

DILEMMA

BERTRAND RYAN, O.P.



MAN'S capacity for perversion is unlimited. Of all of God's earthly creatures only he can twist and deorient a thing from its natural purpose. The flower of necessity seeks for water and sunlight so that it may continue to live, while the animal will fight to the death in defense of its food. The divine ordination of self-conservation is never thwarted in the lower creatures, whereas man can, and unfortunately often does, steal from himself that which belongs to Another, his own life. History, the story of the creature's pilgrimage, offers ample testimony to the varied forms under which the perversions of man can masquerade. Down through the ages the human mind has invented unworthy ends that were to wrack and destroy the bodies and souls of men.

Of all these aberrations the most far-reaching and devastating have been those that affected the minds of men. The intellect, the most noble of man's faculties and his link with angelic creation, has always and must always suffer the greatest harm. The more noble always suffer more severely. When a country is enslaved, its people suffer greatly; but it is the ruler who must bear the shame and confusion of defeat.

Recently, in one of our larger Catholic universities a professor of the natural sciences decried the intensity of the theological training being given to our clerical students. When questioned further, this man of science proposed a theory of relativism that made for a complete dichotomy between theology and secular science. According to his conception all things are relative, and in the fields of human learning all the disciplines can maintain a parallel course, each being of equal value. True, the body of knowledge possessed by man today would have no principle of unity and orientation other than an arbitrary norm, one which could admit of no objective evaluation of the body of truths possessed.

This outlook is in no way novel. It is merely a reflection in the academic sphere of the dazzling sun of secularism that has been blinding the minds of men since the sixteenth century. With the advent of Protestantism the bridge of faith linking man to God was destroyed, and in its place was substituted the fragile cat-walk of human reason. Thrown upon its own resources, the human mind

ever attempting to create a goal as real, as necessary, and as substantial as its True Goal has become lost in the maw of relativism, the fruit of the secular society. The intellect of man was made for Truth. To grow it must attain to its object—the created truths of this life, and Eternal Truth in the life to come. It cannot exist on the deficiency diet of relativism. When the minds of men asked for bread, the secular society “reached them a stone”; and these undernourished minds have evolved and directed the moral and physical chaos that is the passing scene.

SCIENCE OR SANCTITY

In response to the challenge of secularism, there arose in the Catholic Church a body of men who, calling upon the masters of the past, ably defended the traditional, the sane view. Unfortunately, some of the defenders had greater zeal than ability, and thus set in motion a current of thought that has perdured through the centuries. These men, appreciating the fullness and the beauty of the Christian revelation, asked what more could the mind and heart of man desire. What could the study of secular science add to the fount of truth as contained in the Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church? Thus was created a conflict that was to burden the minds of Catholics in the ages to come. Was it to be Christ, or the world?

The scarcity of Catholic men of learning today in all the branches of secular science is eloquent testimony to the vicious vitality of this mental outlook. Despite the efforts of the Holy Fathers and the work of the valiant few, there remains a certain reluctance among Catholics to plunge whole-heartedly into the study of the things of this world. As a result of this attitude, we are witness to a whole field of Godless learning for the majority of those who give their energies to these disciplines are men who have no place for God in their lives. Deprived of the supernatural guidance necessary for any intelligent study, they have created a science that Our Holy Father, Pope Pius XII, has termed “Godless.” Today, these men are the admitted leaders of their fields. The catholic student who wishes to become proficient in these branches of learning must go to them for instruction. Thus the dilemma persists—Will it be science, or sanctity?

Unfortunately, this problem is not merely the product of an over-active imagination, or a piece of mental gymnastics. It is a problem of tremendous importance to the catholic educator and stu-

dent. The position taken in regard to its solution will enter into and affect the work of each. If the attitude of the secularist is adopted, then God will be driven from his life. If the study of the things of this world are despised, then the investigator will miss some of the beauty of the work of the Creator which is the product of His love.

BASIS FOR STUDY

The fact that the Catholic man of learning is faced with this problem is significant, for it is only in virtue of being a thinking animal that man can be so troubled. Knowledge is never a problem for the brute. Man alone has the capacity for analysis and synthesis that is demanded by intellectual activity. Moreover, in addition to this properly rational function there flows from the nature of man the characteristic of finality that clothes his proper actions. Every conscious thought, word, and deed that takes place in the human person has about it an air of purposeful action. Hence, any attempt to solve human difficulties must take into consideration the intellectual and moral character of man.

Of the intellectual nature of man we shall say nothing, inasmuch as the existence of the dilemma is sufficient proof of man's rationality. It is from a consideration of the goal, or end of man that we shall draw the solution. The end of man is God, for it is God alone that can quench man's thirst for goodness, truth, and beauty. It is to God that we must look in order to evaluate properly all human endeavor, because the actions of men that are not directed to this Goal are in vain.

In America today, there are thousands of motorists who though skilled in the operation of their automobiles remain ignorant of the true nature of the mechanics involved in their operation. Insofar as they lack this knowledge these people can be considered ignorant, for there is something lacking to them which they could possess in virtue of their rational natures. The knowledge they have of their cars is certainly sufficient for purposes of utility, but the degree of perfection possible is not theirs. This is just a common-place example of the very important principle—perfect knowledge of a thing cannot be had, unless its operations are known. That we may understand a thing perfectly, we must know not only that it is but also something of its operations.

To know with the certitude of faith that God exists, is the greatest gift that we can possess in this life. It is greater than the gift of life itself, because in the possession of this knowledge we resemble

God in a certain way, since in Him, His knowledge is His existence. In addition to this great gift, we have an additional source of truths about God in the teachings of Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Yet, to augment this vast store of truths there remains the great book of the world that is ours to open and read; for in this book we find a record of the operations of God.

The whole of creation stands in testimony to the three-fold operation of God; namely, the production, the conservation, and the governance of creatures. In these three operations are contained the whole of God's relations with His creatures, whether it be in the order of nature—the production of the physical world with its varied components, and the heavens with their myriad stars—or the order of super-nature, the order of grace.

Hence, it is from a consideration of God's operation in the production and maintainence of his creatures that we can draw the proper reasons for the study of the secular sciences. It is the proper reason, because it shows us the relation between the matter under consideration and its Maker. True, there will be secondary ends for the study, such as the advance of theoretical knowledge, and the attainment of greater facility in the fields of technology, but these will ever remain secondary, if man is to embrace these endeavors in a truly rational manner. Man, redeemed by the blood of Christ, cannot rest in secondary ends if he is to remain true to his lofty Goal that was purchased at such great price.

Considered in this manner, the study of secular sciences does not offer a problem to the Catholic student or teacher. The very fact that God has acted this way in the production of His creatures, and continues to so act in their governance and conservation is ample ground for the intense study of these disciplines, for it is by the penetration of these matters that we can reach a more comprehensive knowledge of God.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

Foremost among the benefits obtained from a study of the secular sciences is a greater appreciation of the divine wisdom. Yet, this appreciation cannot be obtained unless the study is accompanied by meditation; for it is by the quiet turning over in the mind of the truths possessed that the depths of their richness can be plumbed. Neither the tiring, exhaustive work of the laboratory, nor the exacting work of interpreting the data obtained, will lead to this appreciation. It can be gained only by careful and constant meditation, for

the wisdom of the divine artist is impressed deeply in His work.

One who is skilled in the appreciation of art has an ability to detect in an artefact certain characteristics that proclaim its authorship. The wood-carver leaves upon his work certain indelible signs that remain a testimony to his labors. God too, in creation, has left certain indelible marks that proclaim to the thoughtful observer the richness of His wisdom. If the Catholic student will approach his study of the secular sciences in a spirit of meditation he will be able to detect these marks, the signs of the wisdom of God. His science will not be "Godless," for with the Psalmist he can chant:

"Marvelous are Thy works, and this my soul knows full well"
(Ps. CXXXVIII, 14).

The phenomenon of power is the most fascinating and fearsome discovery of modern science. In ages past, men knew of its existence and utilized it insofar as they were able, but it remained for more recent researchers to unleash greater amounts of energy than man had ever before witnessed. Misused, these tremendous forces were directed into the channels of destruction. The resulting havoc has led many to adopt the pseudo-scientific theory of life being a mere struggle between man and the so-called "blind forces" of nature. This fallacious philosophy has been popularized and advertized until today it receives a gracious acceptance in those circles which like to be called learned.

No one can deny the existence of these tremendous stores of energy. However, right reason demands an absolute and uncompromising denial of those who wish to interpret it in terms of "blind forces." For the Catholic investigator this problem, the correct interpretation of power, offers proof of a second benefit that can be obtained from the study of secular science—an admiration of the magnitude of the power of God. The whole of creation with its vast stores of energy are merely dim reflections of the majestic power of God. Possessed of this knowledge that is further strengthened by meditation, the Catholic student will not fall prey to novel theories concerning this matter; for he will have as his starting point a knowledge and appreciation of its Source, Power Itself. Secure in this knowledge, he will not toil in the morass of self-pity, nor despair because of his insignificance in relation to the tremendous force of power. His knowledge, correctly gained can lead only to a greater reverence for God.

A third benefit that should be derived from a study of the secular science is an increase of love for the divine goodness in the hearts

of men. As the secrets of nature are penetrated and its mysteries revealed, there should well-up in the heart of the student a greater love for the divine bounty; for God Who is Goodness Itself made all things because of His love. We are all attracted by the goodness of the things of this world, and these are but imperfect mirrorings of the Goodness of God. The micro-world revealed by modern bacteriology, as well as the macro-cosmos surveyed by the astronomers are mere signs of the love which God lavishes upon His creatures. The complexus that is the human body, with its varied structures all united in the common perfection of the whole, is a monument to an all-provident God.

Lastly, there will accrue to man from a study of the secular sciences a certain similitude to the divine perfection. God in knowing Himself intuits all other things, the product of His ineffable Goodness. The knowledge that man can obtain from a reverent, meditative study of the secular disciplines, coupled with that glorious certitude of faith, constitutes in man a likeness to God Himself. True, there will ever remain the infinite distance between Creator and the creature. Yet, man will gain in perfection, because he will approach in likeness to his Goal. Secular science cannot make man "like unto God," but studied in the proper manner it can help to make him God-like. "But we all beholding the glory of the Lord with open face, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord" (II Cor. III, 18).

SCIENCE AND SANCTITY

Clearly, then, it can be seen, that the secular sciences are not to be shunned by the Catholic student. If he is to become truly a man of culture, a saint, he cannot afford to ignore this vast body of truth. Embracing his studies in a reverent and meditative manner he can successfully penetrate the many mysteries of the natural world, and in so doing, not only increase his fund of knowledge, but also grow spiritually. His work will lead him to a keener appreciation of the wisdom and power of God and thus increase in his heart his love for the Creator.

This is a goal that can be reached, for it is not impossible of attainment. The 13th century, that nurtured the great Saint Thomas Aquinas, master theologian of the ages, also produced his teacher, Saint Albert the Great, Patron of the Natural Sciences. In Saint Albert the modern Catholic scientist has a patron and exemplar, for his life embraced both the exhaustive study of the sciences and a

keen theological knowledge that made possible the correct evaluation of his findings in the inferior disciplines. True enough, the modern investigator in the sciences cannot be expected to have the technical knowledge possessed by the professional theologian, but if his work is to be of value it must be guided by the principles of faith, the seeds of theology.

Will it be science, or sanctity? It can be both, and it must be both, if Catholics are to take their rightful place in the field of modern science. God has given the book of the world. Sainly scientists alone can read it correctly.*

* The solution, as presented in this article, is based on the first and second chapters of the Second Book of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* of Saint Thomas Aquinas.