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When Faith and Reason Meet: The Legacy of John Zahm, C.S.C.

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When the Library of Congress began planning its millennial symposium in 1999, librarian James Billington consulted the agenda for the previous centenary celebration only to find that there had been no representative of religion or the arts on the program. The mindset prevailing in 1899 apparently had trusted that "science" would suffice to lead humankind along the march of progress so evident since reason had displaced obscurantism. And if romanticism's widespread reaction to reason's incapacity to respond to the yearnings of the human soul had failed to move these representatives of the Enlightenment to include the arts, the complementary stirrings of the "Great Awakening" would doubtless have elicited yet more formidable fears of the specter of religion. As Billington invited people to reflect on a century in which

more people have lost their lives to pseudo-scientific ideologies than did in the rest of human history, he moved to correct both lacunae. He chose a philosopher to comment on religion, the current archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Francis George, O.M.I., whose prognosis for the central religious issue in 21st century — dialogue between Catholics and Muslims — would highlight the relevance of the subject even more decisively. But let us first focus on the climate in 1899, when Notre Dame's John Zahm had found a persuasive voice for articulating the integrity of rational inquiry in scientific investigation while expounding the complementary guidance of faith.

In retrospect, Zahm's presence could have proved illuminating to that august gathering at the Library of Congress. But in 1899, Notre Dame was far from the university which he would prod it to become, and of course a Catholic priest could only have spoiled

the party. It is not that Zahm's talents went completely unrecognized. In 1887, Indiana University's president had invited him to speak on "the Catholic Church and modern science" at Indiana University. One local reviewer was impressed enough to comment that "unlike many a Protestant minister, Father Zahm knew what he believed, where he got his belief, and how to sustain himself in the same." Southern Indiana was far from Washington, however, and such trenchant criticism of the *de facto* religious establishment may have been even less tolerated in the nation's capital, so omission proved a more suitable strategy for the representatives of the intellectual elite at the Library of Congress in 1899.

Aside from a residence hall bearing his name, omission has characterized the University of Notre Dame's treatment of Zahm as well. Ralph Weber's *Notre Dame's John Zahm: American Catholic Apologist and Educator*, which was published in 1961, is the only existing critical biography. Historians of science have "discovered" his forays into evolution at the end of the 19th century, finding them genuinely ground-breaking. A generation or two separates me from Zahm, but after completing 42 years of service to Notre Dame in teaching,

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administrative, and pastoral roles, I found myself drawn to attempting an assessment of his intellectual contribution to Notre Dame's transformation into a university. Marvin O'Connell's magisterial presentation of Notre Dame's Founder, Edward Sorin, as well as the recent beatification of Holy Cross founder Basil Moreau, led me to wonder about other people in the congregation who transmitted this founding vision to us. Though I learned a great deal from Ralph Weber's life of Zahm, the philosopher in me needed a richer conceptual hook. So, taking advice from historian friends and confreres, I began my own investigation into Zahm's writings.

But what — or rather, whom — did I discover? A veritable intellectual dynamo, as his early devotion to expanding and developing the fledgling "University of Notre Dame" in the final decades of the 19th century testifies. Yet his impact on American Catholic intellectual life extended far beyond the nascent university which he tried valiantly to nudge to adulthood. In fact, his failure to do just that (in his own lifetime) actually stimulated a bevy of other contributions, notably to the contested area of religion and science (as we have already noted) and, even more presciently, to developing our appreciation of Islam — a topic which most Americans felt they could safely ignore. His reflections on this topic uncannily anticipate Francis George's admonition to 21st-century Catholics, as they display a noteworthy "postmodern" penchant for seeking to understand — rather than colonize — "the other." How could all this happen at the time it did, and what might it portend for us?

Born on a western Ohio farm in 1851, John Zahm came to Notre Dame as a student in 1867. He already spoke German and would learn Greek, Latin, and French. He had superb composition skills. But his most absorbing interest was in science of all kinds. Not long after Zahm joined the Congregation of Holy Cross, Sorin picked him to be his "vice president" as well as accompany him on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Zahm spent his early days in the congregation recruiting Notre Dame

students from the American southwest and culling European scientific centers for the latest in equipment and teaching strategies. He taught basic science courses at Notre Dame, where his demonstrations won general acclaim, and expanded his teaching venue through a Chautauqua-like venture in the new "Catholic Summer Schools."

Zahm set out immediately to establish a house of studies for young Holy Cross students of theology adjacent to the new campus of Catholic University, whose founding vision he had imbibed from O'Connell and other friends in Rome.

Here he was able to harness his classical education to his passion for science to offer reflections on "religion and science," already a neuralgic topic in that period of American intellectual history. These were published in various formats between 1894 and 1896 in Chicago and Baltimore, giving Zahm a name well beyond Indiana. The most original, *Evolution and Dogma* (Chicago: D.H. McBride & Co., 1896), would also prove the most provocative. As most scholars of American Catholicism are aware, the Vatican's suspicion of this work led to its suppression in 1898. But I have been more interested in exploring the years that preceded and followed this episode.

Long before his study of evolution and dogma captured the negative atten-

tion of the Holy Office, Zahm's adventures in Rome had led him to become enamored of all things Italian (especially Dante, which turned out to be fortuitous for the future of Dante studies at Notre Dame). Early on, Sorin realized that if Notre Dame was to be on the move, Zahm was the one to promote it. This recognition, combined with Zahm's considerable linguistic skills, led to his appointment as "procurator" for the Congregation of Holy Cross at the Vatican. In this capacity he was charged with advancing both university and congregational interests. Once in Rome Zahm befriended an influential group of Americans, including Denis O'Connell, the rector of the North American College. O'Connell was one of the founders of Catholic University in Washington, D.C., along with Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul and John Keane. Zahm's friendship with these men would not only help him advance Notre Dame's interest but would also facilitate matters after *Evolution and Dogma* came under suspicion.

Zahm was recalled to Notre Dame in 1898 by his superior general, Gilbert Français, to become provincial superior after the sudden death of William Corby. Back on the Indiana frontier, far removed from the Roman culture he so admired, he took up his duties with characteristic gusto. Zahm set out immediately to establish a house of studies for young Holy Cross students of theology adjacent to the new campus of Catholic University, whose founding vision he had imbibed from O'Connell and other friends in Rome. Unpopular as it was among his confreres in northern Indiana, Zahm's initiative appears to have been two-fold: offer seminarians an unencumbered intellectual experience at a university and establish links between Notre Dame and Catholic University. He directed proceeds from his books toward constructing an impressive classical building adjacent to Catholic University — Holy Cross College — which served for 70 years as the center for theological education for Holy Cross seminarians.

Congregational opposition to Zahm's larger-than-life initiatives began to build, and the 1906 chapter refused to renew his tenure as provincial. Zahm

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interpreted this as a rejection of his vision for a real university, trumped by a majority desire among his Holy Cross confreres to keep doing what they were doing (and as Zahm's own education testifies, they had been doing quite well): adapting a French boarding school to an ambitious American clientele. So what could he do? Where could he go, when 25 years of devoted service had been summarily rejected by his own community? What would any of us do when our personal-cum-institutional ambitions were suddenly cut off at 55 years old? Zahm's personal and institutional response to this crisis constitutes the real drama of my "appreciation" of him: he instinctively knew what to do, while Holy Cross College offered him a place to go. As an inquiring intellectual, paths would open for him, while the venue in Washington would offer an indirect way of transmitting his vision for Notre Dame to his younger confreres.

The role of provincial, with the battle over Notre Dame's character, had taken a deadly toll on his psychic structure, leading competent medical authorities to prescribe "complete rest." That being inimical to Zahm's temperament, he asked his life-long supporter, Gilbert Français, for permission to travel in Europe. When that was denied, perhaps fearing he would repeat the "high life" he had so enjoyed in Rome, Zahm substituted the Americas, launching into an extensive travel program through Latin America, which would yield four significant narratives. He supplemented his scientific acumen for both flora and fauna by astute preparation in history and politics and resolved to offer North Americans an intensive sampling of a culture which most of them ignored and looked down upon: it was, after all, Catholic! And that became Zahm's point in constructing these narratives: to illuminate his largely Protestant Anglo-Saxon compatriots regarding the richness of Catholic culture. In penetrating the inner reaches of South America, he managed to combine his talents as a naturalist with his zeal as a Catholic priest to come to a critical appraisal of the way the Catholic faith had been transplanted there (with a keen ear for the plaintive voice of Bartolomeo de las Casas), as well as a stunning appreciation

of the rich natural beauty of that vast continent.

Zahm's three-volume study of Latin America, *Following the Conquistadores*, was published by D. Appleton under the pseudonym H.J. Mozans. The first volume, which appeared in 1910, attracted the attention of Theodore Roosevelt, who agreed to write the introduction to the second volume, published a year later. Zahm wrote the third, which appeared in 1916, while he accompanied the ex-President's exploration in South America. These works gained him popular, as well as scientific, acclaim. With a regular membership in the Cosmos Club in Washington, I suspect northern Indiana seemed very far away to Zahm at this point.

All the while intellectual inquiry remained an inner imperative. In *Women and Science*, also published under the anagrammatic pen name, Zahm undertook an extensive account of the roles which women have played in science over the centuries. He also wrote *Great Inspirers*, a fascinating study of noble Roman women who worked with St. Jerome's companions in translating the Bible into Latin. His *pièce de résistance*, however, would be *From Berlin to Baghdad and Babylon*. In this he recounts a pilgrimage through the ancient and modern "Middle East" as the matrix from which the Bible emerged. This was a journey Zahm himself never got to take. The outbreak of the Great War forced Zahm to compose the work in the Library of Congress, and just when he was on the verge of setting out on the journey in 1921, he succumbed to influenza in Munich. The book was published posthumously the next year.

Above all, *From Berlin to Baghdad and Babylon* manifests Zahm's genius for reaching out to and understanding "the other." These reflections display a mind trained in Greek and Latin classics in an 1870s Notre Dame, desirous of sharing with us the amplitude to which life had tempered both his mind and his heart to accept and learn from cultural and religious "others." The most telling chapter in this regard — "Islam Past and Present" — anticipates Cardinal Francis George's prognosis for the 21st century, made at the 1999 Library of Congress symposium: that nothing would prove

more salient religiously than dialogue between Christianity and Islam. In this chapter Zahm employs one example after another, framed as personal encounters via train and raft from Istanbul to Baghdad, to studiously correct western misapprehensions and fears of Islam. Depressingly enough for contemporary readers, those misapprehensions not only continue to prevail but have succeeded in reinforcing a western hubris as destructive as it is oblivious to what Jonathan Sacks has called "the dignity of difference."

Zahm's openness to Islam is nearly as baffling as composing an account of the Middle East without having taken the journey itself, for nothing in his background can plausibly account for it. So we must look to a more generic principle of explanation, already exhibited in his documented travel through South America: an inveterate recoil from narrow or provincial ways of seeing anything, perhaps in gratitude for the liberation which his early education and the opportunities for travel and friendship as a Holy Cross priest had afforded him, first in service of the fledgling University which had become his home, and then of a larger public: "the glory of God, His church, and Holy Cross." Others had received the same education, however, and were content simply to pass it on. Contemporary students of Islam may be tempted to compare Zahm with Louis Massignon, the towering French intellectual who brought entire generations to an unprecedented appreciation of Islam. Like Zahm, Massignon (1883-1957) was devoted to crossing boundaries, and his dedication to the Muslim mystic and martyr, al-Hallaj, led him to "revert to faith in the God of Abraham" in such a way as always to think of the revelations of Bible and Qur'an together. We owe the prescient phrase, "Abrahamic faiths" to Massignon, and there is little doubt that his long-time friendship with Pope Paul VI expedited the reconciling lines in *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican II document on the relation of the Catholic Church with other religions. Zahm and Massignon were both impelled by their own strong faith commitments to help their fellow Catholics appreciate the Muslim "other."

Their legacy is an important one.

Both men remind us that Catholic faith cannot be exclusive in the sense of Catholics having nothing to learn from others. In fact, quite the opposite is true. It is only in the encounter with persons of other faiths — in their case, Islam — that we become more open to the reaches of our own. So it must be said that “something else” influenced intellectuals like John Zahm and Louis Massignon, something which cannot be identified unilaterally with their Catholic faith, since many who profess that faith have responded to “others” in disdainful ways. Indeed, it is that “something else” which attracted me to attempting an appreciation of John Zahm’s life through his works.

A century later, John Zahm’s views reconciling Catholic faith with evolution received confirmation from Pope John Paul II. So, too, would his educational aspirations for Notre Dame eventually be realized. Can we suspect that there is “something else” in each person which, were we able to identify it and reach to express it, would give us the individual image of the creator in each human being? While each of us is born, reared, and educated in a family and a community, we may find ourselves unable to express our uniqueness within that otherwise nourishing context. That



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was certainly the case with John Zahm in the Congregation of Holy Cross, and I can only hope that this “appreciation” may open many inquirers, including his brothers and sisters in that religious family, to cherish the unique witness that was his, and can be theirs. Cardinal George’s remarks at the 1999 Library of Congress millennial symposium, which emphasized the importance of fostering Muslim-Christian dialogue, suggest that such intellectual openness and passion

are well worth the effort to recover and emulate.

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Archives Report

Thanks to Mary Jo Weaver for recommending us as an archival repository to the Carmelite Sisters of Indianapolis. Since last October we have received 44 linear feet of records from their monastery, including documentation of their inclusive language psalter, their religious typesetting business, their web site, and their annual interfaith prayer service for peace. The records also include files on the history of the monastery, including chronological files, records of individual sisters (current members, former members, and women who have lived at the monastery), and records of friends of the monastery; clippings and chronicles; files on initiatives of the monastery and on the participation of Indianapolis Carmelites in national organizations, including the Association of Contemplative Sisters and Carmelite Communities Associated; historical data on Carmelites in America, on Carmelite formation, on third-order Carmelites, now called the Secular Order of Carmel, and on the Carmelite Order in general; books including breviaries, prayer books, and ceremonials; periodicals including the *Contemplative Review* and the *Servitium Informativum Carmelitanum* newsletter; and photographs, audio-visual

material, and historical artifacts such as the pre-Vatican II Carmelite habit, devotional objects, and equipment for making hosts for the eucharist.

In June we received material collected by Rev. Jeffrey M. Kemper in support of his doctoral dissertation, “Behind the Text: A Study of the Principles and Procedures of Translation, Adaptation, and Composition of Original Texts by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy.” The collection, amounting to about four linear feet, includes copies of ICEL correspondence, memoranda, agenda, meeting material, and texts. This new material complements other collections in our archives from the Consultation on Common Texts and the International Commission on English in the Liturgy.

— Wm. Kevin Cawley
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