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The Lost Consensus: We Hold These Truths

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effects and implications of legalized contraception. Part III (Chapter 8-13) justifies the Catholic Church's stand regarding artificial methods of contraception. Chapters 14-16 in the fourth and last parts stress the role Catholics should assume in the world today as regards family planning and birth control.

The author apparently tries to reach two types of audience. Bowing to the non-Catholic, he dedicates his book to men of "good will who hesitate and who doubt." Turning his attention to the Catholic, he calls on them to be "a sign in the world", their position to be a "testimony, an appeal".

Concerning the population problem of under-developed regions of the world, Father de Lestapis exhorts the readers not to think that the only solution to this problem is contraception and birth limitation. He advocates the progressive mobilization of all educational forces within a country, to start with the family and emphasize the responsibilities of parents in order to develop a pro-creative sense that is not only reflective and responsible but also more altruistic. He calls on the community of nations to organize a world-wide development policy, with precise and well defined objectives and sees in the policy the hope of cutting the Gordian knot of insufficient resources in the face of an ever increasing population.

MERCEDES B. CONCEPCION

THE LOST CONSENSUS

WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS: CATHOLIC REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN PROPOSITION. By John Courtney Murray, S.J. New York, Sheed and Ward, 1960.

There is a story that before the battle of Manila Bay in 1898 the seamen of the Spanish fleet were extremely confident of victory. The source of their confidence lay not in their seamanship or gunnery, but in the belief that at the first shot their American adversaries would mutiny and turn on each other in bitter internecine strife. They argued that the Americans, being of different religions and diverse national origins, must necessarily be divided into mutually hostile groups, each waiting for the opportunity to get at the throats of the others. The fate of the Spanish fleet illustrates the unreliability of this particular sociological prediction; yet the prediction itself, on the basis of European experience, was not an entirely unreasonable one. The building of a national society out of a diversity of ethnic and religious groups is not an easy or commonplace accomplishment,

as the experience of the new nations of today amply testifies. And the theory of the "melting pot", that all differences are "melted down" and disappear, is now recognized as a gross oversimplification; in America the religious differences, at least, have remained.

A central theme of Father Murray's recent book is the nature and conditions of societal unity with religious diversity in America. He argues that through the greater part of American history, despite the religious diversity, there was an underlying agreement or "public consensus" which served as a bond of unity. The content of the consensus was not merely procedural, as for example that the will of the majority should prevail. The consensus also included substantive propositions on the existence of God and His sovereignty over nations as well as over individuals, on the existence of human rights which even the State must respect, and a whole set of principles on the nature and purpose of human society, the nature of the State, and the scope and limitations of government. Father Murray sees these principles as derived not from the French Enlightenment but from the English tradition of law and through it from the medieval Christian tradition of the West. He argues that it was the consensus on these principles which made possible the intelligent discussion and rational argument on matters of public policy which he characterizes as "civility", and the antithesis of which he describes as barbarism. There was, of course, always dissent from the consensus, and the system provided no mechanism for attempting to force assent. But dissent was always clearly identified as such; it served to sharpen and solidify the consensus, but never, at least until recently, to destroy it.

Integral to this unity amid diversity are the institutions of religious liberty and separation of Church and State. Father Murray holds that they are entirely appropriate to the conditions of religious pluralism in which America finds itself. They make for social peace which is a moral good which the State is obliged to seek, and therefore they are good law. The Catholic recognizes them as good law and hence binding in conscience; he does not conform to them merely as an act of expediency, biding his time until he controls the famous "fifty-one percent" of the electorate and can overturn them. And the American Catholic recognizes that the institutions of religious liberty and separation of Church and State have been beneficial to the Church in America, by saving it from the interminable power struggles and alternations of persecution and privilege, one often as damaging as the other, which it has known in other lands. At the same time Father Murray denies most emphatically that the American system should be raised to the level of dogma, in the style either of Protestant theology or of secular liberalism; to say that it is good law is praise enough.

With regard to the present state of the consensus, Father Murray is far from optimistic; he holds, in fact, that it not longer exists, that it has been corroded away by doubt and scepticism. His description of the agent of this corrosion will bear citation at length.

The barbarian need not appear in bearskins with a club in hand. He may wear a Brooks Brothers suit and carry a ball-point pen with which to write his advertising copy. In fact, even beneath the academic gown there may lurk a child of the wilderness, untutored in the high tradition of civility, who goes busily and happily about his work, a domesticated and law-abiding man, engaged in the construction of a philosophy to put an end to all philosophy, and thus put an end to the possibility of a vital consensus and to civility itself. This is perennially the work of the barbarian, to undermine rational standards of judgment, to corrupt the inherited intuitive wisdom by which people have always lived, and to do this not by spreading new beliefs but by creating a climate of doubt and bewilderment in which clarity about the larger aims of life is dimmed and the self-confidence of the people is destroyed, so that finally what you have is the impotent nihilism of the "generation of the third eye", now presently appearing on our university campuses. (p. 12)

Consequent on this corrosion of consensus is the inability of America today to settle on a consistent, and rationally defensible policy on such issues as foreign aid and the use of military force, and in general on the application of moral principles to public policy. American thought in these areas seems not to be able to settle on anything more profound than "foreign aid is good for us because it is bad for the Communists", and "we will never shoot first".

The remedy which Father Murray suggests is a return to the concept of natural law as understood in the medieval tradition of the West. He explains the Thomistic doctrine on natural law at some length, and at various places in the book he applies it either explicitly or implicitly to such questions as foreign aid and the use of military force, tax support for Catholic schools, censorship, and the regulation of business enterprise.

It may be noted in passing that others in America also are concerned about the erosion of consensus and the confusion which this has generated in American policy. A series of articles in LIFE MAGAZINE within the last year on "The National Purpose" created considerable interest and indicated that a need was felt for some new statement of that purpose—something more profound and inspiring than mere survival. Mr. Kennedy in his campaign speeches emphasized that there has been this loss of direction in public policy, and the point seems to have met with considerable agreement among the electorate. And a prominent American sociologist and author of a widely used textbook on American society has remarked to the present writer that America needs something more than the idea that "fifty-one percent makes it right" and must get back to something like the natural law.

But the return will not be easy. Many who feel the need and would like to get back to the natural law find the way blocked by

epistemological difficulties. Very common is the conception that since the rightness or wrongness of a moral judgment cannot be proven by empirical method, it cannot be proven at all. Such "value judgments" are classed as opinion or sentiment, beyond rational proof or discussion. People who believe most intensely in the dignity of the individual for example, will become either uncomfortable or impatient when asked on what rational basis this belief rests. One such sincere and intelligent person summed it up: "Don't ask me to prove it; I can't; I just feel it in my gut." And some who are familiar with the variations in culture and cultural values over the world feel that much of what natural law theory describes as rooted in human nature is really rooted only in the customs and values of the West; without denying that it exists, they ask to what extent we can *know* human nature.

JOHN J. CARROLL

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

TOO MANY ASIANS. By John Robbins. New York, Doubleday and Company, 1959. 214 p.

Subtitle: "A disturbing account of the current population explosion in India, China, Japan and other Asian countries, and how it threatens the future."

Mr. Robbins is a journalist, the recipient of an Ogden Reid fellowship awarded each year to selected journalists for travel and research abroad. That is, Mr. Robbins is not a demographer and it is risky for one who writes on the slippery subject of population not to be acquainted with advanced demographic thinking. In part the book reports matters of fact and its reporting, though commonplace, is not bad. In part it expresses opinions and fashions generalizations which in all cases must be read critically and in many cases will evoke sharp disagreement. It is never safe to frame generalizations about Asia; nor about Southeast Asia; nor even about any single country in the region, unless one is unconcerned about blurring profound differences. Descriptions fitting the slums and congestion of part of Bombay do not fit other parts of Asia: the region is remarkable not only for its rather densely populated sections but also for vast areas thinly inhabited.

Again, writing of Bali, Robbins esteems it "the Utopia of Asia" and regrets that its "magnificent state of ecological balance is now in danger" because of the disturbing influence of "missionaries and salesmen." By those who view the role intended for man on earth