

RAHNER AND DULLES ON THE UNITY OF THE CHURCHES THE KARL RAHNER SOCIETY

The third meeting of the Karl Rahner Society was devoted to a discussion of Jon Nilson's paper "The Unity of the Churches: Actual Possibility or Eschatological Actuality?" The paper had been sent to all members of the Karl Rahner Society prior to the convention and it will be published in the winter 1993 issue of *Philosophy and Theology* with other articles on Rahner, an "Update of Bibliography of Rahner Secondary Literature: 1993," and the *Karl Rahner Society Newsletter*. The computer-disk version of that issue will also include data base entries for the entire "Bibliography of Rahner Secondary Literature: 1939-1993." *Philosophy and Theology* and the Karl Rahner Society are working together to establish the winter issue of the journal as a forum for Rahner studies in North America.

The "chilly winds sweeping across the ecumenical landscape," provided the context for Nilson's reappraisal of Rahner's suggestion in 1983 that unity of the churches was already an actual possibility¹ and Dulles' position to the contrary that reunion is so far from realization that it must be understood as an eschatological event.² Despite this fundamental disagreement, Nilson finds considerable common ground underlying the two positions. Both hold that "a genuine unity of faith already exists between churches" and is manifested in their adherence to the Scriptures and the Creeds. Both "affirm that the churches could be doing much more for the sake of unity." Both underscore the importance of the notion of the "hierarchy of truths" and neither "confuses Church unity with uniformity." Finally, both believe "that complete doctrinal agreement among the churches is probably impossible" but also is not necessary for reunion.

¹Karl Rahner's and Heinrich Fries, *Einigung der Kirchen-reale Möglichkeit* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1983); ET: *Unity of the Churches. An Actual Possibility* (New York: Paulist, 1985).

²Nilson's analysis relies for the most part on Dulles' "Paths to Doctrinal Agreement: Ten Theses," *Theological Studies* 47 (March 1986), reprinted as "Ecumenism and the Search for Doctrinal Agreement" in *The Reshaping of Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988); "Ecumenical Strategies for a Pluralistic Age" in *The Resilient Church* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977); and "Ecumenism Without Illusions: A Catholic Perspective," *First Things* 4 (June-July 1990).

The disagreement between Dulles and Rahner emerges over the doctrinal minimum required for reunion. For Rahner, the Scriptures and Creeds provide

the necessary and sufficient basis for a genuine unity of faith. Because he does not consider the particular doctrines of the "partner churches" (*Teilkirchen*) as church-dividing, he proposes an agreement among the uniting churches. No partner church will condemn the "binding dogmas" of another partner church nor will a church make acceptance of their own dogmas a condition for unity. The Scriptures and Creeds are enough to assure each partner church that an authentic unity of faith exists among them.

Further agreement about the distinctive formulations of the faith would occur after the reunion had been effected. For Dulles, however, such agreement about the Scriptures and Creeds, although necessary for reunion, is not sufficient. According to Nilson, Dulles "takes withholding assent to a dogma as equivalent to doubting or even to denying it," so Rahner's path to unity would ultimately relegate all the particular doctrines of the churches to optional status. The proposal would result in a reductionistic, nondescript union of churches which would be "culturally, religiously and theologically disastrous."

Nilson maintains that there are answers to Dulles' objections in *Unity of the Churches* and that there are important theological agreements between Dulles and Rahner about the mission and identity of the Church and about the nature of grace which ought to make us wonder "what could have led Dulles not only to overlook Rahner's response but also to misconstrue his proposal as reductionist?" Nilson's analysis leads him to conclude that the real basis for Dulles' rejection is not fundamentally theological. The root of the disagreement is "their two quite different assessments of the conditions of contemporary culture and their implications for the church's mission. In theological shorthand, Dulles' position comes down to 'Christ against Culture' and Rahner's to 'Christ above Culture'." They both construe the ecumenical imperative as crucial to the identity and mission of the Church, but their assessments of the cultural situation lead them to opposed positions. For Rahner, Nilson explains, "the unity of the churches which is today possible must be urgently pursued for the sake of the churches' survival and effectiveness of their mission" to an increasingly secular and atheistic world. On the other hand, for Dulles, "that unity which today is impossible must be expected only at the end of history, since premature unification renders the churches even more susceptible to the deadly viruses of secularism."

These very different assessments of contemporary culture lead Rahner and Dulles "to construe the ecumenical imperative quite differently." But Nilson points out that the perception of neither is grounded in rigorous cultural analysis. This leads Nilson to suggest that

what may be most divisive *between* and *within* the churches is not faith or doctrine at all but different readings of "the signs of the times." If so, ecumenists will have to undertake cultural interpretation as an essential component of their

work. Without careful cultural analyses, the goal of unity of the Christian churches may be held hostage to impressions stemming more from bias than reasoned judgments.

ROBERT MASSON
Marquette University
Milwaukee, Wisconsin