et al. are bellwethers rather than issuers of manifestos. Instead of staking out doctrinal ideas or piling on empirical data, they point toward shifts in sensibility, changes in the slant of light, that transform the way we see.*

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<sup>2</sup>John Pitcher, introduction to Francis Bacon, *The Essays*, ed. John Pitcher (London: Penguin, 1985), 15. A good statement of the difference made pertinent to contemporary Catholicism is the contrast drawn by Garry Wills between Cardinals Ratzinger and Bernandin in his “A Tale of Two Cardinals,” *New York Review of Books* (April 26, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).



So, my portraits of these Jesuits all circle around the age-old division between agonistic and irenic ways of being Catholic. There is also a plotline to this commonality. Though Murray was pretty solidly in the agonistic camp (as were those, like Gracián, who went before him), his penchant for political moderation indicates that he was hardly inflexible about it. His ambivalence foreshadows the transformation of the Church Militant into an institution divided within itself. By the time we get to Ong, we encounter a figure who realized that the sexual hierarchy associated with the agonistic/irenic mindset was simply no longer tenable. O'Malley takes the discussion a step further. He extends and blurs the erstwhile division between male and female.

This evolution may seem intangible. The story takes on heft, however, once we realize that O'Malley et al. are bellwethers rather than issuers of manifestos. Instead of staking out doctrinal ideas or piling on empirical data, they point toward shifts in sensibility, changes in the slant of light, that transform the way we see.

### Some Notes on the Cast

As a guide for the perplexed, here is some background information on the cast of characters.

Born in 1921 in Minnesota but raised in Syracuse, New York, Daniel Berrigan was ordained a Jesuit priest in 1952. His first book, *Time without Number*, won the Lamont Poetry Prize. His later exploits as a peace activist during the Vietnam War landed him, along with his brother Philip, on the cover of *Time* and, on various occasions, in prison. Berrigan resides at the West Side Jesuit community in Manhattan. He continues to write and minister to the gravely ill.<sup>4</sup>

Born in 1601 in provincial Spain, Baltasar Gracián y Morales entered the Society in 1619 and professed solemn vows in 1635. In addition to serving with valor as a military chaplain, he had a distinguished career teaching moral theology and Sacred Scripture at

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<sup>4</sup>David Gonzalez presents a perceptive update on the work of Berrigan and his colleagues in "Giving Up Lives of Comfort for a Chance to Serve," *New York Times* (December 14, 2004).



various *colegios* before finally running afoul of his superiors. He died in 1658.<sup>5</sup>

John Courtney Murray (1904–67) earned his doctorate in theology from the Gregorian University in 1937 and spent most of his career teaching the subject to Jesuit seminarians at Woodstock College in Maryland. He also served as editor of *Theological Studies*. Kept from publishing for a time on church-state relations, Murray eventually acted as a *peritus*, at the invitation of Cardinal Spellman, at Vatican II.

Born in 1927, John O'Malley entered the Society in 1946 and earned his Ph.D. in history from Harvard. After teaching for several years at the University of Detroit, he moved to Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass., where he is Distinguished Professor of Church History.

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1912, Walter Ong obtained his doctorate in English literature from Harvard in 1955, after finishing his master's thesis at Saint Louis University under the tutelage of Marshall McLuhan. His work on Renaissance rhetoric earned him the presidency of the Modern Language Association, amid several other honors. Ong taught at Saint Louis University for thirty-six years, and died in 2003, after seeing his books translated into numerous languages.

## II. Dealing with Pluralism

### Camelot, the Council, and Beyond

John Courtney Murray appeared on the cover of *Time* on December 12, 1960, about a month after John Kennedy had been elected to the presidency of the United States. Murray's renown rested on his capacity to persuade Catholics and non-Catholics alike that religious tolerance and political pluralism were acceptable and even praiseworthy in the eyes of a tradition not remarkable for

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<sup>5</sup> It is instructive to contrast the fortunes of Gracián with the tumultuous life of his longer-lived near contemporary, the Portuguese-Brazilian Jesuit António Vieira (1608–97), who almost certainly knew of his Spanish peer. A respected diplomat, Vieira gained fame as a preacher. His two-hundred-odd sermons are part of the canon of Luso-Brazilian literature. See *Sermões*, ed. José Barbosa Machado (Lisbon: Dom Quixote, 2003).



promoting either. The urbane Murray bore himself with the aplomb of a celebrity intellectual. "He entered a room," a Jesuit colleague recalled, "like an ocean liner."<sup>6</sup> The aura surrounding Murray continued to grow through the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), where his advocacy of "the American proposition" was ratified in the Declaration on Religious Liberty.

The eminence accorded Murray reflected the high point of the American century in Catholicism. An immigrant church had come of age. Educationally accomplished and economically successful, American Catholics were reaching for intellectual respectability and the upper echelons of political power. The Camelot of the Kennedys coincided with the beginning of Vatican II.

Even before Murray died in 1967, however, there were signs that fortress Catholicism was crumbling. The cultural revolution and the feminist movement were in full spate, and the gay-rights movement was just around the corner. Priests and nuns left religious life in droves. By the end of the century, Jesuits in India would outnumber their peers in the United States. Catholicism's demographic center of gravity shifted toward the South.

The pluralist settlement that Murray propounded stayed in place but internally the American church was split by ideological quarrels and, with the dawn of the new millennium, by sexual scandal. Catholicism began to look like a wobbly colossus. "Gentlemen," Murray intoned on his return from Vatican II, "we have just cleared the church's decks of certain nineteenth-century business. We have not even begun to deal with the issues of the twentieth century."<sup>7</sup> Murray seems to have

been as worried about reforming the Church on the inside as about consolidating its opening toward the world. Whatever his intentions, Murray unlocked the floodgates to changes that overtook his vision

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*Confusion arose after Vatican II not only about what to do but also about what to be, especially among the clergy.*

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Peter McDonough, *Men Astutely Trained: A History of the Jesuits in the American Century* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 227.

<sup>7</sup> Peter McDonough, "On Hierarchies of Conflict and the Possibility of Civil Discourse: Variations on a Theme by John Courtney Murray," *Journal of Church and State* 36 (1994): 115.



of reasoned debate among statesmanlike leaders. His legacy was ambiguous. The pluralism he espoused not only altered relations between church, state, and the larger society, toward greater tolerance. It also opened Catholicism to rival currents within its own walls.

## Reaction or Accommodation?

Murray is a transitional figure on the way to a more contentious Catholicism. His contribution was seminal but incomplete, and it is this incompleteness that had made his thinking so fertile. Pluralism hinged on discussion, and discussion was open-ended. Murray had a visceral distaste for "maximalism," "absolutism," and the like that was on a par with his disdain for do-your-own-thing relativism. The difficulty is that it can be easier to pinpoint his dislikes than to frame his vision thing in a positive sense.

Murray was a minimalist, a Republican, when it came to political action. The stance jibed with his view that any attempt on the part of government to enforce religious beliefs would be counterproductive. Much the same reluctance and suspicion held for Church-sponsored politics. Murray's rule-of-thumb, that the Church should keep a modest political profile as part of the pluralist trade-off, borders on a benign neglect theorem that did not sit well with Catholics of a world-changing bent. He can be read, with some ingenuity, as the brains behind the slide toward a "naked public square," the secular forum that enforces a gag rule against religion.<sup>8</sup> Murray said hardly anything about what believers actually should *do* with their fresh understanding of freedom. His procedural focus left some Catholics searching for worthy tasks with tangible results in the here and now. It was this vacuum that the faith-and-justice movement, not just the Berrigans, sought to fill.

Confusion arose after Vatican II not only about what to do but also about what to *be*, especially among the clergy. The problem went beyond the denominational identity of Catholics in the dawning ecumenical age. As Walter Ong indicated, the irenic turn upset the preeminence of the Church Militant over the Church Maternal. It also undermined clear-cut understandings about clerical sexuality and identity. The crisis of the celibate male priesthood could not be

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<sup>8</sup>Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1984).



solved by busy work or social action. It was more a crisis of purpose than of performance or efficiency.

## Radicalism Left and Right

Two of the changes that followed in Murray's wake, along with one feature of Catholicism that has endured in the midst of them, are of special interest. The first change is the social radicalism that flourished in the sixties and seventies under the aegis of figures like Dorothy Day and the Berrigan brothers. This was a break not only from the civil give-and-take favored by Murray but from much of the papal social thought that had developed in response to the mass politics of industrialization.

Vestiges of what came to be called a preferential option for the poor drew on encyclicals from the 1890s and 1930s, and the pastoral letters issued by the American bishops during the eighties on the economy and war had roots in the encyclicals issued by John XXIII and Paul VI in the 1960s. But in the euphoria immediately following Vatican II, the Catholic Left dropped most of the talk of class reconciliation and took its cues from the in-your-face tactics of Saul Alinsky, Stokely Carmichael, and Tom Hayden.<sup>9</sup> These were the days of the Catonsville Nine and the Chicago Seven. Now that the Counter-Reformation was over, some of the ardor that had burned in the old Church Militant seems to have migrated toward a zeal for social action, a zest for symbolic bearing of witness, and political theater. All this went beyond the decorous combat promoted by Murray, toward the advocacy of social revolution.<sup>10</sup>

A second offshoot of the changes associated with Murray also bears on the question of radicalism but without tying it to the left or right. The direction of opinion, left or right, is one thing; the intensity with which beliefs are held is another.

During the sixties and on into the mid-seventies, stridency—indeed, a certain fanaticism—was identified with the left. In the

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<sup>9</sup> Bernard Doering, ed., *The Philosopher and the Provocateur: The Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinsky* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), and R. David Finks, *The Radical Vision of Saul Alinsky* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> James Colaianni, *The Catholic Left: The Crisis of Radicalism within the Church* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1968), and Garry Wills, *Bare Ruined Choirs: Doubt, Prophecy, and Radical Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972).



eighties, this edginess came undone among progressives. Many on the left burned out or retreated into a therapeutic, semi-privatized spirituality.<sup>11</sup> Their new-found ambivalence was taken for relativism, dithering, or intellectual bankruptcy. A few disillusioned leftists wound up converting to the enemy. Polarization was back, louder than ever, but most of the commotion now seemed to come from the right. This turnaround persisted in Catholicism until the first decade of the new millennium, when the sexual abuse scandals re-energized progressives.

The shifting connection between the substance or direction of beliefs—their left/rightness—and how strongly they are held confirms the lesson that extremism is not confined to one side or the other of the ideological spectrum. The shift is also rooted in a historical transformation. From the sixties on, lifestyle issues heated up. Conflict over cultural values displaced the end of ideology and economic complacency that were supposed to arrive with affluence.<sup>12</sup> However this might be, the split between agonistic and irenic styles of being Catholic runs deeper than temperamental differences. It evokes an abiding partition between the Church Militant, in whose view error has no rights, and the Church Maternal, more indulgent toward dissenters and ecumenical toward nonbelievers.

What's more, there is a powerful link in Catholic tradition between these sensibilities and definitions of masculinity and femininity. Observations about changing ideological styles in Catholicism are not stand-alone hypotheses; they open up a lane to the land of sexuality. The connection between historically contingent customs (male celibacy as a requirement for ordination being the most obvious) and the primal moorings of gender makes it difficult to disentangle issues of institutional reform from cultural upheaval in Church. Sex has been the boiler room of Catholicism, whatever course the organization happens to be steered in.

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*Observations about changing ideological styles in Catholicism are not stand-alone hypotheses; they open up a lane to the land of sexuality.*

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<sup>11</sup> See Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).



Standards of tolerance for political and religious differences, commitment to ideals of social justice, the affinity for a more aggressive or a less doctrinaire adherence to beliefs, the link between authority and sexual identity—all these are norms about how Catholics *should* behave. They are prescriptive rather than purely objective statements.

The same normative updraft cannot be said to hold, at least not in a conventional sense, for a third current in Catholicism. This consists of a stock of hardball precepts about survival and getting one's way in a dangerous world. The lore is one of realpolitik. It pulses, a perennial if mostly unspoken truth, through the institutional wisdom of Catholicism. Its practitioners are more calculating and manipulative, even ruthless, than the genial padres of *The Bells of Saint Mary's* and *Going My Way*.<sup>13</sup>

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*[Gracián's] perspective accords nicely with the Brazilian proverb that the wiles of a Machiavelli are preferable to the brutality of an Attila or the zealotry of a religious fanatic.*

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Calling the operational code a theory is a stretch. Little in this way of thinking is systematic or written down, and much of it is unabashedly cynical. Bits and pieces were codified, however, by Baltasar Gracián, whose *Art of*

*War*-type handbooks became *New York Times* bestsellers during the boom years of the 1990s.<sup>14</sup> Gracián's bleak, unapologetic realism throws light on the nuts and bolts of one-upmanship and self-preservation in an environment where the only rules seem to be those of caprice.

The worldliness of Gracián is not wholly unscrupulous. His perspective accords nicely with the Brazilian proverb that the wiles of a Machiavelli are preferable to the brutality of an Attila or the zealotry of a religious fanatic. Careers may be ruined but few people actually get killed. In this respect, Gracián is a moralist of the *via media*. And while many of his recommendations instruct those in positions of leadership about how to outdo their rivals and keep

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<sup>13</sup> Wilfrid Sheed, *Three Mobs: Labor, Church, and Mafia* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1974).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Baltasar Gracián, *A Pocket Mirror for Heroes*, trans. Christopher Maurer (New York: Doubleday, 1996).



their subordinates in line, some of Gracián's tips are designed as aids for those trying to defend themselves against the whims of the powerful. In modern parlance Gracián looks like something of a passive-aggressive, and it is this slant that makes him an astute diagnostician of politics, ecclesiastical and otherwise. The world for Gracián is an irredeemably authoritarian hierarchy that is best dealt with not by clamoring for change but through caution and cunning, with the guile of a courtier.

### **Church and State in the Secular City**

"The church is a whore," Daniel Berrigan once declared, "but she is my mother." While reforming the internal workings of Catholicism was not at the top of John Courtney Murray's agenda, rationalizing the Church around the edges was a logical extension of his efforts to bring it into the modern world. Some on the Catholic left, like Berrigan, were both more radical and more conservative than Murray. Their radicalism was founded on a repudiation of the military-industrial complex and social injustice that Murray's focus on church-state relations ignored. The notion that the Church exercised only a "spiritual jurisdiction" in capitalist democracies was anathema to many Catholic activists bent on righting social wrongs.<sup>15</sup> The perspective, defended by Murray, of a Church largely above the political fray sounded like a cop-out from involvement in the secular city. For his part, Berrigan insisted that concern with intramural, churchy disputes was a distraction from efforts at changing the world. "Roman Catholic identity as such is unimportant," he told his friend Robert Coles, "given the times and the real issues." "My brother and I have no continuing interest whatsoever in what you might call the internal questions of the Catholic community, whether that be the question of parochial schools or the question of birth control or the question of celibacy; we look upon such matters as in essence retarded questions."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Eugene McCarragher, *Christian Critics: Religion and the Impasse in Modern American Social Thought* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 108.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Berrigan, *Poetry, Drama, Prose*, ed. Michael True (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), from "Inside and Outside the Church," *New York Review of Books* (April 8, 1971), 71.



The priority given to social and political change seemed to have a couple of advantages. It helped keep Berrigan out of trouble with his religious superiors—with the major exception of his temporary exile to Latin America at the behest of Cardinal Spellman for his opposition to the war in Vietnam. On the whole, Berrigan stayed clear of church politics. He ignored ecclesiastical infighting, and ecclesiastical power holders learned to ignore him.

Second, at least in principle, the outward-looking strategy had ecumenical and secular appeal. “The most exciting aspect of the Second Vatican Council,” John McGreevy has written about Catholic progressives who, though critical of Berrigan in several respects,

were influenced by him, “was the realization that the church now called them to shape and engage their own societies, not simply fortify Catholic subcultures within them.”<sup>17</sup>

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*But [Berrigan] did not manage to connect condemnation of the Vietnam War with American values in the same way that King justified racial emancipation with reference to the bedrock American tenet of equality of opportunity.*

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The celebrity of the Catholic left proved fleeting. The Vietnam War was over by 1975. Figures like Berrigan engaged in a high-wire act without a net. There were no right-hand men with organizational savvy, no Andrew Youngs

or Ralph Abernathys, to keep the troops marching when the leaders went to jail. The heroic politics of the Berrigans drew heavy penalties but, except for a handful of “professional prisoners,” few long-term supporters.<sup>18</sup> The uncompromising dedication that drove the Berrigans also raised questions about tolerance and political tactics. The “sacred register of politics” alienated middle-of-the-roaders and placed severe demands on adherents.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> John McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 283.

<sup>18</sup> Murray Polner and Jim O’Grady, *Disarmed and Dangerous: The Radical Lives and Times of Daniel and Philip Berrigan* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Jason C. Bivins, *The Fracture of Good Order: Christian Antiliberalism and the Challenge of American Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).



Like Martin Luther King, Berrigan invoked biblical imagery and values for a political cause. But he did not manage to connect condemnation of the Vietnam War with American values in the same way that King justified racial emancipation with reference to the bedrock American tenet of equality of opportunity. King did not want to overthrow the system, at least not in the early days of the civil-rights movement; he wanted to take part in it.<sup>20</sup> The difference was crucial. The problem facing Catholic radicals concerned not only the legitimacy of infusing politics with religious sentiment. They had to demonstrate that their religious message did not subvert the American creed. Murray's minimalist formula, that Catholicism and democracy could coexist, gained acceptance. For some this meant that religion was tolerable in the secular sphere as long as it was politically innocuous. The idea that, armed by religious dictates, militants might sit in judgment on the American system was a much tougher sell.

### **Romantic Anger, Intellectual Clarity, and Gender Roles**

Whatever the effectiveness of their dramaturgy, the Berrigan brothers amplified the repertoire of protest. Their legacy of bearing witness against the odds crops up from time to time within the Church—decades later, for example, in the sit-ins against parish closings in the Boston Archdiocese and in the dogged picketing of cathedrals by members of SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests).<sup>21</sup>

Yet the Berrigans never rallied many Catholics in the pews. The challenge was conceptual and symbolic as well as practical. There was an antirationalist tenor to the actions of the Berrigans. It was unclear what alternative to injustice they offered, besides tearing it all down.<sup>22</sup> Later and to a limited extent, both of these deficien-

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<sup>20</sup>Dennis Chong, *Rational Lives: Norms and Values in Politics and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup>The tradition also appears to hold up with actions directed outside the Church. According to Mark Chaves, "Catholic congregations are more likely than others to engage in the direct action and pressure group politics of demonstrating, marching, and lobbying" (*Congregations in America* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004], 118).

<sup>22</sup>See Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia*, trans. Francis Haskell (New York: Grosset &



cies—the antirationalism and the absence of options—were addressed in the bishops' letters on war and the economy that appeared in the 1980s.<sup>23</sup>

Another difficulty can be traced to shifts and uncertainties in the expressive habits and political language of Catholicism. After several decades of suffocating formalism induced by papal condemnations of Americanism and Modernism, the Church was coming up for air, and the air was intoxicating. The pleasures of assimilation ran up against the traditional Catholic subculture. The ambivalence inherent in these cross-currents was captured by Walter Ong. A specialist in the Renaissance, Ong also brought with him a background as a student of the hypermodern media guru Marshall McLuhan. He turned out to be a Renaissance man in the popular as well as the academic sense.<sup>24</sup>

The bright strand that runs through Ong's writing concerns the contrast between agonistic and irenic styles of discourse and behavior.<sup>25</sup> Ong associated the confrontational manner with an oral culture that, with the rise of print, he claimed was being displaced by a less assertive approach to dialogue. Like dueling, the fulminations and bluster of old-line oratory had pretty much had their day. Catholicism saw this change come to a head in "the decrees of the Second Vatican Council [which], while often forthright and firm, lack the agonistic edge typical of many earlier church pronouncements."<sup>26</sup> For better or worse, "the development of the Roman Catholic ethos . . . has been that of a strongly masculinizing era, marked by . . .

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Dunlop, 1966), and Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> J. Bryan Hehir et al., *Liberty and Power: A Dialogue on Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), and Richard John Neuhaus and George Weigel, eds., *Being Christian Today: An American Conversation* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992).

<sup>24</sup> The flow of influence between McLuhan and Ong was reciprocal. McLuhan credited Ong's doctoral dissertation with giving him one of the insights (on oral versus visual thinking) that he went on to use to such effect in his media studies. Especially after publishing *The Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan wrote—allusively, cryptically—the way that Ong often spoke when he was in full speculative flight.

<sup>25</sup> See *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, ed. Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Ong, *Fighting for Life*, 170.



agonistic patterns (169).” The new condition was one of doctrinal, not to say sexual, ambiguity.

Ong’s scalpel is sharper for trends like the decline of Latin and the entrance of women into the academy than for political and economic issues. With the latter, studying events at a distance rather than at first hand, he tended to lapse into a myth-and-symbol exegesis of illustrative anecdotes.

Nevertheless, Ong’s diagnosis is consistent with the down-to-earth view that ecclesiastical incumbents (and other power holders) were caught off guard by the eruption of the sixties, when ideology was supposed to end. Romantic anger rather than intellectual clarity be-

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*The psychosexual building blocks of the institutional edifice of Catholicism suddenly looked less solid.*

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came the signature of the new left. As far as the Church was concerned, the polarities inherited from the Counter-Reformation were reversed. Now, in the uproarious sixties, to be on the left was to be militant, while Paul VI, borderline irresolute, presided over an establishment in flux. On one side it looked like a *trahison des clercs*, on the other like a failure of nerve.

The situation was not confined to the Church. In his study of parliamentarians during the 1960s, Robert Putnam (who was to become known as the premier analyst of social capital) noted that

a politician’s perspective on social conflict and harmony is quite closely related to his ideological position in [the] left-right sense. Leftists stress conflict, rightists stress harmony, and centrists fall between. . . . It is . . . no accident that Burke, the great conservative, extolled social harmony, while Marx, the great revolutionary, stressed social cleavage.<sup>27</sup>

As in the Church, self-confident conservatives seem to have been transformed into mild-mannered paternalists, at a loss about how to react to a confrontational generation. Authority in general was at loose ends during the sixties.

A reaction set in by the end of the seventies and the early eighties. Margaret Thatcher came to power, so did Ronald Reagan,

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<sup>27</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *The Beliefs of Politicians: Ideology, Conflict, and Democracy in Britain and Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 106 f.



and John Paul II ascended to the papacy. But the ambiguities that Ong had isolated continued to resonate through the Church. The implication of his analysis was not just the fanciful-sounding idea that ideological styles were associated with oral or literate modes of thinking or that these tendencies were linked in turn to masculine or feminine orientations. The touchier point was that sexual identities themselves, like the political settlements analyzed by John Courtney Murray, revealed elements of historical contingency.

The psychosexual building blocks of the institutional edifice of Catholicism suddenly looked less solid. “[A] male clergy,” Ong wrote, “is basically not a characterizing feature of the Church so much as a countervailing feature [against an overwhelming femininity rooted in Mariology, the cult of the *pieta*, etc.]”<sup>28</sup> Ong drew back from exploring the import of his analysis for clerical homosexuality (the word scarcely appears in his publications), but the implications for sexual confusion and gender bending are clear enough. Age-old expressions of sexual identity that were once taken for granted might be culturally conditioned and subject to change.

The premise of Ong’s work is that, especially in the Catholic tradition, modes of discourse and domination are correlated with characteristically masculine (bullying) and feminine (nurturant) styles. His more novel contribution stems from the idea that the historical contingency of rhetorical mannerisms holds clues about the mutability of sexual identities. This variability threatens the authority structure of Catholicism. It is one thing to propose, as Murray did, that no political system is supreme in an ahistorical, Platonic sense. His critics claimed just the opposite when they talked of monarchy as a reflection of celestial hierarchy, of the Great Chain of Being. Murray could fall back on the almost equally venerable notion of “accidentalism,” according to which political regimes are shallow epiphenomena (rather like Marxian superstructures) compared to the deeper workings of society and the abiding differences between male and female. This meant that the Church could live under practically any number of civil arrangements.<sup>29</sup> It was as much a culture as an institution.

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<sup>28</sup> Ong, *Fighting for Life*, 178.

<sup>29</sup> See William J. Callahan, *The Catholic Church in Spain, 1875–1998* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 311.



But it was quite another thing to suggest that the foundational pillars of authority inside Catholicism, its male-dominated structure of governance, were subject to the whims of history rather than divinely mandated or fixed underpinnings of natural law. At this juncture, not only the authority structure but also the sempiternal truths of the Church, related to issues like contraception, divorce, abortion, and the role of women, come into play.

Ong was not an aberrant case. Murray himself understood that underneath the clash of ideologies lay barely enunciable questions of sexual identity. He worried about “men of diminished manhood, of incomplete virility” whose rational capacities were underdeveloped because, as Aristotle had feared, they failed to master their feminine irrationality. They were not rigorously combative. Here is Murray at full tilt, without any of the reservations Ong was to express a few decades later:

“[I]t is woman who offers man the possibility of headship, of entering into his native inheritance of rule—of realizing himself as head, *Logos*, the principle of order, which by ordering life rules it. Woman is life, but not *Logos*, not the principle of order. . . . She is not her own ruler; man is to govern her.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, sexual stratification is at the heart not only of ecclesiastical hierarchy but

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of traditional social order. The originality of Ong was to sense that this was an order, desirable or otherwise, ideal or not, whose time was passing in Catholicism. It was beginning to look indefensible, the Old South of religion. It was a lost cause. The great difficulty was to discern what within Catholic tradition might take the place of this order. Murray's faith that civilized disputation could uncover solid truths on which reasonable men could eventually agree became shakier as he grew older. Ong's logic also led him away from the terra firma of received sexual categories and their solid social attributes.

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<sup>30</sup> John Courtney Murray, S.J., “The Danger of the Vows: An Encounter with Earth, Woman, and Spirit,” *Woodstock Letters* 96 (Fall 1997): 424.



### III. A Wily Voice from the Past

#### Weathering the Storm on the Bark of Peter

While the characteristic feature of Walter Ong's prose was a stripped-down clarity, he knew that clarity itself had its limitations. "The truly profound and meaningful principles and conclusions concerning matters of deep philosophical or cultural import," he argued, "are invariably aphoristic or gnomic, and paradoxical."<sup>31</sup> Many of the orphic sayings of Baltasar Gracián pass the obscurity test hands-down. The catch is that Gracián could be perfectly lucid about the uses of obscurity, and it is with this manipulative awareness that he strikes his defining note. "Don't express your ideas too clearly," he recommends.

Most people think little of what they understand, and venerate what they do not. To be valued, things must be difficult: if they can't understand you, people will think more highly of you. Intelligent people value brains, but most people demand a certain elevation. Keep them guessing at your meaning. Many praise without being able to say why. They venerate anything hidden or mysterious, and they praise it because they hear it praised.<sup>32</sup>

None of this prevents Gracián from recommending elsewhere that you "express yourself clearly, not only easily but lucidly," qualifying the advice, with characteristic hauteur, with the observation that "sometimes it is good to be obscure, so as not to be vulgar" (122). It is typical of Gracián at one moment to adopt a you-can't-be-too-careful posture in praise of prudence and at the next moment fly off the handle at the tasteless and the obtuse, that is, at just about everybody.

It is not just the pinball careening of Gracián's *mots* but their apparently amoral tenor that perplexes readers who come to him expecting uplift. Some of this befuddlement vanishes, however, once his books are understood as self-help manuals *avant la lettre*, with the accent on "self." Gracián is interested in power relationships but not in institutions, except tangentially. Organizations are always hierarchical; this is an iron law. It is the kaleidoscopic cunning of human

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<sup>31</sup> Ong, *Fighting for Life*, 31.

<sup>32</sup> Baltasar Gracián, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom: A Pocket Oracle*, trans. Christopher Maurer (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 143.



nature and how to manage it that intrigues Gracián. "What Machiavelli said of the politician," Schopenhauer observed admiringly, "Gracián said of the individual."<sup>33</sup> The overriding idea is personal survival and, more than this, the winning of esteem and influence in a treacherous world. Life is a *militia contra malicia*, a war against the scheming of others. Man is a wolf to man, and the only help for it is prudence and guile. For Gracián as for Hobbes, his contemporary, life was a war of all against all.

This pessimism, together with a courtier's distaste for the multitude, sometimes leads Gracián to favor truly ruthless stratagems. "With all his interest in man," Aubrey Bell noted, "there is something a little cold, abstract, and inhuman in his flashing epigrams and paradoxes."<sup>34</sup> Gracián's is a harsh realm of winners and losers whose standing, moreover, is constantly in motion and therefore hard to predict. Herein lies the game. "Know the fortunate in order to choose them, and the unfortunate in order to flee from them. . . . The trick is to know what cards to get rid of." Or again:

Don't let your sympathy for the unfortunate make you one of them. . . . Who could call himself lucky if many others weren't? . . . The person whom everyone hated in prosperity is suddenly pitied by all. His downfall turns vengeance into compassion. It takes shrewdness to notice how the cards are being dealt. They pull up beside the unlucky soul whom they fled when he was fortunate. Sometimes this reveals an inner nobility, but it is anything but shrewd.<sup>35</sup>

Two things stand out here, besides the pitiless recommendation to shun the weak and the defeated. One is the assumption of a zero-sum world. Gracián lived in a steeply divided class society. "The world of the limited good" is fixed. But the other assumption is that, while hierarchy abides, life is full of unforeseeable ups and downs. It is fluid and brutal.

Gracián's deep appreciation of uncertainty is one of the things that make him sound modern despite the premodern setting of his thought. But it is not only that. After all, human mortality and the vanity of things are themes with an ancient lineage. Two other

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted by Thomas G. Corvan in *The Best of Gracián*, ed. Thomas G. Corvan (New York: Philosophical Library, 1964), i.

<sup>34</sup> Aubrey F. G. Bell, *Baltasar Gracián* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921), 71.

<sup>35</sup> Gracián, *Art of Worldly Wisdom*, 18, 92 f.



quirks add to Gracián's contemporary appeal. One is his stylistic jumpiness. Generalizations, universal laws, and the like are suspect, and this suspicion comes across in the spasmodic presentation of his maxims. The aphorisms ricochet haphazardly off one another.

The ad hoc nature of Gracián's advice mirrors the way he sees reality. Whatever coherence he possesses—and it may be very little,

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*The irony is that the frankness of Gracián's pithy recommendations stands in the service of deception.*

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to judge by the references of critics to the "three hundred ill-arranged maxims" of his *Pocket Oracle*, that "most confusing and difficult work in the Spanish language"—is tactical.<sup>36</sup> Besides his rapid-fire delivery, it is the mordant candor of Gracián that ingratiates him to the modern temper.

Reading Gracián is a bit like dipping into Catullus, full of ellipses and jump cuts, after long exposure to the impeccably graceful Horace. "One cannot blindly follow the rules. A zigzag course is advisable."<sup>37</sup>

The irony is that the frankness of Gracián's pithy recommendations stands in the service of deception. Prudence and the polishing of appearances become key stratagems. Gracián is not a nihilist. He never quite gives up on the attainment of virtue, even sainthood, as an ultimate goal. But, as a practical matter, "prudence guides one not to the fixed principles of virtue but rather to the different goals of winning one's way."<sup>38</sup> There are no rules except caution and deception. Nonbinding resolutions, moral victories, and the like are gestures that do not matter. In the end, as with Vince Lombardi, winning is the only thing. "Take care to make things turn out well." "A winner is never asked for explanations. More people pay attention to success or failure than to circumstances, and your reputation

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<sup>36</sup> Cited by Bell in *Baltasar Gracián*, 28 f.

<sup>37</sup> Gracián as quoted by Michael Nerlich, "Gracián in the Death Cell," in *Rhetoric and Politics: Baltasar Gracián and the New World Order*, ed. Nicholas Spadaccini and Jenaro Talens (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 324.

<sup>38</sup> Monroe Z. Hafter, *Gracián and Perfection: Spanish Moralists of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 93.



will never suffer if you achieve what you wanted to. A good ending turns everything golden, however unsatisfactory the means."<sup>39</sup>

How does this differ from the stratagems of a Machiavelli (whom Gracián affected to despise, along with Cervantes)? Most of Gracián's writings are not about statecraft and only some of his maxims are directed exclusively at the powerful. A good many are offered to readers in competitive settings, whether they are in fear of falling from the top or afraid of being trampled by the high and mighty.<sup>40</sup> "Make people depend on you," Gracián recommends. He elaborates the point for anyone along the social ladder.

He who is truly shrewd would rather have people need him than thank him. . . . When there is no longer dependence, good manners disappear, and so does esteem. The most important lesson experience teaches is to maintain dependence, and entertain it without satisfying it. This can hold even a king.<sup>41</sup>

The same strategic discretion, the same keen eye for the quid pro quo, appear over and over, as in the maxim "Don't outshine your boss. . . . Princes like to be helped, but not surpassed. When you counsel someone, you should appear to be reminding him of something he had forgotten, not of the light he was unable to see" (4). It is important to select which battles to fight and which to pass up. Speaking truth to power and whistle blowing are counterproductive. "Rowing against the current makes it impossible to discover the truth and is extremely dangerous. . . . Dissent is taken as an insult, for it condemns the judgment of others. . . . The sensible person avoids both being contradicted and contradicting others. He may be quick to censure, but he is slow to do so in public" (24f).

Gracián is evidently not a reformer or (at least in his writings if not in his troubled career) a rocker of boats. His discretion is so instrumental it can give prudence (Gracián's *summum bonum* among the virtues) a bad name. "Some people," he observes, "are better at disturbing than adorning the universe: useless trinkets shunned by all. The discreet person should avoid tiring others, especially the

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<sup>39</sup> Gracián, *Art of Worldly Wisdom*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> See Umberto Eco, "Les Signes du pouvoir," introduction to *Bréviare des politiciens*, by Cardinal Mazarin, trans. François Rossi (Paris: Arléu, 1997), 7–12.

<sup>41</sup> Gracián, *Art of Worldly Wisdom*, 3.



great, who are very busy. It would be worse to irritate one of them than the rest of the world" (58).

In the end Gracián's cynicism is catholic, applying to those in and out of favor. He understands the anxieties of those, like himself, on the fringes of power. He is an elitist and a snob, and he repeatedly denounces what readers centuries later would call democratic

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*Actors without ambitions to martyrdom, without an attraction to the monastic life, and without recourse to mechanisms for righting wrongs have few options but to cultivate deceptive stratagems and extreme prudence.*

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cravings. He never romanticizes the downtrodden. But he also has an aversion for pious nostrums. He was a wit and a piece of work, a fatalist who was insufficiently solemn.<sup>42</sup>

The shock that Gracián initially produces amounts to a kind of prurient surprise, as if the reader has overheard a man of the cloth swearing like a trooper. This potential for scandal is one of the things, along with his habit of

publishing without asking their permission, that bothered his Jesuit superiors and that drove them in the end to put Gracián under a form of house arrest.<sup>43</sup> But the problem cuts deeper than off-the-record table talk. Gracián does not so much describe or satirize the mores of seventeenth-century Spain as endorse a distillation of them. Almost always, he stands at the nether end of the "what Jesus would do" scale. Nietzsche was a fan.

The realism that Gracián espouses has a plausible rationale, given the combination of perpetual hierarchy and uncertainty he assumes. Actors without ambitions to martyrdom, without an attraction to the monastic life, and without recourse to mechanisms for righting wrongs have few options but to cultivate deceptive strata-

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<sup>42</sup> Arturo Zarate Ruiz, *Gracián, Wit, and the Baroque Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996). This habit got Gracián into so much trouble that he petitioned to leave the Jesuits and join the Cistercians. He died before the process was brought to a close.

<sup>43</sup> Miguel Batllori, S.J., *Gracián y el Barroco* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1958), and Virginia Ramos Foster, *Baltasar Gracián* (Boston: Twayne, 1975), 14 passim.



gems and extreme prudence.<sup>44</sup> The goal is not the fantasy of holding the powerful to account but of defending oneself from and working around them. If structural reform is unthinkable, then the sensible course is low-profile accommodation, ingratiation, and circumspect resistance. The corollary rule is to exploit the weaknesses of others to one's own advantage. In this way, the culture of hierarchy, of "little monarchies," reproduces itself on down the pyramid. Gracián's conservatism is such that, even were hierarchy relaxed a bit, the pragmatic tactic is almost always indirection and expedience rather than confrontation or holy innocence. "Two kinds of people are good at foreseeing danger," he writes, "those who have learned at their own expense and the clever people who learn a good deal at the expense of others. . . . Don't be so good that you give others the chance to be bad. Be part serpent and part dove."<sup>45</sup>

So, the *via media* recommended by Gracián, despicable as it seems in democratic hindsight, may be benign in an unalterably authoritarian world. If the inverse of hierarchy is not a fanciful democracy but anarchy, a world turned upside down, then strong doses of guile and caution may help preserve the peace. Violence may be avoided, though not much else improves.

## Appearances and Substance

Part of Gracián's fascination stems from a reckless forthrightness that, contrary to his own advice, speaks truth to power. He lauds prudence from the viewpoint of the accident prone. He worships discretion as he does virtue, from afar.

This disconnect is a tip-off to Gracián's appeal. He is like the politician whose only ideology is the budget. You can prune off his occasionally vicious recommendations, as you might ignore one or another pious excess in a devotional manual, put his fatalism on hold, and come up with a serviceable, ideologically agnostic *vade mecum* to the ways of politics. But the accent is less on pragmatism as Americans might understand it—as a mandate to cut the guff and

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<sup>44</sup> See Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), and James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>45</sup> Gracián, *Art of Worldly Wisdom*, 137 f.



get on with the task at hand—than on prudence and above all appearances and perception.

Gracián felt that it was crucial to *seem* as well as to *be*. Artifice is not everything. It is a necessary if insufficient condition for success. “Do, but also seem” is his motto. It is a good thing that virtue is its own reward, because in its “intrinsic” state it has few others. Gracián goes on to elaborate the maxim in typically acidic fashion.

Things do not pass for what they are, but for what they seem. To excel and to know how to show it is to excel twice. What is invisible might as well not exist. Reason itself is not venerated when it does not wear a reasonable face. Those easily duped outnumber the prudent. Deceit reigns, and things are judged from without, and are seldom what they seem. A fine exterior is the best recommendation of inner perfection. (73)

Gracián is full of ironies. The greatest irony is that in setting aside religious precepts, his corrosive realism consecrates a split-level spirituality, cut off from mundane life. “Gracián seeks to assist his readers toward success,” one commentator remarks.

This is only possible through cunning, the pugnacious and pragmatic relinquishment of action according to Christian notions of morality. . . . [T]he product of appearance . . . is accorded greater significance than action according to the outcome of ethically motivated veracity.<sup>46</sup>

There is something of the broken-hearted idealist in Gracián. This lends a bitter piquancy to his preaching about an ethic without illusions. It is as if traditional morality was something he could no longer believe in but could not quite forget.

The final irony is that Gracián was done in not by any doctrinal transgression but by the religious equivalent of reasons of state. What passed for *savoir-faire* in court circles and elegance among his literary friends struck Gracián’s superiors as slick and flippant. Some of his works were received as satires on religious as well as political life. They read like the opposite of “edifying letters.” Gracián slapped together a devotional handbook for communicants that did nothing to appease his adversaries. Those “frivolous books that speak badly of our profession” continued to grate. This judgment, plus bad timing, did him in. The publication of Gracián’s last

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Nerlich, “Gracián in the Death Cell,” 318 f.



book, *El criticón*, in 1656–57 coincided with the appearance of Pascal's *Lettres provinciales*. Condemnations of casuistry and trickery filled the air. The Society decided it had enough bad press on its hands, and Gracián was silenced as "a necessary measure and just defense of Ours."<sup>47</sup>

## Religion to Worldly Wisdom

Gracián's work applies mainly to situations in which individuals—middle managers, for example, under a bullying boss—cannot organize in their own defense and where support groups are weak. Talk of fair play sounds alien and naively self-destructive. This covers an enormous amount of ground. Some of the amplest documentation of the syndrome bears on the ethically challenged denizens of the entertainment industry. And the practice of democratic politics hardly rules out subterfuge, betrayal, and generally doing the right (or wrong) thing for the wrong reasons.<sup>48</sup>

The resemblance between the ethos captured by Gracián and aspects of clerical culture, where a prevalent norm is to play things close to the vest and where wiggle room for public conflict is very limited, is not farfetched. Gracián almost never wrote directly about church affairs. But his approach serves as a corrective to mystified renditions of religious life. Gracián's realist perspective offsets idealized accounts of ecclesiastical politics. It rings true as a diagnostic of the culture of *Romanità*, and it stands as a caveat emptor for those working the salons and corridors of power. His own obsession with keeping up *la bella figura* is a sign of the pathology.

But the stance is not particularly sensitive to the tortured mix of pluralist and traditional sympathies found in Murray or to the

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<sup>47</sup> E. Correa Calderón, *Baltasar Gracián: Su vida y su obra*, 2nd. ed. (Madrid: Editorial Gredes, 1970), 84–109. For "frivolous . . ." the Spanish is "alguns libros poco graves, y que desdican mucho de nuestra profesión." For "a necessary . . ." the Spanish is "es medio necesario y justa defensa de nuestra Compañía. . . ." In Gracián's entry in the *Jesuit Historical Dictionary*, Miguel Batllori argues that he died reconciled with the Society. See *Diccionario Histórico de la Compañía de Jesús*, eds. Charles E. O'Neill and Joaquín María Domínguez, vol. 2 (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2001), s.vv. "Gracián y Morales."

<sup>48</sup> Laurence Whitehead, "Bowling in the Bronx: The Uncivil Interstices between Civil and Political Society," in *Civil Society in Democratization*, ed. Peter Burnell and Peter Calvert (London: Frank Cass, 2004).



symbolic reverberations one encounters in Ong. These, too, are important currents in the Catholic legacy. Only self-interest, not ideas, counts for Gracián. His focus is on the material world and the maneuvering of individuals in it. Casting a cold light on the gap between rhetoric and reality is Gracián's strong point. His eccentric, disenchanted eye is less acute when the gap is between competing discourses or ways of framing reality—in other words, between rival visions.

What, then, is left of the religious in Gracián? Not much. His first book was entitled "The Hero," and his last "The Critic." His

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*Gracián strips rhetorical maneuvering of almost all of its religious connotations.*

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work vibrates like a tuning fork between a moralizing impulse and relentless cynicism. It is often just about impossible to distinguish encomium from satire. His religious critics thought the satirical element was scandalous enough, possibly because it was unthink-

able to admit (although they eventually did) that Gracián was actually holding up the machinations of the mighty and the subterfuges of the powerless to praise. Either way, he was unsound.

So there seem to be only trace elements of the conventionally religious in Gracián—except for the pervasiveness of the agonistic theme. "Passive-aggressive" is psychological language for the struggle between irenic subtlety and agonistic cut and thrust. This tension was to be handled through rhetorical skill. Rhetoric as a weapon to be deployed in contention with the wayward was integral to the Catholicism of the time. There is a whiff of stereotyping in the military imagery, but Spadaccini and Talens get it mostly right in the introduction to their edited volume on Gracián.

As an army, [the Jesuit order] had to deal with masses and individuals. For the masses, there were missionaries and preachers; for the individual, there were education and confessors. All . . . had to address the conquered with the subtlest weapon they could find: the word. Thus, rhetoric is the glue that binds together the entire enterprise.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Nicholas Spadaccini and Jenaro Talens, "Introduction: The Practice of Worldly Wisdom," in Hirschman, *Rhetoric and Politics*, xxii.



Gracián strips rhetorical maneuvering of almost all its religious connotations. Rhetorical finesse is bound neither to the defense nor the overthrow of an institution but to the *bildung* of the individual. He “wanted to help people cope with the rules of an established social order that they do not want to transform but that, in any case, they seek to take advantage of.” He is dialogical but supremely instrumental, out to win.<sup>50</sup> “Life is a battlefield,” Nerlich notes, repeating Gracián’s mantra (and echoing Murray) “from which there can be no flight into idyllic fields; rather it is one on which man must develop into a *persona*.”<sup>51</sup>

Then, after praising his “emancipatory potential”—Gracián appears to be honest with the reader even if he does not recommend honesty as a policy—Nerlich presents an excerpt from a treatise written by Werner Krauss during his months awaiting execution in a Nazi prison. The passage makes a direct connection between Gracián’s *machismo* and the agonistic style. Stilted though it may be, the translation is worth quoting at length.

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*John Courtney Murray did not substantially alter the separation between sacred and secular realms that Gracián espoused. The alternative, “integralism,” was unworkable in the United States and a bitter memory in Europe.*

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It is no accident that tension occupies such a basic position in Gracián’s aesthetic. . . . Gracián’s worldly wisdom reveals both a high point and an end. Already in one’s first pass at his intellectual world one becomes . . . aware of the limits of worldly experience. The polarity of the sexes, the occurrence of the passions of love in no way partake in the construction of the masculine world of striving, of business, of fame, and accomplishment. This lesson of life creates a most striking contrast to the portrait of the human of the French moralists, which forms itself with the appropriate consideration of the female role as partner. The psychology of the sexes is not a topic with which Gracián busies himself. The existence of irrational powers in the conversational situation of man and woman was already integrated in seventeenth-century France, and the hopelessness of

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., xiii, and Carlos Hernández-Sacristán, “The Art of Worldly Wisdom as an Ethics of Conversation,” *ibid.*, 301 *passim*.

<sup>51</sup> Nerlich, “Gracián in the Death Cell,” 312.



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reasonable behavior was again . . . understood as a foundational Christian experience of the world. (340)

We need not unpack everything going on here to recognize that Gracián had gone native. With the hindsight of twentieth-century psychoanalysis, he looks like a bad case of identification with the aggressor. How you played the game mattered to him. This was what rhetoric was about. But the game was also about keeping score. Gracián was a brilliant tourist dazzled by the refinement and cruelty of a world he observed but could not quite enter.

### A Permeable Wall of Separation

John Courtney Murray did not substantially alter the separation between sacred and secular realms that Gracián espoused. The alternative, "integralism," was unworkable in the United States and a bitter memory in Europe. It was very difficult to find a way around both confessional politics and rigid secularism. Murray argued, crucially, that the two cities, instead of being irrelevant to one another, might coexist to their mutual benefit. The result would be greater stability than if one tried to dominate the other. Murray made his peace with democracy. Compromise could promote civil order. The Church stood to lose by pressing for political dominion. Under modern conditions attempts to enforce a union of church and state were bound to backfire.

Gracián also came to terms with the politics of his day. However, he understood the absolutism of the Spanish monarchs more as a permanently Hobbesian state of nature than as an institutional format subject to change. Structural reform was simply not on his agenda. He recognized that absolutism creates the moral equivalent of an underground economy, and he treated these maneuvers as relatively humane stratagems for survival and success. "*Obedesco pero no cumplo*," the wisdom of the street went: "I obey but I don't comply." This was the bright side of Gracián. The dark side was a pessimism that gave no thought to altering the rules and in some cases ratified their severity.

The trade-off Murray advocated involved scaling back on Catholicism's outmoded public ambitions. By the standards of twentieth-century industrial societies, these ambitions—of religious



uniformity or something close to it—were perilously anachronistic.<sup>52</sup> Exactly how much of a cutback this entailed he left indeterminate. Murray's studied equivocation endowed Catholic activists with alternatives regarding religion-driven politics that they continue to quarrel over.

Two properties render many of these choices manageable in practice. For the most part, social justice issues involve controversies outside the Church. And secondly, they are likely to involve questions of more versus less, not either/or. They require priority rankings rather than zero-sum decisions. The sectarian fires set by the Berrigans did not spread very far because most Americans believed economic policy was to be bargained over rather than treated as tinder for revolution.

But the family of issues Walter Ong analyzed bear on matters of identity and "truth," not just interest or ideology. The questions that such trends and controversies raise are hardly unique to the Church or the Society. Nevertheless, religious authorities find them particularly threatening and difficult to resolve. After much struggle and consultation during the 1980s, the Catholic bishops managed to sign off on pastoral letters concerning the economy and war and peace. Yet they had to abandon efforts to draft an equivalent statement about the role of women. Issues like these were internal, "neuralgic" affairs—"matters of revelation," according to conservatives, the intractable bedrock of Catholic dogma.

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*O'Malley took pains to set the distinction in a comparative historical context. He emphasized the peculiarly irenic nature of Vatican II, setting it against both the Gregorian reforms of the thirteenth century and the Protestant break with the Roman church.*

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Gracián saw the Spain of the Habsburgs as a microcosm of the way of the world. It was a majestic, sordid reality defining the human predicament, and it was no more about to change than the wisdom he culled from his beloved poets and philosophers of

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<sup>52</sup>See Claudio Veliz, *The Centralist Tradition in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).



Roman antiquity. A flexible pessimist regarding human nature, Gracián was a thoroughgoing fatalist regarding society.

In the United States, Murray understood that he had to cope not just with a material reality. Catholics were also confronted with “the American proposition,” a new idea or set of ideals and a social order radically different from that of the Old World. The country was the land of the redemptive second chance and perennial make-overs, where the sky is the limit, with an evangelical mission to sponsor democracy and sell its way of life around the world. Add to this a racial and ethnic diversity that surpasses anything seen in Rome during its heyday, and you have a particularly dramatic face-off between two powerful “isms.” Catholicism’s *détente* with democracy, especially its American variant, was uneasy.

#### IV: Cultural Expressions with Sexual Overtones

##### The Rhetoric of Reproach and the Embrace of the Temperate

Classical Catholicism rested on an unchanging dichotomy. The hierarchical division of the sexes was the cornerstone of the institutional church, taken for granted by Baltasar Gracián, dissected by Walter Ong, and insisted on, with some fury, by the usually cool John Courtney Murray. The patriarchal family depicted the Church Militant in miniature.<sup>53</sup> “Dissect” is the word for Ong’s analysis. He performed a vivisection on a moribund culture. The operation was not hopeful. No painless remedy—no reform that preserved doctrinal continuity—was in sight.

A pair of conclusions came with the diagnosis. The polarity of the sexes turned out to be more fluid than categorical. Moreover, this fluidity was connected to an awareness that form—optional, historically variable styles of expression and communication-shaped substance—those supposedly objective realities like sex—as much as the other way around. Male and female were not just biologically given. They were also conditioned by and conveyed through customs that, while usually slow to move, varied over time and place.

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<sup>53</sup>The *locus classicus* is Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936).



In 1983 *Theological Studies* published an article by John O'Malley entitled "Development, Reforms, and Two Great Reformations." Much of it restated Walter Ong's contrast between agonistic and irenic modes of dealing with conflict and change. This time O'Malley took pains to set the distinction in a comparative historical context. He emphasized the peculiarly irenic nature of Vatican II, setting it against both the Gregorian reforms of the thirteenth century and the Protestant break with the Roman church. The latter two were charged with ferocious rhetoric, intransigence, and extremism. Vatican II stood out for its ecumenism and its embrace of the temperate. "The 'rhetoric of reproach,'" O'Malley observes, "is replaced by a 'rhetoric of congratulation.' The stance is religiously admirable but rhetorically problematic, for it induces a vagueness and indeterminacy into language that deprives it of dramatic force."<sup>54</sup>

The article made a modest splash. But it was not until the publication a decade later of *The First Jesuits* that O'Malley reached a broader audience. Then, in 2004, *Four Cultures of the West* appeared. Here the spotlight is less on Catholicism or the Jesuits than on the modes of understanding and expression—the cultures and sensibilities—that have shaped the Church and the Society and that they have influenced in turn.

For O'Malley, the core of institutional Catholicism is no longer strictly dichotomous, divided between male and female or, as he had put it in his *Theological Studies* piece, between agonistic (Counter-Reformation) and irenic (Vatican II) mindsets. Instead of a dichotomy, visualize a spectrum. It is on this imaginary line that O'Malley places four cultures.

Two of these cultures, the prophetic and the humanistic, were present in O'Malley's original formulation. The first is all absolutes and certainties, all (or mostly all) argument by assertion, like Ong's agonism and Isaiah Berlin's hedgehog, who knows one big thing. It

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*If one element falters in the binary culture portrayed by Ong—if for example disputatious males give in to conniving females—then the whole system goes into crisis.*

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<sup>54</sup> John W. O'Malley, "Development, Reforms, and Two Great Reformations: Towards a Historical Assessment of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 44 (1983): 396.



makes strong statements about vague or unprovable issues. The other resembles Berlin's fox, who knows many smaller things. Irenic culture is keen on complexity, ambiguity, and nuance.<sup>55</sup> Its roots lie in classical rhetoric and the arts of persuasion. The first brooks no doubts and demands strict allegiance. The second leans toward equivocation.

It is by unfolding this pair of sensibilities one at a time that O'Malley doubles the cultures to four. One of the newly specified genres is analytical. With much of the assertiveness of the purely

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prophetic, this type prizes implacably reasoned argument rather than outrage. It may take the form of logic-chopping philosophy or empirical science. It has roots in medieval dialectics. The other culture is an extension of the humanistic. It is devotional-esthetic, mediated through liturgy, through a nonverbal art like music or dance, or a graphic art like painting. It

traffics in the ineffable. Once in a while literature reaches these heights. A classic example is James Joyce's epiphanic short story, "The Dead."

O'Malley makes no evolutionary claims for the classification—the cultures are not stages—and nowhere does he call the scheme a "typology" or label its components as scientific-sounding "paradigms." But there is a pattern to the cultures. As we move from "culture one" to "culture four," from the prophetic to the dialectic to the rhetorical to the esthetic-mystical, we travel roughly from the confrontational and activist toward the conciliatory and contemplative. It is like the stereotypical split between male and female, only now spread out along a continuum.

O'Malley's world is less tidy and his vision more optimistic than Murray's or Ong's. If one element falters in the binary culture portrayed by Ong—if for example disputatious males give in to conniving females—then the whole system goes into crisis. The threat of collapse is less severe for O'Malley. The cultural portfolio of

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<sup>55</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953).



the West is diversified. Quarrelsome and barely compatible, his four \*cultures are more like climatic zones than compartments. The diagnosis is one of fragile continuity and measured hope.

## A Question of Cultural Development

*Four Cultures of the West* does not pose a question and answer it, or set a problem and solve it, or frame a hypothesis and test it, or state a puzzle and explain it. No tangible policy recommendations follow from it. At first glance, the implication of O'Malley's analysis appears to be straightforward: cultural multiplicity makes for a protective redundancy. This diversity almost certainly contributes to the resilience of the civilization—"The West"—whose constituent elements are (at least) four cultures.

There is no politics or economics in *Four Cultures*, but there is some sex. O'Malley quotes a passage from Gueric of Igny's riff on the Song of Solomon, a love lyric, that abolishes the sexual demarcation at the core of agonistic struggle:

In commenting on the verse from the Song, "Your two breasts are like two fawns" . . . [and] taking "the bridegroom" of the text as usual as a coded designation for Christ, he says: "The Bridegroom himself has breasts better than wine. The Bridegroom, I say, has breasts, lest he should be lacking any one of all the duties and titles of loving kindness. He is father in virtue of creation or new birth that comes through grace, and also in virtue of the authority with which he instructs. He is mother, too, in the mildness of his affections, and a nurse because he is so attentive to the care such a duty imposes."<sup>56</sup>

Elsewhere O'Malley comments on depictions of the nakedness of St. Francis and of the infant Jesus as cues toward mystical transport beyond eroticism and mere erudition, as allegories of release and reconciliation. The standard sexual categories are subsumed, like the agonistic dichotomy of male and female, by paroxysm and calm.

By contrast, for all their literary and political sophistication, both John Courtney Murray and Walter Ong saw the firmament of Catholicism in bipolar terms, split culturally as well as biologically between male and female. They also saw that the underpinnings of

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<sup>56</sup> John W. O'Malley, *Four Cultures of the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 147. Gueric, a Cistercian, was a colleague of St. Bernard of Clairvaux.



this cosmology were in grave danger. A slide from authority to chaos in church affairs might come about just as readily as a soft landing toward moderation and compromise. "It is only the few," Murray wrote, "who understand the disciplines of civility and thus hold in check the forces of barbarism that are always threatening to force the gates of the City."<sup>57</sup> Beneath the formal gardens of Catholicism lay an anarchic Eden. The pessimism of Murray and Ong was measured, but it was pessimism all the same.

### Gender by Nature or Culture?

The tone of *Four Cultures* is equable, discursive, and matter-of-fact. O'Malley's term for what he does is "epideictic," a form of discourse that invites contemplation. It is the opposite of "apodictic," certainty-suffused proclamation. O'Malley does not exhort and he is not a problem solver in the accepted sense. *Four Cultures* has nothing directly to say about governance.

This equanimity can be misleading. *Four Cultures*, though hopeful, is also unsettling for Catholicism. Murray and Ong saw the agonistic world on a simplified map, but it was better than no map at all, and it was capable, like an etching, of exquisite tonalities and variations. The longstanding practice of softening doctrinal severity with pastoral casuistry is the prime example of this. The map itself, like medieval *mappemundi*, was above all going somewhere, even if in fact all paths do not lead to Rome or Jerusalem.

The comparative realism of *Four Cultures* breaks with this tradition. The expansion of two into four cultures is not just a heuristic curiosity. It gets O'Malley past the bipolar psychodynamics of Murray and Ong. When this fluid layout is put alongside O'Malley's discussion of the sexual echoes of art and mysticism, a significant alteration of traditional Catholic categories comes into view.

The only place Ong and Murray could go with the agonistic hierarchy was toward equality between the sexes, and that route was blocked. Ong saw it coming, Murray wanted to keep things as

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<sup>57</sup> John Courtney Murray, "America's Four Conspiracies," in *Religion in America*, ed. John Cogley (Cleveland, Ohio: Meridian, 1958), 24.



they were, but neither felt he could do much about the impasse. The issue seemed doctrinally unmanageable.

O'Malley skirts the question of sexual equality between male and female and explores instead questions of sexual identity. The treatment is understated and oblique. Cultural categories are fluid. At least, they are not entirely fixed, and the fuzzy differences between them subvert the masculine and feminine stereotypes of the agonistic legacy even as the cultures reflect an underlying combative-contemplative continuum.

### Resources for Tolerance and Change

It is possible to read O'Malley's analysis, and Ong's, too, as another exercise in grand abstraction. What's more, my presentation has exaggerated the schematic quality of their work. Any synopsis is bound to make these Jesuits look more like stick figures than we would like.

On the other hand, it is clear that O'Malley and Ong, not to mention Murray and Gracián, delve into questions of sexuality and authority. They discern gendered archetypes beneath the talk about rhetorical strategies, and they suggest correspondences with patterns of power.<sup>58</sup>

Still, so what? I am reminded of a cartoon that appeared in the 1950s in *Punch*, the defunct English periodical. It shows a lord reading the *Times* in a plush chair alongside the breakfast table, all plainly set in a cavernous manor house on the family estate. The lady of the manor is sipping tea. "My word!" his lordship, faintly astonished, exclaims. "It says here that the east wing burned down last night!" Catholicism is so big that a disaster here or a crisis there may have very sluggish and attenuated reverberations elsewhere.

The problem with the work of O'Malley, Ong, and their colleagues is not that it is difficult but that it does not spell out programmatic directions. Best practices do not leap off the page. (The exception may be Gracián, whose "best practices" are a bit

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<sup>58</sup> Peter McDonough, "Metamorphoses of the Jesuits: Sexual Identity, Gender Roles, and Hierarchy in Catholicism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (April, 1990), 325–56.



unsavory for some.) This is probably why most Jesuits ignored Ong's studies of agonistic and irenic rhetoric, and his occasional writings on Catholicism, when they appeared.<sup>59</sup> What do you *do* with them? My guess is that the same indeterminacy kept O'Malley's 1983 piece in *Theological Studies* from getting the attention it deserves.

The judgment implies a strategic as well as intellectual rationale. O'Malley et al. touch on combustible subjects. This invokes a primary rule of costs and benefits—too much to lose, too little to gain—that applies to religious as well as secular life. Gracián would understand perfectly.

It could be that O'Malley et al. pinpoint trends so inexorable that you do not have to take any action. But this is like supposing that Catholicism is a tightly wound mechanism rather than the disjointed, baggy environment it is. Single-factor explanations are seldom anything other than reductionist, and the predictions based on them are equivalent to the expectations of cargo cults. Casting O'Malley et al. as templates for change would amount to a flight into identity politics.

It is a truism that the sexual magisterium is the third rail of Catholicism. An equally serious problem may be that we have no models of change for established religions, including Catholicism.

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*[O'Malley] implies . . . that rhetorical, artistic, and religious vehicles with fairly clear erotic undercurrents are shaped by cultural codes.*

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The silent embarrassment of the sociology of religion is that the field still hangs on models developed about a century ago to account for the rise and eventual bureaucratization of religious movements, starting with charismatic breakthroughs. We lack comparable toolkits for the reverse phenomenon: the metamorphosis

of bureaucratized religion into something less rigid, unless we assume that charismatic transitions are cyclically repeated.<sup>60</sup> There

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<sup>59</sup> Walter J. Ong, *American Catholic Crossroads* (New York: Collier Books, 1958), *The Barbarian Within* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), and *Frontiers in American Catholicism* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

<sup>60</sup> See, however, Roger Finke and Patricia Wittberg, "Organizational Revival from Within: Explaining Revivalism and Reform in the Roman Catholic Church," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39 (2000): 154–70.



are no roadmaps to take us from here to there. The temptation is to give up on theory altogether and concentrate on Vaticanology.

This being said, recall the notion of Catholicism as a layered composite of sexual-moral, social, and political tiers. We can dispense with the idea that changes at one level cascade over to the others and still recognize, for example, that O'Malley's repositioning of the debate over sexual equality toward sexual identity sends a few tremors percolating through the system. His contribution is elegiac as well as provocative, and this gives it resonance. The venerable agonistic/irenic idiom is extended rather than abandoned. Notice, too, that O'Malley is not primarily interested in suggesting that various types of cultural expressions have sexual overtones, though this is true enough. Insofar as O'Malley makes a propositional argument at all, he implies something like the reverse: that rhetorical, artistic, and religious vehicles with fairly clear erotic undercurrents are shaped by cultural codes. On its own, the idea of "four cultures" does not trigger transformation. But it does magnify the resources on which change, and the tolerance for change, can draw.

















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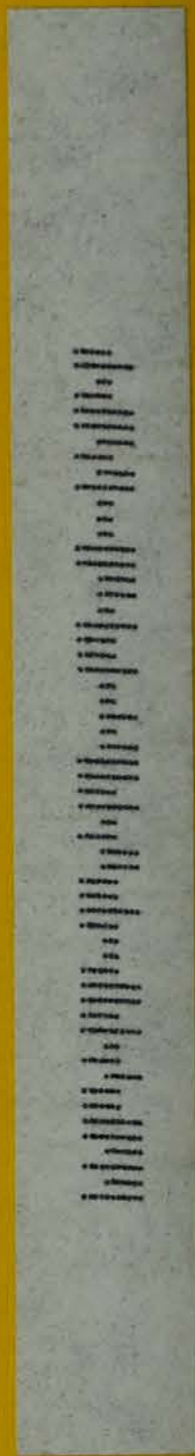
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