

Father Richard P. McBrien

Essays in Theology



Left-wing theology

Mainstream Catholic theologians owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Thomas Sheehan, a member of the department of philosophy at Loyola University of Chicago. Professor Sheehan has just published a controversial book, *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* (Random House), which has been described as a work in which "Loisy meets Heidegger."

Alfred Loisy was a French Catholic biblical scholar who became one of the leading figures in the Modernist crisis of the early part of the century, was censured by the Pope and left the Church.

Martin Heidegger was a German philosopher who launched an entire school of modern existentialist thought. His work had enormous influence on that of another well-known biblical scholar, Rudolf Bultmann.

Although an acknowledged expert on Heidegger and a professor of philosophy, Mr. Sheehan has his doctorate in theology. His new book embraces Loisy's thesis: Jesus came to preach the Kingdom of God, but instead we got the Church. He joins this with Heidegger's view that the central mysteries of Christianity are statements about human existence, not declarations about something God has done.

Thus, the resurrection did not happen to Jesus; it is something that happened to the disciples. According to the modernist-existentialist pitch, Jesus did not rise from the dead. What happened is that his disciples were suddenly emboldened to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth, despite Jesus' death.

But Professor Sheehan puts an even sharper leftward curve on the ball. According to him, Peter and the other apostles simply refused to let Jesus go. Although Jesus came to preach the future Kingdom of justice and charity, they persisted in preaching about Jesus himself and about the things he said and did in the past.

But even when the Church did preach about the Kingdom, it made it over into something heavenly or even identified it with the Church itself.

True to his Heideggerian roots, Professor Sheehan insists that the Kingdom of God is "an interpretation of human existence," nothing more. Furthermore, the Jesus who preached the Kingdom called for the end of religion, not the beginning of a new one.

All the trappings of religion and of the supernatural that we find in the New Testament, therefore, are fabrications of

the early Church. The nativity stories are forged. The Gospel miracles are myths. The Easter accounts are legends.

Indeed, Jesus himself made no divine claims. Christianity's first sin was one of idolatry: deifying the person of Jesus.

I suggested at the top of this column that mainstream Catholic theologians owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Sheehan. Why? Because his book shows what radical left-wing theology really looks like.

Compare Sheehan's book with Edward Schillebeeckx's two volumes, *Jesus and Christ*. Compare his treatment of the resurrection with that of Raymond Brown. Compare his discussion of the founding of the Church with that of Avery Dulles. Compare his description of the ethical foundations of Christianity with that of Charles Curran.

Do you want Modernism revived? Read Sheehan, not Schillebeeckx, or Brown, or Dulles or Curran.

Too many right-wing Catholics, however, continue to lump the theological center and moderate left with the far-left. They assume that Professor Sheehan's conclusions are standard fare in Catholic theology today. They are not.

The reviews of Professor Sheehan's book by Catholic scholars in theological, biblical and popular journals in the weeks and months ahead will make that unmistakably clear.

But will the self-appointed defenders of the faith even notice?

One further observation: Not surprisingly, Professor Sheehan's book and his presence on the faculty have created some internal and public-relations problems at Loyola, a Jesuit university.

The usual complaints and charges have been filed. Loyola did exactly the right thing in response: Instead of engaging in a fruitless debate about academic freedom or getting bogged down in arguments over canon and civil law, Loyola organized a public debate on the book. On the panel, in addition to Professor Sheehan himself, were a theologian, a biblical scholar and a philosopher.

If a book cannot withstand the scrutiny of scholars, it cannot have any significant or long-term impact on the wider Church. Censures, on the other hand, only confuse matters by transforming an issue of truth into an issue of authority.

In this case, the truth will out, and authority will find itself adequately served in the process.

There's a lesson to be learned there somewhere.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

On the Right Side



Report to Father Orlando in Lyons

Many thanks to you for giving me the care of your parish February 2-27. This is my third year, and I felt very much at home, both because of having served there for you and also because of the many people I knew during my 13 years in Clyde. It pleases me to meet so many youngsters and to be able to say, "Oh, I knew your parents and grandparents." And it interests me to note family traits and resemblances.

A nice bunch of high school altar boys served faithfully last month, preparing things efficiently and serving piously. They had a nice ease with me as we discussed many things before Mass. How I would hope for some future priests from among them! You probably have heard how I insisted that they memorize the seven capital sins: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, envy, gluttony and sloth.

A bit of dramatization concentrates interest, so at the last Mass I had six high schoolers come to the pulpit one at a time to recite the capital sins. They were grand: nervous, amused and pleased with their performances, as were their parents and myself. Many of your parishioners know them, because I had your secretary, Pat Jolomono, print their names in the bulletin.

My visits to the hospital were productive. The communion calls were edifying. And just meeting people on the streets was a warm experience. My last call, made as I was heading out of town on my way to Elmira, was on Bill Courneen, the uncle of Jesuit Father Francis Courneen in Buffalo and the late Maryknoll Father Jim Courneen, who was tragically killed in a plane crash in South America. Weren't they St. Augustine people? Father Jim used to stay with me in San Antonio when I was stationed at Lackland and he was traveling about as vocation director for the Maryknollers. "I'm trying to get rid of this job so I can go to the missions," he used to say. He finally succeeded. He was a persuasive man, and his death was a great loss to the Church.

Despite Bill's 101 years and some phys-

ical weaknesses, his mind is sharp and his memory keen, and he keeps in touch with relatives and friends. His activities with volunteer fire departments have made him famous in upstate New York. He is quite contented with his room and service in the boarding house where he holds court for many visitors. We had a fine visit.

You certainly have a faithful corps of truly devoted parish workers. And the way the rectory took care of me reminds me of the parable of the prodigal son. Instead of being the prodigal, however, I was the calf being fattened. It was enjoyable.

Fathers Nellis, William Hart, John Roach, McFarland, J. Sullivan, Heisel, Wohlrab and B. O'Brien all paid a visit. I showed them your newly reconstructed church. They agreed that the small Blessed Sacrament chapel is fine for daily Mass and that the church interior is much brighter with the light walls, which also show off the beauty of the windows. They also agreed that when the stations of the cross are erected and some statues added, it will be more devotional. I like the intimacy between the pews and the pulpit. (During the first Saturday night Mass, when I sat in the celebrant's arm chair, I was embarrassed that, as I was rising, the chair came up with me. Too big at the hips — but it cheered up the congregation.)

As usual, I set up my store of religious goods. Now your people have more prayer books, beads, medals and books. One man picked up the little *Treasury of Prayers* and said "I got one of these three years ago when you came, and I use it every night." *Deo gratias.*

Again, thank you for having me. And do remind the high schoolers to meditate on the seven capital sins as a good preparation for confession — and to gather together to receive that holy sacrament. It seems to me if peer pressure can swing people toward the bad, an equal degree of peer pressure can lead them to the good. *Oremus pro invicem.*

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