DEVELOPING THE TRADITION
To give some structure to my remarks on the difficulties confronting Catholic intellectual life at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries and the resources within the Catholic intellectual tradition to respond to those challenges, I turn to Saint Paul’s statement that there are three things that last: faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13:13). These “theological virtues” are basic attitudes establishing us in a right relationship with God and, as such, may help us locate the most pressing challenges confronting Catholic intellectual life and the resources for dealing with them.1 In connection with faith, I shall say something about pluralism and relativism. In connection with hope, I will offer a comment on cultural despair and cultural arrogance. And in connection with love, I must speak about what I believe to be the most pressing question among Catholics, especially young Catholics, in the United States today: “Why do I need a church?” Spirituality is a “hot” word on college and university campuses today. If you want to fill an auditorium, include the word “spirituality” in the title of your lecture; if you want to empty the auditorium, add the word “church.” So the third part of my remarks deals with the fact that there are many in our culture today who profess deep interest in spirituality but see no necessary connection between spirituality and participation in community.
Pluralism and Relativism

Toward the end of his richly productive life, Karl Rahner advanced the thesis that the Second Vatican Council might best be understood as "the Church's first official self-actualization as a world Church." As such, he suggested that Vatican II marks the second great turning-point in the Church's history. In broad outline, Rahner divided that history into three epochs: the brief period of Jewish Christianity, "the period of the Church in a distinct cultural region, namely, that of Hellenism and of European culture and civilization," and the new period beginning in our lifetime when the Church is finally becoming in practice what it has always claimed to be in intent: catholic, universal. This means that we are now living through the second great crisis in the Church's history. The first, marking the shift from the brief first to the long second of Rahner's epochs, occurred in the apostolic generation. Then the Church had to confront the question whether it was possible to be a Christian believer, a follower of the risen Christ, and at the same time move beyond the Palestinian Jewish world of Jesus and his first disciples into the wider Greco-Roman world. And if it was possible, how could it be done? That these questions were not easy to answer and caused considerable controversy among Christians is amply demonstrated in the Acts of the Apostles and many of the Pauline letters. Now, at the second great crisis, the emergence of the world Church, the question is whether and how it is possible to be a Christian believer, a follower of the risen Christ, and also be a member of a non-Western culture. Virtually all Christians up to our time have lived within European and European-derived cultures. What happens when the Church becomes fully catholic and embraces peoples of Asia and Africa? Must Asians and Africans be transformed culturally into Europeans in order to be Christians?

This is very similar to the question which Paul and Barnabas and their contemporaries had to answer: Did pagan converts have to become culturally Jewish in order to be Christians? Of course, historical decisions always tend to seem inevitable in retrospect, but Rahner pointed out that the answer might have been otherwise. There might still have been a mission to the gentiles, but its
results would have been very different from the churches which emerged from the Pauline mission. But, of course, the answer given to the question was that one did not have to become culturally Jewish in order to accept baptism. We are so accustomed to results of that decision that we can easily fail to recognize how sweeping it was. Indeed, we are still working out its ramifications. Even now, nineteen centuries later, the question of Christianity’s relationship to the first covenant remains a much discussed issue. But if the response to the question which marked the first turning-point in Christian history was that one can be Christian without becoming culturally a Palestinian Jew, the response to the question which marks the second turning-point may be that one can be a member of the Church without becoming culturally a Westerner.

But how does the Church make the adjustments and adaptations necessary for that decision to be realized while remaining faithful to its tradition? To rephrase that question, how does one embrace pluralism without falling into relativism? What I mean by “pluralism” I shall explain shortly. As I am employing it, “relativism” is a negative term. Relativism is too easy a response to the question which confronts us. I can summarize what I mean by relativism as a cultural shrug of the shoulders. Cultures are simply incommensurable. *Chacun à son gout. De gustibus non disputandum.* Different strokes for different folks.

What has the Catholic tradition to offer which allows pluralism to be embraced and relativism to be avoided? I suggest that we consider an oft-repeated statement, deeply embedded in our intellectual tradition, a statement which is all too frequently violated as soon as it is made: God is mystery. Let us take that claim with maximal seriousness.

All talk about God, if not idolatrous, is framed by two poles which I will characterize by statements from Ludwig Wittgenstein and T.S. Eliot. Probably the most frequently quoted sentence in twentieth-century philosophy is the last proposition of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus:* “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”*4* In other words, “If you don’t know what you are talking about, be quiet.” This is an enormously important caution for anyone who speaks about God, the incomprehensible Mystery which grounds all that exists, for
speech about mystery inevitably seeks to make it unmysterious. We must be very cautious not to chatter on about ultimate Mystery as if we know what we are talking about. God demands reverent silence, as the scriptures often remind us. Perhaps the most dramatic instance of this is found at the climax of the Book of Job. When Job, having refused to say that his suffering is the result of guilt which he does not feel, challenges Yahweh to come into court and explain himself, Yahweh answers from the whirlwind in two powerful addresses, the most magnificent poetry in the Hebrew scriptures. Yahweh hammers Job with a series of questions emphasizing the limits of human knowledge: “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations? . . . Have you ever in your life given orders to the morning or sent the dawn to its post? . . . Have you visited the place where the snow is stored? . . . Can you fasten the harness of the Pleiades, or untie Orion’s bands?” (Job 38:4, 12, 22, and 31) In answer to the first of Yahweh’s speeches, Job replies, “My words have been frivolous: what can I reply? I had better lay my hand over my mouth” (40:4). The need for reverent silence is emphasized again in Job’s response to the second of Yahweh’s addresses: “I know that you are all-powerful: what you conceive, you can perform. I was the man who misrepresented your intentions with my ignorant words” (42:2-3). Laying one’s hand over one’s mouth when one is tempted to speak of mysteries that are too high, too incomprehensible for us, is a very Wittgensteinian pose. The first pole framing speech about God is the reminder that we do not know what we are talking about and that silence may well be the best response to Mystery.

But there is another pole. A quotation attributed to T.S. Eliot about poetry holds that there are some things about which we cannot say anything but before which we dare not stay silent. Some things are so important, so crucial to our own being, so necessary to our understanding of who we are and who others are and what the world is like, that we cannot be silent about them even though we know that whatever we say will be inadequate. Think of the words, “I love you.” Has anyone ever said those words without the sinking feeling that they do not begin to convey what one feels? But silence is impossible. From
Shakespeare’s sonnets to woefully inadequate four-letter words sometimes used as synonyms for love in our society, we go on stuttering new ways to say “I love you.” They are all attempts to say what cannot finally be said. Yet we know that we cannot, indeed, that we dare not be silent. Preeminently about God, who is not only ultimate Mystery but also the final destiny of all creation, it is impossible to remain silent. In speaking to undergraduates unenthusiastic about curricular requirements in theology, I often ask whether they think that their lives have purpose, meaning, direction, and if so, whether they produce that purpose, meaning, direction or, at least in part, discover it as already present. If they answer that they find meaning present in their lives, I tell them that they are engaged in talking about God, even though they may never use the word. It is impossible to be silent about God because it is impossible to be silent about the reality of purpose and meaning in our existence.

The religious use of language is carried on between these two poles. The danger for those of us who are professional talkers, “ologists” in whatever “ology” happens to be our specialization, is that all our speaking can mislead us into thinking that finally we know what we are speaking about. If we are speaking about incomprehensible Mystery, about God, then we need to be cautioned frequently about the danger of glibness.

Perhaps this is how we should understand the first two commandments of the Decalogue. When I was a boy, I never worried about the first commandment. Idolatry was not a great problem in the Brooklyn of my youth—or, at least, so I thought. Neither my family nor any of our neighbors were especially tempted to butcher a goat for Odin or offer the odd pigeon to Pallas Athena. But I have come to realize that the first commandment is not of merely historical significance. It’s the first precisely because it commands against a continuing temptation for all religiously sensitive people: the temptation to make an image of God. Images are not only made by hands; the most deceptive images may be the product of seductive words or susceptible imaginations. An image of God, however great, powerful, rich, deep, attractive, consoling, scripturally based, or ecclesiastically approved, is simply an image and must never be confused with
God. An image may serve certain important purposes and be good so far as it goes, but it never goes all the way. Nothing can. God remains sovereignly God.

There is a story told of a distinguished theologian who began his first class with new students by standing at the lecture podium and solemnly saying one word: “God.” After an impressive pause, he continued, “Whatever came into your head when I said the word ‘God’ is not God.” Whether or not the story is true, it may be the most important caution to give students in theology: whatever you think of when you hear the word “God” is not God.

This is the real import of the second commandment of the Decalogue, that against taking the name of God vainly. This commandment has long been reduced in practice to a condemnation of profanity. Now, I am happy to go on record against bad language, but I suggest that the commandment is concerned with something far more important than the Israelites’ use of colorful language. The second commandment follows from the first. If every image, even our best, is inadequate to God, then let us not throw the word “God” around vainly. Let us not chatter on about God as if we know what we are talking about. Indeed, far more than a commandment against profanity, the second commandment might be taken as a caution against preaching and theology. Be very careful not to talk about God in vain, not to claim that one can with perfect adequacy speak about absolute Mystery. The claim to know the “right” way to talk about God, the only “true” way to think about God, is always idolatry.

But does this not throw us into the arms of relativism? If there is no “right” way to think and speak about God, does it follow that we can think and say anything and everything about God? I shall appropriate three terms from H. Richard Niebuhr’s extended essay, “Radical Monotheism and Western Culture,” which I will use in a way not identical but not opposed to his: polytheism, henotheism, and radical monotheism. Polytheism is an attitude of pure skepticism which finally ends in making all conversation about values impossible. Polytheism is not simply the worship of an array of gods; it is the positing of an array of goods, all absolute in their own domains, among which we pick and
choose. You are for this, and I am for that; you are interested in $X$, and I am concerned about $Y$, and there is no way to adjudicate which is better or more important. Niebuhr quotes Walter Lippman:

Each ideal is supreme within a sphere of its own. There is no point of reference outside which can determine the relative value of competing ideals. The modern man desires health, he desires money, he desires power, beauty, love, truth, but which of them he shall desire the most since he cannot pursue them all to their logical conclusions, he no longer has any means of deciding. His impulses are no longer part of one attitude toward life; his ideals are no longer in a hierarchy under one lordly ideal. They have become differentiated. They are free and they are incommensurable.\(^7\)

The governing principle of life is *de gustibus non disputandum*. Chacun à son gout. Different strokes for different folks. Everyone’s opinion on everything is equally valid—or invalid. There is no possibility of genuine conversation, merely juxtaposition. Such relativism saps the *gravitas* of the intellectual life. For, as Thomas Mann wrote, “God is a high and difficult task; but ‘the gods’ are a pleasant sin.”\(^8\)

Henotheism is the absolutizing of one particular historically conditioned perspective. In Niebuhr’s words, it is “that social faith which makes a finite society, whether cultural or religious, the object of trust as well as of loyalty and which tends to subvert even officially monotheistic institutions, such as the church.”\(^9\) Henotheism elevates one “God” above the ranks of the many “gods” and acclaims that “God” as the only one that matters. There is only one God, and he is our God. Our good, our value, our creed, our doctrine, our worship, is the finally and absolutely true one. Henotheism is a subversion of radical monotheism because it is actually an idolatry of the community. Our way of thinking and living is the only true way of thinking and living. That this can “subvert even officially monotheistic institutions, such as the church,” is not surprising, for henotheism is, in fact,
another form of concupiscence, the absolutizing of a relative good. It is the exaltation of \textit{a} good as \textit{the} good, of one way of formulating the truth as the only way of formulating it. To use a biblical category, henotheism is idolatry, the worship of a humanly produced image instead of the living God.

Over against polytheism, the relativizing of the absolute and henotheism, the absolutizing of the relative, stands what Niebuhr calls radical monotheism, in which “the value-center is neither a closed society nor the principle of such a society but the principle of being itself; its reference is to no one reality among the many but to One beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being, and by participation in which they exist.”\textsuperscript{10} If I may be permitted to try and summarize this radical monotheism in a phrase, we do not possess the truth, truth possesses us. Any claim that we possess the truth risks falling into henotheism, into idolatry.

Of course, every theologian worth his or her salt has said this since time immemorial. No one has done so more rigorously than Thomas Aquinas, who insists that speaking equivocally about God tells us nothing and renders meaningful speech about God impossible, that speaking univocally about God is idolatrous, and that, therefore, we must speak of God analogically and so with enormous circumspection.\textsuperscript{11} Nicholas Lash has suggested that the very definition of a theologian should be “someone who watches their language in the presence of God.”\textsuperscript{12} In words that I suspect Saint Thomas would have applauded, Lash writes, “Our words and thoughts concerning God are, indeed, inadequate but, as Newman knew, their inadequacy is acknowledged, their ‘insufficiency’ confessed, not by talking nonsense, but by talking carefully, by taking great care what we say.”\textsuperscript{13} This seems to me especially pressing today as the Church becomes what Rahner called “a world Church,” which requires that we simultaneously recognize that the Church is situated in a global context and that there is a growing pluralism within the Church. The Catholic community must begin to mine deeply its own profound conviction that even its deepest, richest, most traditional formulae about God are simply \textit{our} formulae. They contain wonderful truths about God, but none of them are \textit{the} truth.
All our doctrinal statements are asymptotic. Like certain kinds of curves on a graph, they draw closer and closer to the axis but never intersect it—or, if they do, it is only in infinity. We must profess our doctrinal beliefs with a bit more Wittgensteinian caution, somewhat more of the spirit of Job before the whirlwind. Only so can we recognize that there may be deep, rich, and profound elements of truth among those who speak—and worship—very differently than we. For truth possesses us; we do not possess the truth. This makes real pluralism, as opposed to relativism, possible and so establishes the ground for genuine conversation. By contrast, polytheism renders intellectual conversation impossible and henotheism makes it unnecessary. (If I simply possess the truth, I may lecture others but I have no need to converse with them.) Only radical monotheism allows us to engage in genuine conversation with the conviction that the conversation is important but can never arrive at an absolutely final conclusion. One of the ways we can see this in the wisdom of the Church over the centuries is our traditional way of formulating doctrinal pronouncements: let anyone who says thus and so be anathema. The doctrine teaches what cannot be said but not an absolutely final way in which something must be said. Our doctrine has traditionally been phrased negatively and so avoided idolatry. We must consider this fact more and more deeply if we are to engage in a pluralistic world without becoming a relativistic church. We need to reappreciate the incomprehensibility of God.  

Realistic Cultural and Political Engagement

Relativism is the triumph of Humpty Dumpty. In Through the Looking-Glass Humpty Dumpty tells Alice, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." This is the high road to cultural despair. Social anthropologist Clifford Geertz has offered an oft-quoted definition of "culture": "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions embodied in symbolic forms by means of which men [and women] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." The very notion of a unified culture, i.e., shared values,
attitudes, and symbols conveying those values and attitudes, falls apart if for those whom Niebuhr might call radical polytheists words mean whatever they want them to mean. If a symbol is so polyvalent that it can mean whatever we want it to mean, then shared symbols are simply impossible.

The way in which the “pattern of meanings embodied in symbols” is “historically transmitted” is through texts, by which I mean not only written documents but human artifacts which are designed to express meaning, e.g., dance, music, statues, pictures, building, rituals, and so on. One of the alarming aspects of contemporary intellectual life is arrogance with respect to texts. A classic text, i.e., a text which has influenced many people over a long period of time, must be approached with reverence. If some one leaves a performance of Hamlet saying, “I don’t see anything so remarkable about that play,” the person is proclaiming judgment on him- or herself, not on Shakespeare. This is not because Shakespeare is sacrosanct, but because for four hundred years intelligent, responsible women and men have found Hamlet to be profoundly moving and insightful. To dismiss the play as trivial or silly is disrespect not for a long-dead playwright but for four centuries of lived human experience. One must be very young or very arrogant or very stupid to do that. Since the church is none of these, it must approach its texts with profound reverence. This certainly does not mean that we should not use every technique available to us to read the text. But those techniques are always in service of the text, not the egoism of the reader. Plato has something interesting to say, and it is far more important for me to discover that than endlessly to find mirror images of what I already think reflected back to me. Reverence for the text is necessary if we are to avoid a cultural polytheism which is, in fact, an incapacity for conversation.

This incapacity of conversation ends by making political life impossible. In election years in this country it has become trite to bemoan the sorry quality of the candidates among whom we are asked to choose. Who produces the slate of candidates? In recent decades, thanks to a system of primaries across the nation, we, the voting public, have created the candidates. To paraphrase Shakespeare’s Cassius, “the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our
candidates but in ourselves.” It is increasingly difficult to act as a responsible electorate when there are fewer and fewer shared symbols of cultural values. Unless the symbols that express our “knowledge about and attitudes toward life” are shared, unless they have a communal meaning which cuts across our private meanings, all real political life grinds to a halt. Without some kind of shared symbol system, civil conversation ceases. Polytheism leads to cultural despair which leads to political despair. Since we cannot speak with one another about our deepest convictions about what constitutes a good human life, we vote for our personal interests, a rule which is usually construed as voting our pocketbooks. We vote for candidates who tell us that they stand for the American way, and that the American way means whatever we think it means. To find out what the majority of people-think it means on any given day, candidates poll our opinions, over and over and over again; thus they find out what they stand for.

Cultural henotheism, on the other hand, is the path of cultural imperialism. “We have the truth, and we will tell you others what it is—whether you want it or not. We will impose on you our understanding of the good, the true, and the beautiful. We will make you see the world as we see it, and if you cannot, then you simply will not count as part of that world at all.” The American way of life is the highest and finest achievement of human beings to this point in the history of the planet. Our way of living is the only authentic way for human beings to live. Everyone outside the sphere of our culture lives in a less than optimally human fashion, is, in short, a barbarian. We have seen cultural imperialism of this sort again and again. Once a barbarian was someone who did not speak Greek, now it may be someone who does not live in a free-market economy, but always it is the one who is not like us. Sometimes we ignore the barbarians, but all too often we decide to bring them the benefits of our culture—liberty, goodness, knowledge—even if we have to send in the troops to do so. This cultural arrogance is really the flip-side of cultural despair. And to the avoidance of both the Catholic intellectual tradition has something important to contribute: what Karl Rahner called “the forthright realism of Christianity.”

This realism is the insistence on both the truth of human
freedom and the fact of its limitedness. Christianity’s grasp of both the depth of our freedom and the internal and external limits upon it assures us, in Rahner’s words,

that our freedom is finite, that the restrictedness and stubborn facts of the psychological, historical and sociological material of our freedom can never be abolished in the course of history, not even as a result of the greatest psychological and sociological changes for the better in our state of freedom; as long as our earthly history endures, we are always faced with the unresolved contradictions between the claim of our freedom and its actual opportunities; in this sense we are not free, our freedom can be liberated only by the act of God giving himself.¹⁹

This realistic appraisal can save us from despair on the one hand and utopianism on the other. These utopias are “the result of an outrageous monomania and assert the impossible claim to construct concrete reality in the light of a single principle, thus ultimately having a destructive influence on man.”²⁰ Such utopianism is closely related to what I have been calling cultural henotheism. Christian realism cautions that all our values are finally inadequate, that all the ways we try to express the good, the true, and the beautiful finally fail to live up to the good, the true, and the beautiful. All the ways we structure our societies—our families, our schools, our businesses, and our churches—are tainted by sin. And yet all these expressions of value, all these social structures, may say something of profound importance, may convey goodness and truth and beauty, because God has incarnated God’s self into this human world of ours. Within this world of finite values and fallible social structures God has spoken God’s Word absolutely. The fact that one cannot canonize any expression of value does not mean that one can dismiss any such expression. The finite and relative remain finite and relative, but in them the infinite and the absolute may be embodied.

In the second act of T.S. Eliot’s The Cocktail Party, one character tells her psychiatrist that her upbringing was “pretty conventional”:
I had always been taught to disbelieve in sin.
Oh, I don’t mean that it was ever mentioned!
But anything wrong, from our point of view,
Was either bad form, or was psychological.21

This same attitude, that evil is finally explicable as either “bad form, or mental kinks,” can be found on many an op-ed page in our newspapers. If evil is an illness, then the task is simply to find the correct therapy; if evil is bad form, it originates in bad social training which is a form of oppression, and then we must identify the oppressor and join the right liberation movement to overthrow him/her/it/them. I am all for good therapy and for overthrowing oppressors, but after all the illnesses are cured and all the oppressors have met their just desserts, there will still be sin. The price of ignoring sin is denying freedom. The notion of sin presumes that, however confined by limits of time and space, by social and physical, intellectual and psychological factors, we are free and can misuse that freedom. We cannot do everything, and so we reject cultural arrogance and imperialism; but we can do something, and so we also reject cultural despair.

Where sin has abounded, grace has even more abounded. That is the Christian hope founded in realism. Not utopianism: all we need to do is improve schools, balance the budget, protect the environment, provide better housing or health insurance or prenatal care, and then all will be well. No, it will still be a world marked by limits and sin. That is the mess of the human condition. But it is in that mess that grace is found. Rahner insisted, “The Church’s gospel of Christian realism is and remains the primary service that Christianity performs for the freedom of the individual and society.”22 The Catholic intellectual life must be rooted in that gospel of Christian realism.

Love and the Need for Community

In 1998, the distinguished sociologist of religion at Princeton, Robert Wuthnow, published After Heaven, a book whose subtitle tells us what it is really about: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s.23 He offers extensive demonstration of what I suspect many
of us already knew anecdotally. In the United States today many people are genuinely interested in developing their spiritual lives, but that interest is largely unconnected to a desire to participate in communities of faith. Wuthnow writes that "growing numbers of Americans say they are spiritual but not religious, . . . that many say their spirituality is growing but the impact of religion on their lives is diminishing." This is an historic shift in our culture:

At the start of the twentieth century, virtually all Americans practiced their faith within a Christian or Jewish framework. They were cradle-to-grave members of their particular traditions, and their spirituality prompted them to attend services and to believe in the teachings of their churches and synagogues. Organized religion dominated their experience of spirituality, especially when it was reinforced by ethnic loyalties and when it was expressed in family rituals. Even at mid-century, when the religious revival of the 1950s brought millions of new members to local congregations, many of these patterns prevailed. Now, at the end of the twentieth century, growing numbers of Americans piece together their faith like a patchwork quilt. Spirituality has become a vastly complex quest in which each person seeks in his or her own way.

We live in a society in which increasingly even religiously sensitive and concerned people see religion as a matter of "God and me" rather than "God and us." What are the resources which the Catholic intellectual tradition can mine in order to respond to this enormously pressing challenge?

We are familiar with the notion of a hierarchy of truths. Although the phrase came into use after the Vatican II, the idea that doctrines vary in their connection with the basis of Christian faith has, in fact, long been recognized in Catholic teaching. Rather than the term "hierarchy," which carries with it suggestions of "higher" and "lower" truths, I prefer the image of a series of concentric circles. Some doctrines are closer to the center, others more peripheral. The innermost circle contains
those elements which are so central, so key, so much the core of the tradition that without them one cannot pretend to be dealing with Christianity at all. I suggest that at least two doctrines are in that innermost circle: the Trinity and the Incarnation. In these two doctrines the whole of the Catholic intellectual life is rooted.

The doctrine of the Trinity is an enormous elaboration of the core claim of Christianity, a claim repeated again and again in varying ways throughout the New Testament documents but which finds its clearest and most succinct formulation in 1 John 4:8, 16: God is love. I intend merely to suggest one consequence of that central claim: outside the context of a community which makes agapic love experienceable, the word "God" will always be used idolatrously. Let me explain what this means by recalling two stories, the first taken from Nietzsche and the second from Dostoevsky.

Certainly one of the best-known passages in all of Nietzsche's work is "The Madman," from The Gay Science. Into the marketplace came a madman carrying a lantern who cried out, "I seek God! I seek God!" Those standing about in the marketplace, who did not believe in God, began to mock him, asking whether God had wandered off and become lost or if God had gone into hiding. The madman fixed them with his stare and replied that he would tell them where God was. "We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers." Then in a series of stunning images he shows them the consequences of the death of God:

Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?

The madman concludes with a stark summary: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him." When it becomes clear
that his astonished hearers do not know how to respond, the madman smashes his lantern and leaves the marketplace murmuring to himself, “I have come too early . . . this tremendous deed is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men.”

I believe Nietzsche is on to something of immense import in this parable. Please notice that the encounter is set in the marketplace and that those in the marketplace have lost belief in God before the madman ever appears on the scene. This is not only the classical Greek agora; it is also the unregulated, laissez-faire capitalist marketplace of the nineteenth century. And in such a marketplace, a world governed simply and solely by competition, God who is least inadequately understood as agape is dead. In a world under the rubric, “Always take care of number one,” the word “God” is a nonsense syllable. Those who live in such a world do not believe in God even if they do not yet realize it as yet.

Perhaps I can underscore this point. I ask you to imagine two people standing next to me. On the one side is the most brilliantly gifted scientist since Einstein, a greater philanthropist than Mother Theresa, a more remarkable poet than Shakespeare, a more talented musician than Mozart, a finer painter than El Greco. On the other side is a mentally retarded child. Certainly, no one advocates cruelty to this child, but let us play “life-boat ethics” for a moment. If we have the time, the energy, the resources to care for only one of these two persons, who will it be? The first who so obviously offers so much to the rest of us, or the second who seems to be a drain? On any ordinary scale the first seems a huge plus and the second, we must reluctantly conclude, a minus. The only way to avoid such a conclusion might be to insist that the two are incomparable, each of infinite value in him or herself. Ah, but to speak of infinite value implies an infinite valuer. That would, of course, be God—but, in the words of Nietzsche’s madman, “God is dead, God remains dead, and we have killed him.” And if God is dead, our imaginary child is in grave danger. What a terrible world, you say? Yes, and as the madman asks, isn’t it getting colder every day? You think that you would not want to live in such a world? Quite right, you probably couldn’t.
Human beings need “God” to survive and will crumble in a world without “God.” That is why in Nietzsche's next book, Zarathustra proclaims the “superman.” The superman is the one who can face the dark, cold, empty universe, and survive. We human beings are simply not up to it.

Let me offer a contrasting but complementary story taken from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov:* A woman seeks the help of Father Zossima, an orthodox monk and a spiritual director of great fame throughout Russia, who also happens to be the novice master of Alyosha, the youngest of the Karamazov brothers. She is distraught and tells him that she can no longer bear the suffering with which she has been living. After Zossima promises to assist her if he can, she tells him that she was raised as a believer but that somehow she has gradually lost faith. This was not the result of a sudden crisis of faith sparked by some terrible event in her life, but rather a slow drifting away from belief. Now, however, she realizes that she cannot live without hope of continuance of life beyond death. Life has become dreary and meaningless for her. She asks Zossima for some proof for faith, and he replies that, although proof is impossible, conviction is not. He tells her she must enter upon the way of active love, that she must set out daily to love the people around her in the most concrete and practical ways possible. As she approaches real selflessness in loving others, she will gradually discover that she cannot not believe in God. “This has been tested,” he tells her, “it is certain.”

What Nietzsche’s madman says negatively, Dostoevsky’s Zossima puts positively. Both insist that, if one lives in a world in which agapic love is systematically ruled out, the word “God” ceases to have any meaning. One may continue to use the word, one may even pray to “God,” but the word will designate at best an idol and at worst a void. Apart from Zossima’s way of active concrete love, apart from agape, one can only use the word “God” in vain.

In a world governed solely by competition, whatever is meant by “God” will not be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. On the other hand, if one works to realize agapic love in the world, one comes to an experience of the living God. With
due respect to Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas, to Descartes and Kant, and all those wise and learned folk who have labored to find proofs for the existence of God, Dostoevsky's Zossima is right: here proof is impossible, but certitude is not. At best, all proofs for the existence of God, even when they seem to work, lead us to a concept. Zossima's way of active love leads us to an experience, which is something entirely different. There is a vast difference between my giving you a dossier filled with information about someone and my introducing you to that person. The first will give you a very full idea of the person, but the second engages you in a richer and incomparably fuller experience. That is the hinge of on which turns the conviction which Zossima holds out to the woman who lost faith. The experience of a community in which agapic love is celebrated and attempted, a community which confesses its failure and repents when it fails to love agapically, is the precondition for the meaningful use of the word "God." Outside such a community, God-talk is idolatrous. This is the first reason why the Catholic Christian community is convinced of the need for church: outside a community of agapic love, one will not know what the word "God" means. Exploration of the core Christian doctrine of the Trinity leads to the recognition of the need for community as the context in which language about God can be used meaningfully.

The second doctrine in the innermost circle of Christian belief is the Incarnation. To point to the significance of this doctrine for understanding the absolute necessity of community in Christian religious life, let me ask you to consider what may, at first glance, seem the least immediately interesting verses in the Gospel of Luke. The first two chapters of Luke's Gospel are the infancy narratives ending with the finding of the boy Jesus in the temple and his return with his family to Galilee. The third chapter picks up where Mark's Gospel begins, with the mission of John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism by him: "In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar's reign, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of the territories of Ituraea and Trachonitis, Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, and while the high-priesthood was held by Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah, in the desert" (3:1-2). I
suggest that this verse is enormously important because it is the
very antithesis of “Once upon a time . . .” Its claim is that the
story being told is not a timeless tale, an always present myth
about anyone at anytime, but rather a narrative of events which
happened at a particular time (the fifteenth year of the reign of
Tiberius, and soon) in a particular place (the desert beyond the
Jordan) to particular people (in this case, John the son of
Zechariah). When God enters our world, when God translates his
Word into human speech, God takes on space and time. Human
being is spatio-temporal being. If the claim of the Incarnation is
taken with radical seriousness—and how else can we believers take
it?—then the Word’s assumption of human nature is also an
assumption of spatio-temporality. The Word is in space and time.
But space and time is always a matter of particularity: here is not
there, and now is not then. If the Word of God becomes incarnate
in the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, then the Word does not
become incarnate in the same way in the reigns of Hammurabi or
Louis XIV. If the Word of God becomes incarnate in a minor
province of the Roman empire at the eastern end of the
Mediterranean, then the Word does not become incarnate in the
same way in China or Peru. That is the point of living in space
and time: if you live in the twenty-first century, you do not live
in the tenth or the thirty-fifth centuries; if you are born in North
America, you are not born in central Africa or Australia. Spatio-
temporality means that you are particular.

That particularity propels us into history. Because historical
events are particular, there is only one way to know about them:
someone tells you. Historical events cannot simply be deduced.
They cannot be argued to. One may deduce the Pythagorean
theorem, but no one can simply think his or her way to the
conquest of Athens by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. There is
only one way in which we can know an historical event: someone
told someone else who, in turn, told another who wrote it down,
after which it was read by still another who again told someone
else who told us. Apart from a chain of tradition, there is no
access to historical knowledge. This is why, if the Incarnation is
an historical event, i.e., if it is a particular event at a particular
time and in a particular place, we can know of it only by
participation in a community of witnesses. The great nineteenth-century Catholic apologist Johann Adam Möhler made this point as strongly as anyone ever has:

We can never arrive at an external authority, like Christ, by purely spiritual means. The attempt would involve a contradiction, which could only be disposed of in one or two ways; either we must renounce the idea, that in Christ God manifested himself in history, to the end, that the conduct of mankind might be permanently determined by him, or we must learn the fact through a living, definite, and vouching fact. Thus authority must have authority for its medium.  

The intellectual historian John Nef recounts a story about the great physicist Werner Heisenberg.

An account was recently given me of an episode that occurred when Heisenberg was visiting Cambridge University. The discoverer of the principle of indeterminacy is a gifted amateur pianist. One evening after dinner in hall with the fellows of a college, he was persuaded to sit down at the instrument. He played the last sonata of Beethoven, opus 111. He finished amid silence produced by the majesty of the music. "There, gentlemen," he remarked, "you have the difference between science and art. If I had never lived, another would have discovered the principle of indeterminacy. Given the evolution of science the discovery was inevitable. But if Beethoven had never lived, no one would have written that sonata."

One could say much the same about the difference between "Once upon a time . . ." and "In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar's reign . . ." A timeless myth may be equally available to anyone and, if forgotten, recreated by another, but unless someone tells you what happened in the fifteenth year of Tiberius' reign, you will never know. That is the second reason why church is
necessary: apart from a community of witnesses who tell the story, there is no access to the Word made flesh.

G.K. Chesterton maintained that it is crucially important to belong to a community with deep and rich sense of tradition because it saves us from what he regarded as the most degrading of all forms of servitude: that of being merely a child of one’s time. Participation in the tradition of life and thought of such a community preserves us from being merely twenty-first century English-speaking North Americans. Through such a community we are connected to the persons and events of the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, as well as the north Africa of Augustine, the Paris of Thomas Aquinas, Spain of Teresa of Avila, and the England of John Henry Newman. What Acton wrote of the study of history is eminently true of participation in a community with such a sense of tradition:

History must be our deliverer not only from the undue influences of other times, but from the undue influences of our own, from the tyranny of environment and the pressure of the air we breathe. It requires all historic forces to produce their record and submit to judgment, and it promotes the faculty of resistance to contemporary surroundings by familiarity with other ages and other orbits of thought.  

We need to mine the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation if we are to explain to students why participation in the community of the church is absolutely essential to their spiritual lives. If they do not participate in the community of the catholic and apostolic church, they will not know how to speak of God and even less how to speak to God and they will find themselves cut off from the presence of the Word in space and time. They will be unintentional idolaters and merely children of their own time.

Faith, hope, love—these three last. Under the heading of faith, our problem is to enter wholeheartedly into pluralistic conversation without falling into relativism. I have suggested that taking with full seriousness the incomprehensibility of the mystery
of God gives us a way to begin addressing that problem. Hope makes possible true engagement in the work of politics, i.e., the forming of communities which foster the truly good life for human beings without succumbing to an all too easy embrace of some utopian "ism" or lapsing into a cynical social despair. To encourage this in ourselves and our students, I have suggested that we must explore ever more deeply the proclamation of the gospel of Christian realism, which sees the human situation as deeply marked by sin but even more radically rooted in grace. And finally, to counter the exaggerated individualism of American culture, we must experience again and again that outside communion with one another we can never know communion with God. To appreciate the full depth of this claim and the full scope of our communal being, we must turn, as believers have always turned, to the core doctrines of the Catholic Christian tradition, the Trinity and the Incarnation. Those are challenges that face the Catholic intellectual tradition today, and these are some of its resources for responding to them.

Notes

1. See Karl Rahner, in Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 1795b: "the real function of the supernatural, infused virtues is to orientate the whole religious ethical life (which itself expresses the spiritual nature of man) towards the immediate possession of God."


5. All translations are from The New Jerusalem Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1985).
11. *Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 5.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Polytheism, Henotheism, and Idolatry

FRANCIS X. CLOONEY

It is daunting to find oneself having to offer a response to a presentation by so eloquent and wise a speaker as Michael Himes. I am fundamentally in agreement with his general position and sentiments about the Catholic tradition; I share most of the values he commends and worry about most of the dangers he signals. This should not come entirely as a surprise: I come from Brooklyn too, and from a similar religious background; I did Ph.D. studies at the same university; I teach in the same department. Many of the points he makes are simply what I would have tried to say in my own words were I in his position. So I will not be proposing any sharp disagreements in substance.

My expertise is in the study of India and comparative theology, so I was naturally intrigued by Himes’s discussion of monotheism and the temptation to settle for easier and less authentic alternatives. In particular I enjoyed observing his use of the categories of polytheism, henotheism, and radical monotheism, which H. Richard Niebuhr had introduced in his Radical Monotheism and Western Culture to sort out and explain the core of Christian identity and the temptations which dilute it. Luckily, since there are three of us who have been asked to respond, I feel authorized in narrowing my response to a particular issue: How are we to think about monotheism in relationship to polytheism, henotheism, and idolatry, and how might this affect how we teach
the wisdom of our own tradition in relation to that of other religious traditions in today’s world?

Let us recall how the terms are used in Himes’s presentation of Niebuhr’s ideas. First, he quotes Niebuhr, “Polytheism is an attitude of pure skepticism which finally ends in making all conversation about values impossible.” Himes adds:

Polytheism is not simply worshipping an array of gods, polytheism is positing an array of absolute goods and you pick and choose among them. You think this, I think that. You are for this, and I am for that. I am concerned about this issue, and you are concerned about that issue and they are all simply incommensurable. There is no way to discuss them; it is simply different values for different people; different strokes for different folks. It is a pure relativism which says everyone’s opinion on every issue is as good as everyone else’s opinion. It is a kind of democracy of the intellectual life. Whatever anyone thinks is equally valuable with what everyone else thinks. There is no possibility of genuine and meaningful conversation.

In Niebuhr’s essay, as Himes cites it, henotheism is “social faith which makes a finite society, whether cultural or religious, the object of trust, as well as of loyalty, and which tends to subvert even officially monotheistic institutions such as the Church.” Himes interprets Niebuhr this way:

Henotheism is the approach that says there is only one best value. Out of all the possible values, there is only one. Out of all of the many gods, only one matters, and believe in him. It is our God, our good, our value, our creed, our liturgy, our doctrine which is the finally and absolutely true and one. It subverts radical monotheism because, in fact, it becomes a kind of idolatry of the community.

Finally, Niebuhr suggests that “radical monotheism speaks of a situation in which the value center is neither a closed society nor the principle of such a society, but the principle of Being itself. Its
reference is to know one reality above the many, but to one beyond all the many whence all the many derive their being and by participation in which they exist.” Himes adds later on, “If I may be permitted for a moment to try and summarize the deep and rich perspective that Niebuhr offers in that article, it would be this: we do not possess the truth; the truth possesses us. Any time we speak as if we possess the truth, we are falling into henotheism, we fall into idolatry.”

Thus far Niebuhr, and Niebuhr as used by Himes. It is easy to agree with them both—though a detective (writing a longer essay) might notice differences in their views—since none of us will in principle favor religious consumerism or clumsy and artificial substitutes for God. But I would like to raise a few questions about the genealogy and use of the terms “polytheism,” “henotheism,” “monotheism,” and “idolatry” in Himes’s paper. As Catholic intellectuals, after all, we need to ponder both the explicit and implicit effects of the words we speak, as well as the sources of those words.

Niebuhr himself does not tell us where he gets the terms “polytheism,” “henotheism,” and “monotheism.” In a footnote he refers vaguely to Emile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religion* as a source for ideas on mythologies and cults, but at least in that work Durkheim does not use the terms we are interested in. The likely source, though not mentioned by Niebuhr, is F. Max Müller, the great nineteenth century scholar of religion and pioneer Indologist who was generally considered the first to make widespread good use of “henotheism.” In one of his 1878 *Hibbert Lectures*, for instance, Müller took up the topic of “Henotheism, Polytheism, Monotheism, Atheism.” He begins the lecture with the question, “Is monotheism a primitive form of religion?” Drawing on examples from the ancient Vedic religion of India, Müller argues that henotheism—derived from the Greek “hen” (one) rather than “monos” (one only)—was the oldest form of religion evident in the Vedic cult which had already diverged from a thorough polytheism (if it had ever embraced it previously). According to Müller, henotheism aimed at acknowledging divine presence in specific single objects recognized as particularly and compellingly worthy of respect. Ritually, this attitude functions
as “a successive belief in single supreme gods” which must be kept “distinct from that phase of religious thought which we commonly call polytheism, in which the many gods are already subordinated to one supreme god, and by which therefore the craving after the one without a second has been more fully satisfied.” In Müller’s essay, monotheism, in which the multiplicity of gods is banished, succeeds both henotheism and polytheism, as one God becomes not only the immediate but also enduring and perpetual object of worship, to the exclusion of all others. We can also note though that for Müller atheism, in which the personality of particular deities and even of a supreme deity is put aside, goes beyond monotheism. His interest heads in this direction since he is interested too in non-theistic Indian thought, particularly the great Vedanta traditions, some of which are not theistic but instead nondualist. Obviously, neither Niebuhr nor Himes engages Müller’s whole project of theorizing about where monotheism and atheism came from in the first place; both have a specifically Christian theological notion of monotheism in mind, even if Niebuhr’s monotheistic apprehension of “the principle of being” does not seem identical with Himes’s God-language.

In a longer and very learned response with copious footnotes someone might also, as Müller himself did, turn again to the study of ancient India, in order to (re)gain insights into what henotheism, polytheism, monotheism, and atheism meant in that context. Such would be a worthy service to this discussion, since ancient India has preserved for us so many interesting aspects of the religious history of the human race in general, and it would be worthwhile to balance our considerable knowledge of the West with more knowledge of other cultures and traditions. Here I will offer only a few summary observations based on my own reflection on the gods and worship of gods in India, as found in ancient Indian ritual texts such as the hymns of the three thousand year old Rg Veda. To be a Hindu polytheist, as distinct from a Niebuhrian polytheist, is to be aware of multiple divine presences in the world. This awareness opens up opportunities to apprehend the numerous arrivals of the Divine in our experience, in our world, and through our rituals, in our practice and worship. It seems that very many Hindu polytheists over many millennia have dealt with
the multiplicity of gods by reinterpreting it as symbolic, or as a complex manifestation of the one. In some cases, the many gods are servants of the single highest and true deity. The reason why a polytheist does not immediately become a monist or a monotheist, insofar as people might be imagined to be stepping back and making conscious choices in this regard, has something to do with honoring the possibilities and not denying the fact that there are many different ways we can encounter the Divine. The polytheistic claim, even if formalized as a claim about divinities, is not at all the same as a loss of the possibility of saying anything definite nor need it be “a pure relativism which says everyone’s opinion on every issue is as good as everyone else’s opinion.”

We should be able to honor the polytheistic insight at least as a general principle in our theology and our teaching: there is not just one possibility, but many, and even the apparently best possibility need not eradicate the multitude of good ones. Filtered through a monotheistic perspective, for instance, a polytheistic perspective might nonetheless be honored as asking us whether God, who has spoken to us in certain ways, might also speak to others in other ways; whether the truths we apprehend in certain concepts and words and images might be rendered thinkable to others by other concepts and words and images; and whether the tradition which makes sense to us and gives us life need be taken as the only successful life-giving tradition. Whatever our answers, no or yes, we are the better off for the asking of the questions as real questions.

Concerning henotheism, it is surely possible for people in any culture to have contempt for views other than their own, and to reduce everything to what one happens to believe right now. But it is not clear that “henotheism” is the word to characterize such attitudes or that monotheism is the sole antidote. As I understand early Indian worship, the dynamic of henotheism was not to deny the other, but rather to appreciate and immerse oneself in whichever encounter one experienced at any given moment, without being distracted by other possibilities, even better ones. Every word, even in blame of others, is subsidiary to praise of the one before whom one stands in worship. At appropriate moments in a ritual performance, the god or goddess being invoked is
addressed with high praise and reverence, as the deity best suited to help the performer at this present time. The experience is total, one is not looking over the deity’s shoulder to see if someone more influential might be passing by.

A henotheist might then be taken as reminding us not to be paralyzed by the multiplicity of possibilities, the tyranny of the generic “better” or the tyranny of the generic “best,” and not to conclude immediately that to make a good choice I must deny that other choices might be made, by myself or others, at other times. Rather, one is challenged to stand in humility before the various presences of the divine in the world, and to offer full commitment, here and now, as we are able. Although modern Americans and Christians may not be able to be henotheists in an ancient Indian sense, we certainly should be able to discuss how imperfect, incomplete, and finite choices can still be honorable and holy, and how my firm affirmation of the truth as I see it now does not preclude different affirmations in different contexts. This interpretation seems more fruitful than saying that henotheism “says there is only one best value. Out of all the possible values, there is only one. Out of all of the many gods, only one matters, and believe in him . . . Any time we speak as if we possess the truth, we are falling into henotheism, we fall into idolatry.”

Perhaps this is the point at which I should include a comment on idolatry. I have known some fine and virtuous idolaters, Hindus deeply devoted to consecrated embodiments of a deity dear to them, in temples large or small, on Indian mountaintops or on street corners or in American suburbs. One of the things I have learned about idolatry is how idolaters are able to affirm that a particular image—this stone carving or that wooden figure or that image painted on a wall—can, even in the context of obvious fragility and limitation, be loved, chosen, and worshipped as holy, as a gift of divine immediacy. Idolaters I know do not think that every block of wood or every stone is God (or a god), even if for some of them, as for us, God is everywhere and in all things; they do not expect images to start talking or to defend themselves if struck by a zealous skeptic; they do not forget that God is more than stone and wood. For the majority of Hindu idolaters who are theists, idolatry is also about divine vulnerability: to be near
to devotees, God chooses to be vulnerable and limited, confined by love to particular very small places. There is something profound and very powerful in idol worship, and Catholics at least should be able to recognize this kind of love and recognition, as at least similar to the Eucharist. There would be no shame in saying that Hindu idolaters and Catholics devoted to the Blessed Sacrament have a great deal in common. In any case, idolatry need not be taken as a defense of the view that “we alone possess the truth”—an attitude to which iconoclasts have yielded as often as idolaters.

Finally, let us consider monotheism. Here too, I agree with most of what Himes has to say. The self-manifestation of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is a gift, a terrifying gift, something God reveals to us, not something we figure out on our own. To stand on the brink and yield to the monotheistic intuition opens us to the mystery of the Divine, teaches us to be silent, at best to speak with a kind of stutter because we know we can never say properly what God is and has done for us. We can fill out this story too, confessing that for the people of Israel discovering the one true God was also to acknowledge the pain of slavery, alienation in a foreign land, the celebration of Passover, crossing the Red Sea and receiving those great first and second commandments at Sinai. We are blessed if we can remember and honor this great gift in our lives.

But one can do well or poorly in speaking of monotheism, and it is important to consider the uses to which we put the term. Niebuhr works with his own sense of radical monotheism, the confidence “that Being is God, or, better, that the principle of being, the source of all things and the power by which they exist, is good, as good for them and good to them.” In a footnote in his book, Niebuhr concedes that he does not want automatically to extend his thoughts on monotheism to other cultures: “In confining the ensuing discussion to Western culture I do not wish to imply that radical monotheism has emerged nowhere else. The question of the relation of this form of faith to the monisms of the East is left aside partly because I am not prepared by intimate knowledge to explore it, partly because the present situation seems to require first of all critical self-knowledge on the part of Western man if his encounters with the East are to be fruitful.”
Himes seems to be talking more directly about God and God as present in our thinking, praying, and worshipping, but it seems fair to ask Himes whether there isn’t at least a hint of Catholic self-congratulation at work when he says:

Because the truth possesses us, we do not possess the truth. We cannot be polytheists because that renders all intellectual conversation impossible. We cannot be henotheists because that renders all intellectual conversation unnecessary. Only monotheism allows us to engage in genuine conversation with insistence that the conversation is important, but never absolutely final. One of the ways that the Church has recognized this over the centuries, is the traditional way of formulating doctrine—the via negativa. Let anyone who says thus and so be anathema. The doctrinal formulae told us what could not be taught: you cannot go beyond this point and you cannot go beyond that point. If you teach anything beyond this, you are outside the circle of belief; if you say anything beyond that, you are out. But in here—all is possible and should be prayerfully pursued. The attempt to claim to speak with positive precision always leads to idolatry. The Church needs to explore that much more richly and deeply.

But I cannot resist intruding with my own rhetorical flourish here, observing that more than once there have been problems with monotheism and those who live by monotheism, problems not resolved simply by stating that monotheism is fine while monotheists remain sinners. The interesting issue of anathemas aside, it would be naïve for us and not credible with our students were we to give the impression that the story of radical monotheism in the Bible is simply a happy and wise celebration of The Great and Gracious Mystery. There is the problem of the slaughter of the first born of the Egyptians and the soldiers in the Red Sea, the slaughter of the Amalekites and the Moabites, the indigenous peoples God smites on behalf of his own people, and there is the problem of I Kings 18, wherein Eli’jah challenges the four
hundred and fifty prophets of Ba’al and the four hundred prophets of Ashe’rah to a contest in which they will demonstrate whose divinity is more attentive and more active. After the priests of Ba’al and Ashe’rah have failed, despite their best efforts, to bring down divine fire on their altar,

Eli’jah said to all the people, “Come near to me”; and all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down; Eli’jah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, “Israel shall be your name”; and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, “Fill four jars with water, and pour it on the burnt offering, and on the wood.” And he said, “Do it a second time”; and they did it a second time. And he said, “Do it a third time”; and they did it a third time. And the water ran round about the altar, and filled the trench also with water. And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Eli’jah the prophet came near and said, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that thou, O Lord, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back.” Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God.”

Neither a polytheist nor a henotheist, Eli’jah adds a final touch:

And Eli’jah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Ba’al; let not one of them escape.” And they seized them;
and Eli’jah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and killed them there. (I Kings 18.19-40)

Such texts are part of our tradition, and reflection on monotheism would be incomplete without some discussion of them. What might a polytheist or henotheist or idolater say about Eli’jah? Our students should know this kind of report too, if our educational institutions are to stand for both “intellectual” and “Catholic.”

The point of course is not to turn things around and suggest that we monotheists are nasty, while polytheists, henotheists, and idolaters are the nicest of people. Different people do well and poorly in different contexts, and no single rule covers all cases. I am talking rather about the claims we end up making or seem to be making about people in other traditions as we sort out the claims we wish to make about ourselves. Our Christian monotheistic commitment is a precious gift from God and should not lead to contempt for the other, intolerance, or violence. But if we are to encourage our students to think through the issues discussed by Himes at the heart of his presentation, we cannot afford to give them even the impression that monotheism is intelligent and virtuous, while polytheism, henotheism, and idolatry are narrow-minded, mistaken, and vicious. Even if we believe that the gift of knowledge of God has a profound effect on our lives, we cannot convincingly draw a straight and exceptionless line from “monotheism” to “good” and “true” or from “henotheism” and “polytheism” to “bad” and “false.” Unless disclaimers—such as Niebuhr’s footnote cited above—are explicit, a claim about us (such as Himes intends) may very well seem to be also a claim about people quite different from ourselves. It is too likely that some of our students at least will begin to think of other real people, such as Hindus, to be precisely the polytheists, henotheists, and idolaters who are obscured in our shadow. Even if some critical assessments of others are true, the task in the classroom is to indicate how we could possibly know this, and what lessons are to be drawn from our discovery of the failures of others. We want our students to think, not to congratulate themselves at the expense of people unlike ourselves.

My point then is a practical and pedagogical one. If Himes has
so finely used the India-Müller-Niebuhr series of concepts and words in order to say something very wise and important about what we need to remember and what we need to resist if we are to be humble and intelligent Catholics, he and we still need to remind ourselves that we have not said something humble and intelligent about the polytheists, henotheists, and idolaters of the world. But if their story is unheard and their theories unthought, ours too are incomplete. If we Christians are by the grace of God monotheists, then too, by the grace of God and out of respect for the intellectual life, we need to make it clear that we have much to learn before we draw conclusions about “henotheists” and “polytheists” and “idolaters.” Who knows: some may find their way into our classrooms, and it would be a shame to overlook them.

Notes


2. Müller, “Henotheism, Polytheism, Monotheism, Atheism,” 277. Müller’s understanding polytheism as dependent on monotheism differs from my own, since I would posit a polytheism in which the multiplicity of gods remains multiple and unsubordinated to a single supreme deity.


5. Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, 38, note 1.

am very happy that I did not receive even the two-page outline of Professor Himes’s lecture because I would be in a bad situation if I had. I would have to criticize something with which I agree 100 percent. I would have tried to match an eloquence, the like of which I have never seen. What we heard is actually Catholic common sense raised to a level of wisdom, insight, eloquence, and art. All the time he was speaking, I was thinking of G.K. Chesterton. Maybe Chesterton would also qualify this a little bit. I am, as you might suspect, a monotheist, but not a radical monotheist. Radical monotheism is too radical for me. I leave that to our Protestant brothers and sisters. As a Catholic, I know what is the essence of Catholicism for me. It is in Chesterton, “if a thing is worth doing, it’s worth doing poorly.” That is a very comforting thought to me.

I believe in the communion of saints, as Fr. Himes would say. We are together here, and we are many people out together, and there is a mess. Many people are starving, stumbling to a common end and they never really get there. But this is part of why I like to be a Catholic and could never be, if I may say so, a Protestant, as Mr. Niebuhr was.

First of all, what is education? Briefly, education has traditionally consisted of integrating and incorporating the young into the structures and values of a particular society for better or worse. We know what Socrates had to say about it. In the modern
world, that means that we have to incorporate them into a tradition that gets longer and longer. There are more and more books to be read, there is more to be known, and the pace has accelerated in the last fifty years beyond compare. Education has become so revolutionized in scientific and technical terms that to speak of a humanistic education in the same way that we spoke about it in the past makes no sense at all. One is not a humanist today if one does not know something about science or modern technology. So this is the new incorporation.

Second, for the Catholic student there is an additional task, which may well be the central task, mainly to raise the young within a Catholic tradition—a tradition which also, as you know, is in full change. As Archbishop Rembrandt Weakland put it very clearly—but threateningly—our generation wants all institutions of higher education to be academically excellent, to form leaders in American society, who have vision and values, to work hard at the larger and greater Catholic tradition of learning. We want our graduate students to know the Catholic tradition, even when they decide to reject it. Most of us are convinced that such tradition is not just one of private religion but also that has something to say to this world and to American society. I could not agree more. But this is a very tall order. It is not easy.

Allow me to approach the purely intellectual task, the education of the young into the modern world and into the humanistic tradition. We Catholics have to do a lot of catching up to do. One may remember that about fifty years ago, Monsignor John Tracy Ellis said, “Catholics in America are not non-intellectuals, they are anti-intellectual.” I believe when I first immigrated to this country, this was to some extent still true. Of course, we had great Catholic intellectuals, whom we already had in the nineteenth century. But there was a great deal of catching-up to be done. At this point, this is no longer true. We have a great Catholic intellectual tradition, and we are being recognized, which we were not at that time. No Catholic institution, not even Notre Dame, Boston College, Fordham, or Georgetown were taken seriously. Today they are. But they are also being recognized within the secular academia. It is rather remarkable that the Divinity school at Yale and the Religious Studies Department at
Harvard, both fortresses in the past of anti-Catholic thinking, now have Catholics as their leaders.

So the situation is obviously changed. But what does this mean and what is the lesson? We are there? No. The lesson is this: we can no longer invoke the lame argument in the past that we can do whatever we want to because they do not recognize us. It is true that there has been, and continues to be, anti-Catholicism. But we have proven ourselves and cannot fall back into mediocrity with the excuse of an anti-Catholic environment. It does exist, but not in terms of quality. They expect that if we are running a university, we had better run a good university.

From an intellectual point of view, we in the United States are in a particularly favorable position. If one takes just the order of the Jesuits; they have twenty-eight universities in the United States alone. This is incredible, by any standards. That means that this single religious order is a more widespread infrastructure than anything else in the country. So why don’t we use it? Because I still feel that there is still too much mediocrity. We are still too rapidly satisfied with what we have done, and we still think too easily “It’s good enough for us because we have Catholicism, we have the truth anyway.” That does not work. We have to continue to prove ourselves to God and to each other. What is particularly disturbing is that we, by the very nature of our religion and by the very nature of our training in Catholic schools, we are too inclined to take things for granted, not to criticize them, and not to investigate them.

This brings me to the point of the Catholic identity. As you know, there is a general feeling that we are losing our identity. I do not think I reveal any secrets when I say that some universities have lost it in such a way that it will be very difficult to retrieve. This is a matter of great concern to me.

The question is, what is it to be Catholic? Here again, I think we take it too lightly. We take too much for granted. To be Catholic does not consist of simply repeating formulas that we find in the Catechism, or in papal encyclicals, not even in the most recent ones. Those things are fine, but they are not sufficient. I think that we must be more Catholic in a far more fundamental sense. Yesterday, we spoke about Catholic literacy and the
example of the Real Presence. I do not think it is going to be particularly helpful if one explains to his or her students, those who are involved in theology, “Well, that is very simple, that means transubstantiation.” I must admit, and my field is philosophy, I do not know what a substance is, so even I would have real problems with this. Is it something like what Spinoza said? I do not think that most Catholic sacramental theologians would be very happy with that. Or is it something like what Descartes said, who was in this trouble already in his lifetime and had to explain that this substance could be reconciled with the Eucharist? That is not the point. Let us not simply repeat formulas. But at the same time it is extremely important, whether you put it this way or another way, that we believe in the Real Presence, that we explain what is the Real Presence. To me it means that we have to make a personal and creative effort to understand what we are talking about.

Fr. Himes has done us all a great service by reminding us about common sense. There are many things that we have known all along and at the end of the day they all looked different. I believe this. Perhaps one of the helpful things about being a Catholic educator is to believe in Catholicism. And that means not repeating, but digesting it. It has to become part of us. These formulas have to be surrounded by a spiritual halo, by the spiritual life, by the concrete spirituality of thought. It is not sufficient for a Catholic school to say it has a tremendous theology teacher or an excellent department. It is a matter of penetrating the whole faculty with this kind of meaningfulness of the Catholic mystery. In other words, if I teach English literature, or French literature, I have to be inspired by the same Spirit. This is a very tall order, and I do not know how I can accomplish it completely, but at least I would like to try to do it.

I remember in earlier days saying to my students, most of whom are idolatrists at best, “Now look, I’m not going to apologize here for belonging to the religion of Pascal, Descartes, Mozart and Cardinal Newman. Shed your inferiority complex, it’s high time for being Catholic. Do you know that you come from a tradition which is not just poor immigrants, but which is the tradition of some of the greatest minds of history?” Catholicism
is a wonderful thing as long as one has the courage to accept it, to think it through, to let it radiate and penetrate everything. But to do that, we have to be absolutely free. We Catholics keep saying *veritas vos liberabit*. We say that, but does it? Why do we so quickly go back to a formula, an encyclical or something else that denies the free expression and creative searching of the truth? We must be free to think and challenge in order to find the deepest of truths.
I am here because I have contributed a chapter to the first volume on the Catholic intellectual tradition. I see myself as both an insider and an outsider. I feel I am an insider in the Catholic intellectual tradition because I am a professor of Theology and Religious Studies. I have been brought up in the Catholic tradition, and I have worked in research for more than forty years. I am actually the previous generation to Fr. Himes. My childhood was in the 1940s, not the 1950s. But the more I live in this tradition, the more I hear such brilliant speeches, presented like seamless garments, I feel that the beauty, the majesty, the glory of the Catholic tradition is all there. Yet, I am also deeply uncomfortable and hurt.

Looking at the program I am the only speaker here from outside America—from Europe—unless Professor Dupré is also counted as being of European extraction. But I look at the Catholic intellectual tradition somewhat differently than you.

The Catholic intellectual tradition is not identical with Catholic institutions, especially not with American institutions. My experience with the Catholic intellectual tradition comes from different places in Germany, France, and England, where part of the tradition developed historically, and also from India, where I lived, studied, and taught for five years.

Looking at the Catholic intellectual tradition critically, I think we need a new paradigm. Fr. Himes spoke about the crisis we are
in, and to deal with that requires a new paradigm. I think Hans Küng has clearly shown how many different paradigm shifts have occurred throughout the history of the Church in his book about global theology, and it is imperative that we look at the Catholic intellectual tradition from a global perspective.¹

Allow me to present some statistics. According to a report in the German Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (May 5, 2000), the Vatican published The Statistical Yearbook of the Catholic Church in the year 2000, but the data are from December 1998. According to this source, Catholics represent 1.04 billion people worldwide (that is 17.4% of the global population), of which 49.5% live in the two Americas. That is to say that 28.4% of all Catholics live in Latin America alone, which is just a little more than in Europe, where 27.8% of all Catholics live today. In other words, there are more Catholics living in South America alone than in Europe, and there are far more Catholics living in the whole of the Americas than in Europe. In other words, Catholicism as a living tradition is now far more represented in other parts of the globe than in Europe.

What does that say about developing the Catholic intellectual tradition? We may be too concerned with being too past-oriented by always looking backwards. We have to look forward instead. What is this tradition going to produce? In this brief talk, I could have said something about faith, hope, and charity, as I had originally intended to do. But I have decided otherwise because I now feel much more uncomfortable with the Catholic intellectual tradition since I realize its ambivalence far more than when I wrote my chapter for the first volume on the Catholic intellectual tradition. There I outlined the global challenges, the gender challenges, and the spiritual challenges that are put to the intellectual tradition of Catholicism. Based on my earlier work on spirituality I asserted that if there is a future for the Church, it will be a Church for the mystics.

It must also be a Church where women are more equally represented and take a fuller part than is the case now. Kathleen Mahoney points out that there is a lack of an adequate representation of women in the Catholic Church. And that is one of the greatest injustices and deepest hurts. Can you hear the violence
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of abstraction in theological speech? Michael Himes mentioned it at the very end of his brilliant lecture where he referred to just two women, Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, as part of the ongoing intellectual conversation. But what are two women within an entire theological tradition marked by a great oppressive patriarchal expression?

If we look at the Catholic intellectual tradition not from a universal point of view where everybody is meant to be included, but from a women's point of view, then women have been marginalized and assumed to be invisible in much of the tradition. There are many women's resources in the Catholic intellectual tradition. We have had great women theologians in the Middle Ages, and we have had not only Church Fathers, but also Church Mothers. Many of these women leaders have never been brought fully into speech nor have they been made equal, recognized, and been welcomed in the Church. Through my forty years of teaching and research, I have experienced personally, physically, mentally and spiritually what it means to be a woman in intellectual life—and there are many traces of hurt and pain. I spoke about this very briefly in a lecture I recently gave in Oxford, and an American Catholic woman student came up to me afterwards and said, “I feel so liberated when I hear a woman speak. Until now, I have only heard men speaking here.”

Only men in theology? Where are the women? You know that a lot of women among the audience here carry a lot of the educational and missionary tasks of the Church. Women do so much for the Church: they work at parish level, catechetical level, and liturgical level. But officially they do not seem to be there, or they are only half there in terms of official representation and recognition. I think this absence of women reflects very badly on the Catholic intellectual tradition. If the Church does not meet the challenges of gender equity and justice, if it does not respond to the cry of women, there will be no Church in the twenty-first century because women will leave and seek their spiritual nourishment and fields of activity elsewhere.

In previous years I, like several other women theologians, have held the office of President of the European Society of Women in Theological Research. We have sought to have a
dialogue with Cardinal Ratzinger about women’s theological work, but with little success. We have especially tried to stand up for women theologians to get jobs in German universities, which has been somewhat more successful. The situation is extremely difficult since the Vatican is full of fear and ignorance as far as women’s theological development and work are concerned. Many church representatives actually do not know what is happening in terms of creative breakthroughs in feminist theological circles today. There exist many creative and inspiring developments which can be truly affirming of women, men, and children through promoting justice, peace, and the dignity of creation.3

The intellectual as well as existential and experiential developments among Christian women have to do with faith. They have to do with hope. They have to do with love, and with community building. We really have to give this more thought. In a way, this links up with the theme of pluralism which encourages the diversity to rejoice, to celebrate life in all its diversity. This celebration proceeds from the great panorama of biological evolution to the wonderful web of life with all its different levels and its diversity of people; to the diversity of religious faiths and the many mysterious expressions of the spirit with their disclosure of divine mystery.

When you look at the Church, I think pluralism is the foundation of the Catholic intellectual tradition. When speaking of the Catholic intellectual tradition, there often seems to be a strong temptation to think of the monolithic medieval European Church, or post-Tridentine absolutist and centralized Church teaching, as if we were all standing en bloc like a military regiment, all marching in the same direction behind the same banner and the same general. Well, the Christian church did not start like that. The Jesus movement of the early church was quite different. It was far more complex and diversified. For example, when one looks at the letters of St. Paul to the Corinthians, there was in the colony of Corinth a melee of Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, people from all over the ancient Middle East, as there were in many other cities around the Mediterranean. Pluralistic foundations were there from the very beginnings of the New Testament, in the early church and throughout the history of the
church. Pluralism is really at the heart of the Christian tradition. As Christians we are following a vision, a call, a mission, but we can come to it from very different directions indeed. It is essential for the Catholic Church and the Catholic intellectual tradition to rethink its own identity and history, and also to dialogue with contemporary culture and all its revelatory moments, which can be seen as signs of the times, as when the Second Vatican Council was called.

Yet we have a problem. We can see that the Catholic intellectual tradition gives us a glorious inheritance. Today, this inheritance is particularly precious, but also exceptionally vulnerable in the context of our profoundly changing culture. We are at a critical threshold in the development of human evolution and that of growing globalization. I think we have to reconceptualize what it means to be a Catholic intellectual. We need to carefully consider not only what we are handing on and handing over, but how does this tradition make sense to our lives, how does it feed our spirit, and how does it nourish our community? I know the Church needs structures for transmitting teachings, experiences, and visions. But whether the structures we have in place are actually sufficiently flexible, sufficiently open as Francis Clooney mentioned so beautifully in his paper, I am not so sure.  

How do we transmit the fire of the Spirit, the message about God? Father Robert Imbelli spoke about the loss of a robust Christic center. I fully agree. But what do you understand by a Christic center? Is it merely a central focal point, a rarefied doctrinal teaching, or even an ideology? Or is part of a deep religious and mystical experience where we encounter a Christic center as the heart of the world, a center which radiates outwards, which is dynamic, which is living, which is present wherever you are, in the way that Teilhard de Chardin spoke about the heart of God at the center of the world?  

I have written a great deal about Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. It is sad, if not tragic, to see that the publicly acclaimed Catholic intellectual tradition, which is fed in many different ways, does not seem to include him, perhaps because he was not an insider of Catholic institutions. After he left the Catholic Institute in Paris, he worked always in secular institutions. But he certainly was a
great Catholic intellectual, and a great Catholic mystic of the twentieth century. Why is it that a man of such deep spirituality, Christ-centeredness, and deep Christic mysticism—where everything came together in the fiery heart of Christ, where the fire of the spirit runs through his entire vision of the world—has officially been taken so little note of? Why is it that Catholic intellectual institutions today make so little use of such a splendid resource?

I leave you with that question. Perhaps its answer lies in living with greater faith, hope, and love.

Notes


