

### *Beyond Pragmatism*

Americans characteristically shun theory and opt for "what works." But historian Forrest McDonald, in *Chronicles* (Feb. 1991), suggests that this pragmatic approach does itself not work. Americans, he says, "must learn, anew, how to think non-scientifically in dealing with nonscientific things."

*It was fashionable, for a time, to ask the silly question, "If we can put a man on the moon, why can't we solve our social problems?" The reason we cannot solve our social problems is precisely the reason we can put a man on the moon. That is to say, it was our pragmatism in general and our scientific and technological mentality in particular that made our great material achievements possible. The essence of this mentality is the problem-solving approach. The scientific method isolates problems and solves them: It cannot take the broader view, for anything beyond the immediately demonstrable, testable, measurable, and provable is by definition unscientific. Americans are parodies of the scientific mentality: when anything goes wrong, we fix it, and do not take into account the possibility that our principles may be unsound. We have, for instance, been appalled*

*to learn in recent years that our children are reaching college without having learned to read. Some people responded to the discovery by seriously proposing that we should reorganize the entire educational system from kindergarten upward—and they were branded elitists, racists, or reactionary dodos. Far fewer people considered the possibility that the commitment to universal education is inherently futile, and that other means of civilizing children should be explored. Instead, the nation did what it always does: It tackled the immediate problem by instituting remedial reading classes in college and by dispensing with literacy tests. This [pragmatic inclination] enabled the United States to become the most proficient exploiter of technology the world has ever known; but the same mentality is a barrier to perceiving or dealing with human relationships. In sum, the trouble with pragmatism is that it no longer works.*

*Before it is too late, we must abandon our specialized, fragmented, problem-solving approach to knowledge and cultivate instead a holistic view, or what might be styled an ecological approach to human affairs. Doing so . . . will require nothing less than escaping the boundaries of our culture; but, however difficult it is, it can be done.*

Not everyone approved of Whitefield's aggressive promotional efforts, however. Methodists John and Charles Wesley, for instance, deemed advertising religion a tasteless "sounding [of] a trumpet." Boston minister Charles Chauncy objected to Whitefield's giving "Public Notice" of his preaching activities. And an anonymous

correspondent suggested in the *Boston Weekly News-Letter* in 1742 that just as there already was "a very wholesome law in the province to discourage Pedlars in Trade," there ought to be a law "for the discouragement of Pedlars in Divinity also." Needless to say, that was one law that was never enacted.

### *Learning from Saints*

"The Lives of the Saints and the Pursuit of Virtue" by Robert L. Wilken, in *First Things* (Dec. 1990), Inst. on Religion and Public Life, 156 Fifth Ave., Ste. 400, New York, N.Y. 10010.

Virtuous deeds "implant in those who search them out a zeal and yearning that leads to imitation," declared Plutarch (A.D. 46–120), whose *Parallel Lives* of noble Greeks and Romans offered just such moral instruction. By the time Christianity made its appearance in the Roman Em-

pire, the use of written narratives of noble lives to teach virtue was well-established, notes Wilken, a University of Virginia historian. "Yet Christian hagiography . . . does not emerge until the end of the third century and does not burst into luxurious bloom until the fifth." The early Christians,

it seems, preferred precepts to examples.

"You know what *precepts* we gave you through the Lord Jesus," says Paul in I Thessalonians. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity; that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself. . . . that no man transgress and wrong his brother in this matter." Other lists of precepts can be found throughout the New Testament. Often the precepts stand alone, but sometimes they are supported by illustrations, as when James cites Job for his patience. But such examples hardly constituted comprehensive biographies.

"Why, then, no lives?" asks Wilken. "The most obvious reason was that the gospels stood in the way. The supreme model for Christian life was Jesus. . . . At this early stage of Christian history, it would have been presumptuous to bring other persons into competition with the primal model." That changed, however, with the Council of Nicaea, called in A.D. 325 to settle the question of whether Christ was different in substance from God. The council's (and Christian orthodoxy's) an-

swer was that Jesus as the Son of God was "begotten not created, one in being with the Father." By making Jesus seem less "human," Wilken says, this created "a vacuum . . . that could be filled with other human faces."

The publication of *The Life of Antony*, a biography of the founder of Egyptian Christian monasticism written by Athanasius (A.D. 293–373), bishop of Alexandria, marked the beginning of a new era. A multitude of lives of saints appeared during the next three centuries. "The hagiographers, for the first time in Christian history, turn to living persons, or those who have recently died, as models of the virtuous life," writes Wilken. "By displaying men and women from their own time, and often from their own communities, these lives proclaim that holiness is possible, virtue is attainable, perfection is within your grasp. They teach, in [Henri] Bergson's phrase, a morality of aspiration, not of obligation." They also, in their diversity, implicitly suggest "that there is no single standard, no one catalogue of virtues, no one way to serve God."

## *Tocqueville's Faith*

"Tocqueville on Religious Truth & Political Necessity" by Cynthia J. Hinckley, in *Polity* (Fall 1990), Northeastern Political Science Assoc., Thompson Hall, Amherst, Mass. 01003.

In his classic *Democracy in America* (1835–40), Alexis de Tocqueville contended that the influence of religion was very important to society, but whether it was a true faith was not. "Society has no future life to hope for or to fear; and provided the citizens profess a religion, the peculiar tenets of that religion are of little importance to its interests," he wrote. Many scholars have concluded that Tocqueville favored convenient myth rather than genuine religion. But Hinckley, a political scientist at California State University, San Bernardino, disagrees. "Tocqueville never thought that belief in the social utility of religion could substitute for faith," she says.

The French visitor was struck by the usefulness of religion to American democ-

racy. "[I]f it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of it," he wrote. Religion imposes "a salutary restraint" on the human intellect, which makes men less likely to submit, in fear, to servitude. It also checks certain "very dangerous propensities"—toward self-absorption and "an inordinate love of material gratification"—fostered by "equality of conditions."

But, Hinckley observes, it was Christianity as practiced in America that provided "the type of moral climate that Tocqueville found so favorable to liberty," and he "gives every indication [of thinking] that truth and utility converge in Christianity." In his view, she says, society, particularly American society, had no need to determine which of the many religious sects