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THE  
CATHOLIC  
HOUR

DOCUMENTARY REPORT ON  
CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL LIFE  
IN AMERICA, 1958:

Part Three. *Humanities and  
Biological Sciences*

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CAROLINE GORDON TATE  
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W. B. READY

AUGUST 17, 1958

*This month the CATHOLIC HOUR brings listeners selected portions of the Symposium on the Catholic Contribution to American Intellectual Life, co-sponsored by the Thomas More Association and Rosary College, and held in River Forest, Illinois, June 14-15, 1958.*

*Participants recorded for this broadcast were Jerome Kerwin, Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, Caroline Gordon Tate, lecturer and novelist, James A. Reyniers, Director of the Lobund Institute at Notre Dame University, and W.B. Ready, Director of Libraries at Marquette University.*

*Mrs. Tate's and Dr. Reynier's original talks have been abridged for CATHOLIC HOUR presentation.*

# Part Three

## Humanities

### and Biological Sciences

**KERWIN:** This afternoon we are to hear highlights from two sessions at the recent Symposium on the Catholic Contribution to American Intellectual Life that took place in River Forest, Illinois. Critic, educator and novelist, Caroline Gordon Tate, addressed the symposium on the Catholic contribution in the field of Humanities; on the following afternoon, the Director of Lobund Institute at Notre Dame University, Dr. James Reyniers, spoke on Catholic contribution in the field of the Biological sciences. In spite of the vast difference in the fields of Mrs. Tate and Dr. Reyniers, there was harmony in their position and their plea for respecting the traditional. Mrs. Tate was introduced by W.B. Ready, Director of Libraries at Marquette University.

**READY:** Our Very Reverend Fathers, Reverend Fathers, Brothers and Sisters, ladies and gentlemen. I am very honored, although very apprehensive, to be Chairman of this part of the symposium which deals with the humanities, apprehensive

because the quality of the Chairmen who have preceded me has made me wish that I had been the first.

It's very difficult to find out really what the humanities are, you know. George Shuster pointed that out in his earlier talk. A friend of mine once needing a grant to study in the British Museum in London wrote from the University of Manitoba for a grant to Ottawa to a society which he thought would help him, and he received a letter back from them with a very puzzled frown. I was sitting next to him in his study. And it said, My dear Doctor Cook: We were so happy and interested here to know that you are thinking of going to spend a year in England studying at the British Museum. But unfortunately the plight of our feathered friends here in Ottawa makes it quite impossible for us to help you in any way. Signed, So-and-So, Secretary, Royal Canadian Humane Society.

Indeed it is rather difficult to find out what the humanities really are. As far as I am concerned, the humanities are literature, and all it is concerned with is books and reading. I have spent my entire adult life serving the scholars of the humanities as a librarian, and wherever I have gone I have found myself

despondent over the state of the humanities among we who are members of the faith. For many years I spent my academic life not in Catholic universities but in the University of California and the University of Stamford. And once a year they have in those places a week called Religious Emphasis Week in which members of the faculty who subscribe to a faith are asked to go out among the fraternities and living groups and talk to them about their religion.

And I found that I was being called upon three or four times a night because the number of faculty members at California or at Stamford who subscribe to the truths of our Holy Faith you could number on the fingers of both hands. And most of them spoke broken English.

There seems to be a great division in the world of learning between us and those others of the other learned institutions who subscribe to the humanities. This is something which affects me deeply, which affects us all deeply. I can see growing up around me, among my own children, among the children of my friends, among the students whom I try to teach a growing practice of alliteracy — not illiteracy, alliteracy. The book has become to them required reading.

And anything which goes beyond that is both beyond their confidence and beyond their desire.

This to me is a dire plight, as it is only with the study of the humanities that we are able to face the world and take our part in it and help towards the betterment of our nation. A far better person with a right to speak on this is our speaker for today, Carolyn Gordon Tate, who for many years has been a woman of letters whose books, articles, criticisms are known to us all. She is a most eminent Catholic lady and it is with extreme pleasure that I introduce Mrs. Tate.

**TATE:** A hundred years ago it was taken for granted that when a young man went to college he would be subjected to certain disciplines, and no matter which college he chose to attend the disciplines would be the same — disciplines centering around the Humanities, the classics, our heritage from Greece and Rome. This is not the place, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I am not a person qualified to discuss Humanism, in all its ramifications, from the *encyclios paideia* of the Greeks to the writings of Professor Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt. But it is an historical fact that

until recently the classics constituted the core of our college curriculum. Ours is the first age in which man can call himself educated and know no Latin or Greek.

We hear a great deal nowadays about the world — world health, world unity, world aims of every kind. Some of our foremost educators have formed or have associated themselves with organizations dedicated to world federation. But the instrument which, in the past, united men of different races, of different tongues, in a common, a universal bond has almost vanished from our college curriculum. The Latin language used to be not only the practical instrument but the symbol of what used to be called Christendom and even after Christendom had been fragmented, the classics were still the bond of rational solidarity — until our own day. Were not the classics originally called the Humanities because they nourished man's instinctively human faculty, his reason? Such at least, was the belief of all educators until our own time.

Athelstan Spilhaus, Dean of the Engineering Department at the University of Minnesota, evidently believes that his engineers will build better bridges if they undergo the disciplines which from time



immemorial have been held to be of value in training the mind. Finding the right word for what one thinks is certainly a great aid to thinking clearly and clear thinking never hurt any project. But if the search for the right word, *le mot juste*, is of importance to engineers, of how much more importance is that search to the imaginative writer, the poet, the writer of fiction?

I am much concerned over the plight of the contemporary imaginative writer. The colleges did him an ill turn when they ceased to require the study of Latin and Greek for the bachelor's degree. They took away some of the most valuable tools of his trade. The disciplines afforded by classical studies used to be the hall-mark of an educated man, the world over. Nowadays, they are not even recognized for what they are: the well nigh indispensable, the invaluable equipment for a professional writer. Meanwhile, all over this country, young men and women who hardly know one part of speech from another, enroll in classes in Creative Writing. We cherish the foliage and top-most boughs of that same tree on whose roots we have so relentlessly plied the axe. It seems to me that it is only a matter of time before the tree topples.



The Gospels tell us that the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life. Christ, of course, is speaking of the letter of the Old Law as observed by the Pharisees. T.S. Eliot has paraphrased this profound truth for modern times, presenting it paradoxically when he says: "The spirit killeth but the letter giveth life." I interpret this to mean that the spirit bloweth where it listeth but the letter, from time immemorial, has been its chosen vessel.

Moses writes the Law on tablets of stone so that the people may have it before their eyes. Hammurabi writes his laws on stone tablets with the same purpose in mind. Darius, desiring immortality, has record of his conquests carved on monuments. The letter is the vessel of immortality.

Francois Villon once saved himself from the gallows by pleading what in those days was known as "benefit of clergy." He showed himself to be a man of learning by quoting a few well-turned phrases in Latin, the universal language. Classical learning was more esteemed in those days than it is now. Judge and jury agreed that it would be a waste to hang a man possessed of as much learning as he had showed himself possessed

of, and so he lived, to write poems, which, even today, seem deathless, they are so good.

It seems to me that the aspiring young writer, the student who expects to make his living by writing, is now in almost as desperate a case as was poor Villon. If he wants to save his neck — his "creative" neck — he may have to follow Villon's example and plead "benefit of clergy". If he is going to serve his talent as it should be served, I am convinced that he is going to have to submit to those disciplines which have played so large a part in the making of English literature. He is going to have to follow the example of his fathers and learn a little Latin and perhaps less Greek. Enough of each language, at any rate, not to have to run to the dictionary every time he encounters a word of three syllables, enough of each language to be able in most cases to understand the meaning of a word by a derivation from its root. Otherwise, he will never use his native language with the precision which the highest imaginative effort demands. A word whose meaning has been apprehended by a derivation from its roots, stands up more solidly in a sentence than a word which the author has

found in a dictionary. Words don't come into being overnight. A writer should know something of a word's history — and by that I mean its primary meaning — before he dares use it. There is something else of great importance involved in an early study of Latin and Greek. The habits which result in good writings are the result of disciplines which are better undergone in youth than in later life. Long before a youth attempts to write a novel, he should have acquired a working knowledge of the parts of speech and their respective functions.

How can he best acquire this knowledge? Not, I suspect, from the study of English grammar. He is too close to it, too immersed in it. The student of English grammar is in somewhat the same case as the future surgeon, who, in his anatomy class, must learn to dissect cadavers before we allow him to take out any of our appendices. The best way to learn English grammar is from a study of the dead and therefore unchanging languages (Latin, Greek, Anglo-Saxon) in which its roots are embedded. The boy or girl, who, in his early 'teens, is forced to read and translate the admirably constructed sentences in which Caesar relates his conquests, is getting a prep-

aration, a discipline which will stand him in good stead all his life. Such training is valuable in any career. For the professional writer, it is invaluable. A young writer who has had such a training in early youth will learn many secrets of his craft without realizing that he is learning them, will unconsciously form the habits that make the difference between good writing and bad writing. He will not be likely to write a sentence which has no predicate; he has spent too much time locating the predicates in Caesar's sentences. He will be inclined, without knowing, perhaps, how he came by the inclination, to write more "periodic" sentences than "loose" sentences. In short, he will have acquired the tools of his trade long before he has occasion to use them.

It has been presumed that abandoning traditional disciplines would free the student's energies for nobler aims. That, I am sure, was Thomas Huxley's idea when, impatient to get on with the great career that so evidently lay before him, he decried the general teaching of Latin and Greek. Rousseau, when he put his children in a foundling home and settled down to write his treatise on the education of youth, thought of his Emile as

a noble savage. But the savage is not likely to remain noble if his training is such that he fails to recognize nobility when he encounters it, if he refuses to raise his eye to that horizon where the far blue peaks of Helicon are still visible. In short, if he demands that all literature be circumscribed by his ignorance and we yield to his demands, we will soon have no literature. Agamemnon is a great hero, one of the greatest heroes of the western world. The mere sight of him so wrought upon Helen of Troy that she avowed her treachery and even doubted her own identity — as men and women sometimes do when they have committed some act whose consequences are overwhelming. Homer tells us that when Priam asked her to look down from the gates of Troy and point out by name the Greek warriors drawn up in battle line below and she looked down and saw that figure that towered over all the rest she exclaimed:

That man is Atreus' son, Agamemnon, widely powerful. At the same time a good king and a strong spear fighter once my kinsman, slutt that I am. Did this ever happen?

It seems too much to be asked to give up both adverbs and Agamemnon! I am

beginning to think they may be more closely connected than is generally recognized. If we give up the one we may end by having to give up the other. Not only will there be no far blue peaks of Helicon visible on our horizon but the ground, itself, I begin to fear, may quake under our feet.

**KERWIN:** Dr. James A. Reyniers, Director of the Lobund Institute at the University of Notre Dame addressed another session of the symposium. He emphasized the necessity for research in an atmosphere of respect and security.

**REYNIERS:** Any discussion of this subject rests primarily on an acceptable definition of the aims of a Catholic university. By tradition, the Catholic university has been built around the liberal arts, and the physical sciences have simply been added to the program as expediciencies. Because of this lack of emphasis, it is not surprising that there has been a lag in the development of science, nor is this likely to change quickly in any contemplated expansion.

In the light of the generally accepted objectives of Catholic education, perhaps it might be argued that it is best to maintain the traditional point of view. However, balanced against this point of

view is the tremendous development in science so that it reaches into all phases of life and commands universal attention. Today, men look to science to feed them, fight their wars, heal their sick, rationalize their social problems, clothe their bodies, and heal their minds. I am not defending this, but merely stating what seems to be the present situation. There is, then, a clear responsibility for Catholics to look at the problem. Whether there should be or should not be a conflict between science and the liberal arts, the fact is that this has arisen in the minds of many. It no longer seems reasonable to place science in a secondary role in the Catholic educational system. In light of the many studies made on the position of science in the Catholic schools, it seems to be the general impression that this has and is being done.

Now my thesis today is simple. It rests on a basis that it is not enough to talk about science, or to explain why Catholic institutions rate so poorly, but rather to do something about the situation. This means that we must produce scientists and contribute to scientific knowledge by research if we wish to command respect and attention in scientific matters. I think this is entirely possible



within the framework of existing institutions and faculties. Certainly as a people we are not without talent, but we need to encourage it and to provide a place and atmosphere in which it can flourish. Contributions from the Catholic group can best be made from Catholic institutions.

One thing that is lacking is leadership. This will not be found in designated authority, in public headlines which promise much, in the breathless and bright young men with a self assumed vision. Such leadership will be found in earned authority, in maturity, scholarship, depth of learning, imagination tempered by wise council and not in the gimmicks of modern advertising, but in the sound record of scholarly contributions. The objective is not to be arrived at through educational politics or a publicity campaign, simply because in the end this will be examined and found wanting. If we have no leaders in science, then it is time we took the wraps off those we have and permit them to gain the necessary experience and provide them with the opportunity to assume their proper place.

It might be well to point out now, for the record, that there is nothing which

prevents a Catholic from being a biologist. The two endeavors are incidental to each other. However, the fact that a Catholic is a biologist does not make his work a Catholic contribution to the American intellectual life.

On the other hand, if a biologist has been trained in Catholic institutions, or is working in them, the situation is different. The Catholic is marked by the effort of the Catholic group to educate and provide a place where scholarly work can be done. It is presumptuous to claim credit for a biologist trained in non-Catholic institutions and not working in them. It is obvious that Catholics may well be proud of another Catholic who is an outstanding biologist no matter where he works, but all this shows is that there is no conflict between his science and his religion — an already established fact to all but the prejudiced.

Biology, like any other science, grows best in an atmosphere of quiet security and respect. The pressures and needs of the times do not alter this. Presumably this should be found in universities and higher centers of learning. Biology grows and develops through individuals devoted to research, teaching, and study. It does not grow *per se*. All this simply

means that the individual is the key factor and he must be given the necessary support to achieve full development. It means further that neither the man, nor the field should be regarded as a commodity to be used or discarded lightly. There must be a continuity about scholarly work which should not be interrupted by sudden changes. Unless and until a place can be created where a scholar can work with a feeling of security, it is hopeless to expect scholarship. This seems to have been lost sight of in the modern effort to make the university aware of the needs of the times, to bring it closer to industry, the government, or to make its laboratories into what is sometimes suspiciously close to a commercial testing laboratory. In this great striving to be alive to the times, the university is in danger of losing its identity as a place to develop students — not technicians — and scholars — not technologists.

As Catholics, I think we must quietly accept the fact that we have not shouldered our share of the national effort in science. Attempts to quantitate this are no longer necessary to prove the point. As far as biology is concerned, it is difficult to provide meaningful statistics in

terms of the numbers of biologists, the number of publications, or the value of a single piece of work. The same is true when attempts are made to compare biology to the physical sciences or Catholic institutions to old, large, well established state or private universities. Biology and the Catholic institution have their own potentiality which must be considered within the proper framework. It only takes one significant finding to upset any quantitation. This is as true today as it has been in the past. Who is there to say that a distinguished contribution must come from a large university or cannot come from a small department in a college? By the same token, it is the unwise man who sets himself into the position to judge the value of a sound piece of work to the future, just because it does not answer an immediate question or fit either his need or the way he thinks the work should have been done. The individual, the idea, the persistence of the individual, and time answer this. Hardly any important contribution in its earliest inception has not had its critics. The history of science and medicine is full of such examples.

A scholar must be allowed to follow his bent and his intellectual curiosity

within the framework of his science, the society in which he lives, his religion, and his ideals. It is more than presumptuous for anyone, especially one not trained in science, to decide that a field of biology is *passee*, or that man is wasting his time by not following a current trend or pattern. Someone had to set up the pattern and the trend in the first place.

We, as a society, should thank God that there are individuals who are willing to devote their lives to learning even in an obscure field and this the university should protect and perfect.







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