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Book Reviews: Four Cultures of the West, John O'Malley, S.J., Harvard University Press

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John O'Malley S.J., *Four Cultures of the West*.

Harvard University Press, 261 pages, \$24.95

By Robert B. Lawton, S.J.

John O'Malley's *Four Cultures of the West* is difficult to review. It is so clearly, beautifully written, so wise in its observations and humane in its approach that one simply wants to quote passages at length. Paraphrase and summary seem painfully inadequate. The book interprets the history of the West in terms of four cultures and is aimed at both the specialist and the general reader. I am in the latter category and testify that with me Professor O'Malley admirably achieved at least one of his desires: this small masterpiece deepened my understanding of my own experience and helped me to appreciate lenses different from my own.

The book is about four cultures, not *the* four cultures; the categories are not meant to be all-inclusive. It is not a theological interpretation of Western history. Rather it "makes use of religion to get into better focus certain aspects of Western history, certain modalities of Western intelligence, that have a stunningly long history stretching from ancient times until today." At the basis of the book is Tertullian's famous question: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" "That is, what has human culture to do with the transcendent claims of Judaism and Christianity?"

By "culture," O'Malley understands "a configuration. The elements within the configuration are forms, symbols, institutions, patterns of feeling, patterns of behavior, and the like...Style of

discourse is an especially important element in the configuration of any given culture, constitutive and revelatory of its design." He is writing "more about *form* than about content. The two interact, of course, but insofar as the book deals more with *how* Luther spoke than with what he said, it differs from most other books that likewise indulge in a grand sweep of centuries."

The four cultures are: 1) the prophetic; 2) the academic/professional; 3) the humanistic; and 4) the artistic. These cultures originated in the ancient Mediterranean world and continue, though in transformed ways, into the modern day. O'Malley gives "particular attention to the 16th century, when the cultures, by confronting and doing battle with one another under the cover of religious polemics, made even more manifest their special traits." But, as the following century indicated, the cultures can be partners as well as rivals. Indeed, "for the most part the cultures tend to blend together, borrow from each

other, and they have often supported one another almost to the point of being indistinguishable, seemingly unaware that there might be a level at which they might be incommensurable."

The prophetic culture is "the culture of contempt for the world." Its style of discourse is uncompromising and marked by paradox ("The last shall be first, the first last.") Tertullian himself is an early example. He saw "the cause of the corruption of the church to be *mediocritas*, that is tepidity, standing midway between good and evil."

His style was simple, direct, and prone to exaggeration.

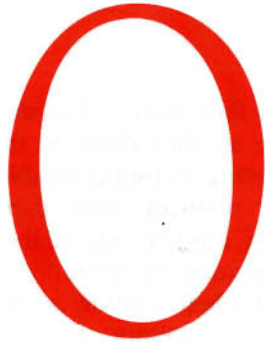
Pope Gregory VII exemplifies this culture. "The Gregorians" provide the first striking example of the transformation of the traditional idea of reform, which up to that time had mostly been applied to conversion in individuals or to local situations. The Gregorians, without being fully aware of it, applied reform to a system, to a large social reality." Moreover, they reinvented the past to construct the future.

The great prophetic individual is Luther. He had little time for either the scholastics or the humanists like Erasmus. "Like the great prophets of old, Luther pointed to the transcendence of

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God, to mystery. The fundamental sin of the scholastics was that they tried to know too much." The style of the humanists was even worse; it was "dainty."



Others belonging to the prophetic culture include William Lloyd Garrison and Martin Luther King.

The academic/professional culture is "the culture of the inquisitive mind intolerant of sloppy thinking." (This section of O'Malley's book gives succinct analyses of historical trends and movements arising in this culture. We learn how philosophy began as "neutral" among Christians and then soon began to be harnessed for Christian needs.

The sections on Aquinas and on Trent are wonderful miniatures. And we are treated to a masterful summary of the origins of the university in the 12th century and its subsequent development over time.

Anyone interested in higher education would do well to read this chapter. O'Malley takes the discussion to the present day. "Since the modern undergraduate college – 'the Arts college' retained at least in theory some of the aims and the ideals of the humanist tradition [after the creation of a new entity, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences], the result was the... tension in American education between the student-centered and more generalist aims of 'the college,' and the specialized, technical, and research aims of the graduate school. In this situation undergraduate and graduate education sometimes became partners, sometimes competitors, sometimes enemies, sometimes strangers passing in the night – cultures two and three."

The chapter on Culture Three is entitled "Poetry, Rhetoric, and the Common Good." Among the stars are Cicero, Petrarch and Erasmus. The writings that this culture has nourished have been works to inspire people to public service, studies that have led to a deeper appreciation of Scripture, as well as the literature that we read simply to understand our own experience. This chapter, like all the others, is filled with perceptive historical reflections. Particularly apt is O'Malley's brilliant interpretation of the documents of the Second Vatican Council as characterized by culture – three style discourse .

Culture Four is "Art and Performance." It is about physical beauty. Liturgy, both the churches themselves and rituals, provides the context for this culture. In the course of his discussion, O'Malley talks about the various iconoclastic movements in Christianity, notably the Reformation, as well as about the responses to them.

In his epilogue, O'Malley emphasizes that although the four cultures have in ways changed over time, there have also been strong and significant continuities. Understanding both the discontinuities and the continuities helps us to understand ourselves and our experience. He tells us: "the genre in which I have tried to write this book is the epideictic genre of culture three. The genre has as its purpose the heightening of appreciation." He has wondrously achieved his purpose.

The centerpiece of Georgetown's campus, Healy Hall rises prominently as a symbol of boldness and reverence.

