

SELECTED SESSIONS

AVERY DULLES ON THE ENGAGEMENT OF CATHOLICISM WITH AMERICAN CULTURE

Topic: Avery Dulles on the Engagement of Catholicism with American Culture
Convener: Robert C. Christie, DeVry University
Moderator: John R. Connolly, Loyola Marymount University
Presenters: Anne-Marie Kirmse, Fordham University
Robert C. Christie, DeVry University

In addressing the conference's theme of "Theology's Prophetic Commitments," these papers addressed three of the suggested questions through a reflection on the thought of Avery Dulles in respect to Catholicism and its engagement with American culture. Those questions were:

- (1) What prophetic voices do we need to listen to today and where do they come from?
- (2) How does prophetic theology continue to address "the issues that will not go away"?
- (3) Does "prophetic" only mean "progressive" or "liberal"?

In the first presentation, titled "Avery Cardinal Dulles—Unwitting Prophet," Anne-Marie Kirmse claimed that Avery Cardinal Dulles would not have considered himself to be a prophet. Yet in reviewing the vast corpus of his writings, a prophetic voice can be heard. Two examples served to illustrate this thesis. Already in the mid-1970s, Dulles was concerned about the loss of the transcendent in American life. His participation in the Hartford Appeal in 1975 seems to have been a defining moment for him. Almost thirty years later, by now a Cardinal of the Church, Dulles publicly challenged the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on what came to be known as the "Dallas Charter," taking the unpopular stance that the charter was flawed. His fear that the rights of innocent priests would be trampled has come to pass, and in the process he lived the prophetic call to care for prisoners and to seek justice on their behalf. The following questions relevant to the conference theme were addressed: *Did Avery Dulles take a turn to the right? As time went on, did he become a conservative theologian? Or, was the prophetic voice heard in some of his earlier writings still there, but now channeled in other directions? Did "the signs of the times" change since the Council ended? If so, did Dulles's reading of the contemporary situation call for*

new strategies in order to be faithful? Primary documents for this paper were The Hartford Appeal, 1975, and Avery Dulles, "Rights of Accused Priests: Toward a revision of the Dallas charter and the 'Essential Norms,'" *America* (June 21-28, 2004).

Robert C. Christie's paper, "An Assessment of Avery Dulles's Advisement for the Engagement of Catholicism with American Culture" examined the role of "the Theologian as Prophet" and addressed the following questions: *Have the four "strategies" identified by Dulles for Catholic engagement with American culture fulfilled the roles of which they were capable? How have these four "strategies" inter-related (or not) over the last twenty years? How have changes in the Church and American culture during this time impacted these roles? What is the current status of the engagement of faith, particularly Catholicism, and culture, especially in light of Dulles's own prophetic vision of integrated, multidimensional engagement? Do the changes in both Church and culture over the last twenty years call for a renewal of Dulles's initiatives?* The primary sources for this paper were Dulles's 1989 lecture, "Catholicism and American Culture: The Uneasy Dialogue," in *Church and Society* (Fordham University Press, New York, 2008, 27-42), originally delivered December 5-6, 1989, and another document, not widely known, which is the as-yet-unpublished-in English Dulles lecture delivered in Pittsburgh in 2006 entitled, "The Dechristianization of Europe: Is America Next?"

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