

Catholic University philosopher builds bridges

Jerry Filteau | Jan. 7, 2010



Oblate Fr. George McLean speaks at the Universit? Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan, Italy, in June 2004.

WASHINGTON -- In 40 years of quiet work, Oblate Fr. George F. McLean has traveled the globe -- China, India, Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America -- promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding on basic human and social issues among thinkers in scores of countries.

"We had 10 meetings behind the Iron Curtain before the [Berlin] Wall came down in 1989," McLean said, referring to seminars he arranged during the Cold War years involving Western philosophers and leaders of academies of science in communist countries.

The collapse of communism left "a real vacuum in those academies of science. They were all dialectical materialists," he said. But the relations that were built up through the previous years offered an opening.

"They were at sea. I went around to all the academies and said, "You have a new job now. Write about your own philosophical heritage. Retrieve your past beyond that 40 years" of communist rule," he said.

The result in the next couple of years were international philosophical and interdisciplinary meetings that led to eight books recovering the pre-communist philosophical and cultural heritage of countries like Poland, Lithuania, Georgia and the Czech Republic.

"Now they are trying to become democratic societies," and seminars on those issues led to the next eight volumes in that series, he said. Additional topics like human values, ethics, pluralism and globalism in post-communist societies have led to at least 12 other volumes so far.

And then there's China. Before its opening to the West in the 1980s, McLean said, he would often meet scholars from China at other international gatherings, especially in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. But after they returned to China he would not hear from them again.

Now, he said, China is working on issues of its modernization and what face as an economic power it will present to the world -- that of a feared competitor or a humane society. He said he helped organize numerous international conferences in China in recent years on a variety of social and philosophical issues.

On a visit to Asia last June and July McLean attended gatherings organized by the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, which he founded in 1983 and continues to direct. A conference in Cambodia examined the role of philosophy in the development in Southeast Asia, and a series of conferences in China covered various topics, including a meeting July 6-8 in Xian on "Ethics in Public Administration and Citizen Participation."

The next and last conference in the series was scheduled to take place on the same topic a couple of days later in Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of Western China, but severe antigovernment rioting there by Uighur protesters forced cancellation of the meeting.

Some 400 people were killed as police suppressed the riots, described as the worst in China since Tiananmen Square 20 years earlier.

McLean said ruefully that the riots demonstrated how on-target the conference's topic was. "This is really important: How can a territory be administered in such a way that it takes account of the people?"

The Uighurs, who are ethnically Turkic and religiously Muslim, object to China's severe restrictions on their religious practice, and many of them want Xinjiang to become an independent nation, East Turkestan.

McLean said addressing such issues is "a philosophical project" -- not in the way philosophy is usually treated in academic courses, but in the more fundamental sense of "philosophy as an effort at self-understanding, with attention to subjectivity," looking at people in the context of their cultural heritage, how they address contemporary change and their struggles over "how to understand themselves"

Philosophy in that sense is "transformative" and a participation in "the existential effort of humankind," he said.

NCR interviewed McLean a few days before a November forum on "Faith in a Secular Culture," which he organized at The Catholic University of America in Washington. The event was the kickoff for a 15-month study by two teams of scholars to assess changes in the way faith and culture interact in the United States. The forum featured as main speakers Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago and Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor, a professor at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., and the 2007 winner of the prestigious Templeton Prize in Religion.

"When you talk about culture from the eyes of [Christian] faith," McLean said, it's a question of trying to discern in each culture "the initiative of the Holy Spirit and the response of mankind."

A modest, self-effacing scholar, the 80-year-old Oblate priest spent his entire academic career as a professor of philosophy at Catholic University.

He retired early from that post in 1993 to devote full time to his growing workload of activities promoting global philosophical collaboration and dialogue through the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy.

Although scarcely noticed in public circles, even within the church, in his early years at Catholic University, McLean soon became a well-known figure among U.S. Catholic philosophers, then among world philosophers, Catholic and not.

[Full disclosure: This reporter took two graduate seminars in philosophy under McLean in 1966-67 and admired his intellectual acumen but had no clue then about his future role in international, intercultural dialogue and collaboration.]

After McLean joined the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, he was sent to Rome for seven years of study, three in

philosophy and four in theology. Courses at the pontifical universities he attended were in Latin, French was the language of the international Oblate seminary where he lived, and Italian was the local language for everything else.

After his ordination in 1955, he returned to the United States, earned a doctorate in philosophy at Catholic University and began teaching there in 1958.

In 1960 Msgr. John K. Ryan, then dean of the university's School of Philosophy, asked McLean to organize a series of annual professional updating workshops for Catholic philosophy teachers and graduate students, and that led to the American Catholic Philosophical Association asking him to serve as its secretary. McLean did so from 1965 to 1980, editing and publishing its annual proceedings and playing a significant role in advancing the association's work and service to its members.

His participation in the 1968 World Congress of Philosophy in Vienna, Austria, marked the start of his involvement with the International Federation of Philosophical Societies, including service on its board from 1978 to 1988. From 1974 to 1998 he was secretary of both the World Union of Catholic Philosophical Societies and the International Society for Metaphysics.

Although retired from teaching for 16 years now, McLean continues to have a small suite of offices and meeting rooms in the basement of Gibbons Hall on the Catholic University campus, headquarters of the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy. At the turn of the century, the council's work was incorporated into Catholic University's research activities by the formation of the university's Center for the Study of Culture and Values as an adjunct to the council.

One of the council's annual activities is a seminar, usually 10 weeks long, attended by a select group of about 12 to 15 scholars from around the world. This year's seminar, "The Sacred and the Secular: Complementary and/or Conflictual?" was drawing to an end when *NCR* interviewed McLean in late October.

The featured speaker at that day's session was Islamic scholar Abdul Karim Souroush of Iran, whom McLean described as "a key liberal thinker" in his country.

Several of the participants were Muslims or from Asian countries where Islam is a significant force.

McLean told *NCR* that contemporary issues of globalization and secularity "are not just an Islamic problem, they're a problem for Christianity as well." The problem for all believers is "how to live faithfully" in the face of change, he said.

Lining one wall of his office is a bookshelf filled with the 225 or so books produced by the council from the seminars and conferences it has sponsored around the world. McLean wandered over to the bookshelf often as he spoke, pulling out examples of the collaborative work done over the years by teams of scholars he helped organize around the world.

From Africa there were titles like *Identity and Change in Nigeria*; *Social Reconstruction in Africa*; *Ethics, Human Rights and Development in Africa*; and *The Idea of an African University: The Nigerian Experience*.

The first volume in the series from Eastern and Central Europe comes from a 1977 meeting of World Union of Catholic Philosophical Societies in Krakow, Poland, on the theme, "The Human Person in the Contemporary World." The meeting's chief local organizer was Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, who a year later became Pope John Paul II. In addition to being archbishop of Krakow, Wojtyla was on the philosophy faculty of the University of Lublin, where he had first begun teaching as a young priest.

The council published the work in English under the title *The Philosophy of Person: Solidarity and Cultural Creativity* in 1994. But in his introduction McLean notes that soon after the meeting, its proceedings were published in samizdat form by the legally nonexistent Academy of Theology in Krakow. Samizdat was the term for the illegally published, secretly circulated writings by dissidents that flourished in the Soviet bloc during the Cold War.

"The impact of the ideas in the volume were dramatic indeed," McLean said. "Solidarity [the independent Polish labor union and later political party] was soon founded upon the principles of the primacy of the person, which had been elaborated through the long quiet work of the Polish philosophers and tested in this international meeting with philosophers from many countries."

Speaking of the seminar, joint study and team approach he takes, he said, "I'm less interested in a book by a single author working in isolation -- a philosophical tradition he described as modeled after 17th-century French philosopher René Descartes.

"The difficulty in a global context," he said, is that no one thinker is "as big as the issues are." He said he tries to get his collaborators around the world "to develop the habit of working as teams, complementing and stimulating each other. I say to a group, if you can get a team together and produce a book, that's gold."

One problem for scholars in Africa and other parts of the developing world is that they do not have access to publishers for their work, he said. He said he guarantees participants in council seminars and conferences that if they put their work together in a book, he'll publish it.

In some cases the printing run may only be around 600 to 1,000 copies, he said, but every volume published by the council is sent to the libraries of about 350 key universities around the world, including at least 50 each in Africa, South America and Asia.

And they are all available electronically on the Internet. McLean said Google has scanned the entire set. This past May, Internet users looked at 500,000 pages in the series through Google, he said.

On the council's own Web site -- www.crvp.org -- they can be downloaded for free. "There's nothing like that for distribution around the world," he said.

McLean said that now that he is 80 he is looking to transfer the work of the council to other hands. He remains president but just recently resigned as general secretary and was succeeded by Edward J. Alam, a professor of philosophy at Notre Dame University in Louaize, Lebanon. Alam, born and educated in the United States, has taught at the Lebanese Catholic university since 1996 and has been engaged in council-organized conferences around the world for the past four years.

When McLean turned 80 June 29, he was at an international conference he helped organize at Fudan University in Shanghai. The participants, including several scholars he has worked with from around the world, threw him a birthday party, he said, and took the occasion to present him with not one, but three festschrifts celebrating his life and work.

A festschrift (from the German words for feast or festival, and writing) is a collection of essays by colleagues or former students to honor a noted teacher or scholar, usually on his or her 75th or 80th birthday.

"I knew they [the scholars] were coming, but I didn't know they were bringing books," he said.

One of the festschrifts, *Asian Philosophy in the Making*, was published in Vietnam and another, *Islam, Cultural Transformation and the Re-emergence of Falsafah [Philosophy]*

, was done in Iran. It was a pleasant surprise to him, he said, that publications honoring an American would come out of either of those countries.

The third, out of Lebanon and edited by Alam, was on the challenges facing Christianity and culture today.

McLean's longtime assistant, Hu Yeping, said McLean had received five other festschrifts on his 75th birthday -- one internationally based and the others from China, Thailand, Romania, and Eastern and Central Europe.

For most professors, even a single festschrift is an honor; eight is almost unimaginable.

During his years as a professor, McLean -- an avid student of Indian culture and Hinduism -- spent his sabbaticals in India, except for his last one, two years before his retirement.

He spent his 1991 sabbatical in Cairo, Egypt, studying Islam in order to be able to work more extensively on intercultural collaboration throughout the Muslim world. "That's been a major effort" of council activities since then, resulting so far in 18 books from Islamic sources, he said.

In today's world of ideas, it's truly hard to assess what impact any single person has had, but it's at least arguable that McLean may have had more influence on world events over the past 40 years than many far more public figures of that era.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

Philosopher sees more faith seekers today

WASHINGTON -- In today's increasingly secular world "people are struggling whether to hold on to the faith," Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor said at a forum here on "Faith in a Secular Age" at The Catholic University of America.

Taylor, author of *A Secular Age* and winner of the 2007 Templeton Prize in Religion, described faith as an "itinerary." He contrasted the "seekers," who he said are looking for "an ethic of authenticity" amid "an incredible pluralism of worldviews," with the "dwellers," who look to their faith as a source of certainty.

Faith involves risk, said Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, the other main speaker at the forum. "Without self-surrender, in Christian terms," he said, "you keep negotiating your way" through the fundamental issues of faith without reaching a resolution.

Vincentian Fr. David O'Connell, Catholic University president, said the forum was the starting point "for a 15-month research project reexamining religion and faith for both the spiritual seeker and the believer in this secular age." Under the leadership of Oblate Fr. George F. McLean, president of the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy and director of the university's Center for the Study of Culture and Values, two teams of scholars from across the country will examine the relation of faith and culture today.

One team, headed by Jesuit Fr. John Haughey of the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University in Washington, will examine the issue from the standpoint of the individual's search for meaning.

The second group, headed by William Barbieri, an associate professor of theology and religious studies at Catholic University, will address it in terms of the social and political dimensions.

O'Connell said the study will be based on the findings of a recent Pew Foundation report that "suggests that young people who leave the church do not do [so] so much to abandon their beliefs, as they do so as a reflection

of an attitude of a personal search, rather than that institutional commitment that is more familiar to previous generations.?

McLean said the study teams will rely heavily on the insights of Taylor's *A Secular Age*.

When the forum and study project were announced, he said, he heard from scholars from various universities around the world.

?All agree that this issue of understanding faith and its role and contribution to the world is a vital and pressing need,? he said. ?The question is not whether it?s the right theme; the question is how to approach that theme.?

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