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# Heinrich Albert Rommen (1897-1967); In Memoriam

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## In Memoriam

HEINRICH ALBERT ROMMEN (1897-1967)

Associate Editor of the NATURAL LAW FORUM

WITH the death of Heinrich Albert Rommen on February 19, 1967, the NATURAL LAW FORUM has lost one of the original members of its editorial board. He brought to this association the resources of Old World learning, a meticulous devotion to freedom in scholarly investigation, and the geniality of a character tempered by the trying experiences of his early life.

Born in Cologne on February 21, 1897, Rommen studied political economy at the University of Muenster (Dr. Rer. Pol., 1924) and civil and canon law at the University of Bonn (Dr. jur. utr., 1929). For the next five years he headed the social department in the Central Office of the Volksverein at München-Gladbach. This was an organization founded in 1890 to promote Catholic participation in the social, political, and cultural life of Germany. During Rommen's period with the Volksverein, a well-educated staff of experts provided practical advice to clergy and lay people, offered lectures on social questions, published two journals, and ran a lively summer school of social studies. Adolf Hitler terminated the work of the Volksverein in 1933. Between 1933 and 1938 Rommen worked in the legal department of a Berlin business firm but found the political climate in Nazi Germany less and less compatible with his own ideals.

Emigrating to the United States in 1938, Heinrich Rommen inaugurated a new and fruitful academic career. He taught at St. Joseph's College (Hartford, Connecticut) for eight years; while there he became a naturalized citizen (1944). From 1946 to 1953 he served as professor of political science at St. Thomas College (St. Paul, Minnesota), and there he was associated with kindred spirits such as Theodore Brauer and Franz Mueller, who shared his interest in Catholic social studies. In 1953 he joined the department of government at Georgetown University, where he remained as a distinguished professor. Active in the American Political Science Association and the Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs, Rommen was also a charter member of the International Suarez Society. Boston College honored him with an LL.D. in 1950.

At Muenster Rommen had done research on the practical philosophy of Francisco Suarez, and his first book was *Die Staatslehre des Franz Suarez* (1927). It is still regarded as a standard work on Suarezian political philosophy. In 1936 he published *Die ewige Wiederkehr des Naturrechts*; translated as *The Natural Law* (1948) this did much to establish Rommen's American reputation in the field of natural law. A more general work, written in English, *The State in Catholic Thought* (1945) was also influential.

Numerous reviews and journal articles added to Rommen's stature as a scholar. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, for instance, has just printed his long article on "The State" and a shorter notice on the term "Volksverein."

Despite his training in traditional politico-legal philosophy (or perhaps because of it), Rommen seemed much ahead of his time on certain issues. Long before Pope John and Vatican II, he argued that the Christian should not concentrate exclusively on the supernatural and otherworldly life. Direct participation in the active work of one's community is stressed in many of Rommen's early writings. Yet he always insisted that there is, and should be, no "official" political philosophy in the Catholic Church. As he expressed this in one long but forthright sentence:

Unequivocally as the Catholic Church stresses her competence to help, to teach, and to admonish in the field of social and political life, yet she has always, though on certain occasions only at the last moment, avoided identifying herself with an historically existing, therefore transitory, political form or doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

Predictably, Heinrich Rommen opposed racism in all its forms, and he lived through one of its ugliest manifestations in Germany during the mid-30's. What particularly disturbed him in the philosophical area, however, was irrationalism. He was never in sympathy with the existential tendencies in recent German thought.

As far as natural law thinking is concerned, Rommen's views were doubtless more classical and scholastic than those of many of his colleagues on the editorial board of the *FORUM*. He regarded law as the "rule of reason" and felt that natural law tends to lose its meaning and validity when law is defined in terms of volition. His Suarezian studies never led him in the direction of legal voluntarism. At the end of *The Natural Law* he stated his legal creed as follows:

The foundation of law is justice. "Truth grants or refuses the highest crown to the products of positive legislation, and they draw from truth their true moral force" (Franz Brentano). But truth is conformity with reality. And just as the real and the true are one, so too the true and the just are ultimately one. *Veritas facit legem*. And in this profound sense of the unity of truth and justice the words, "And the truth shall make you free," are applicable to the community of men under law. True freedom consists in being bound by justice.<sup>2</sup>

If these old-fashioned but high-minded sentences can still find acceptance in the post-Hitler era, then men like Heinrich Rommen have not lived in vain.

VERNON J. BOURKE

1. HEINRICH ROMMEN, *THE STATE IN CATHOLIC THOUGHT* 8 (1945).
2. ROMMEN, *THE NATURAL LAW* 267 (1948 [copyright 1947]).