

CARDINAL AVERY DULLES, S.J., AMONG THE THEOLOGIANs: A MEMORIAL REFLECTION

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Avery Dulles' postconciliar theology must be placed historically in the broad context of what he called postcriticism. His models approach to theology, moreover, attempted to address the theological pluralism of the postconciliar era in a way that contributed to the unity of the faith. His nearly lifelong Ignatian commitment to thinking with the Church, his openness to development, his ecumenical stance, and his respect for diverse theological constructions made him a major representative of postconciliar currents in Catholic theology.

AVERY DULLES (N. 1918) DIED ON DECEMBER 12, 2008, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. For about a year prior to his death, he suffered the effects of a postpolio syndrome that made it impossible for him to walk or write, and even to swallow or speak. He bore these sufferings and incapacities with faith and grace. His last McGinley lecture, read for him at Fordham University, mentioned in passing that because of his physical infirmities he could identify with the mute and the lame in the Gospels.¹ For more than 68 years, even as a Harvard student in the late 1930s before his conversion to Catholicism in 1940, he had been on a personal journey of faith, seeking a fuller understanding of those Gospels. Throughout these years he communicated with lucid prose, clarity, and synthetic skills the results of his own search, and in the end he bore witness concretely to his identification with the one in whom he believed (*Scio cui credidi*, his coat of arms motto).

The editor of *Theological Studies* asked me to write an assessment of Dulles as a theologian—where he should be placed on the theological spectrum, and what, if any, are his lasting contributions to the discipline of theology. This article is my response.

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¹ “Farewell Address as McGinley Professor,” *Origins* 37 (2008) 697–701. As here, all other works cited without designation of author are by Avery Dulles.

The recent, massive one-volume *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*,² a major historical/theological account of theology in the 20th century, intends to introduce readers to the thought of the “most leading Christian theologians and movements in theology since the end of World War I.” As criteria for selection, the editors considered theologians who had “written constructively on a broad range of theological issues” and those who were “widely studied at present.” The editors admitted that, given the space limits of the text (over 800 pages), they could not include all the major theologians who would have merited attention.³ Dulles was excluded. Nonetheless, I consider this omission a major mistake, as I will argue below, because of what Dulles’ theology represents in the immediate 45 years after the Second Vatican Council.

Some have asserted that Dulles was not a creative or “constructive” theologian as were Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, Hans Urs von Balthasar, or Henri de Lubac. Dulles would have agreed with this characterization; he did not intend to be original or creative in the sense of forging a new systematics. His claim to our attention as theologians and his importance to the post-Vatican II Church are based largely on other attributes: his clarity of insight into just what was essential in the theological tradition, the wisdom and breadth of his synthesis (particularly in his models approach to theology), his good sense of humor and openness to diversity and development, his theological moderation between the extremes of the postconciliar period, his emphasis on continuity with Vatican II, and his insistence on the council’s developments as well as on its continuity with earlier conciliar decisions. Dulles wanted to represent the tradition in its fullest, with all its diversity and development, its continuity and change. In particular, he saw his own theology as consistent with that of Vatican II, and in fact he became one of the major interpreters of that council. He saw himself in line with the conciliar progressives and continued throughout his career to articulate what he considered the council’s meaning, without denying the possibility of legitimate postconciliar theological developments. Dulles deserves attention in any history of 20th-century thought because his theology reflected so much of the intellectual and theological ferment of the times in which he lived. Protestant theologian Gabriel Fackre, in fact, has argued that “the intellectual history of Avery Dulles is a mirror of the theological journey of the Roman Catholic Church in the last half of this century.”⁴

² David F. Ford, ed., with Rachel Muers, *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, 3rd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005).

³ Ibid. viii, x. Even Paul D. Murray’s article, “Roman Catholic Theology after Vatican II” (ibid. 265–86), fails to mention Dulles.

⁴ See Gabriel J. Fackre, review of Dulles’ *Craft of Theology* (1992), *Modern Theology* 9 (1993) 315–16.

Dulles was one of the most productive publishing theologians in the United States during the postconciliar era: his theology was widely read internationally as well as nationally; he was well respected in the theological community (elected president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, 1976–1977, and of the American Theological Society, 1978–1979) and in the Church (selected as member of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine, 1991–2007; and appointed member of the International Theological Commission, 1992–1997, and made cardinal, 2001). He published 25 books and over 800 articles and reviews in his 68 years as a publishing scholar, and a good number of his books and articles have been translated into multiple foreign languages. In fact, Dulles is probably the most extensively translated theologian in American history.

As a Jesuit scholastic he began writing reviews for *Theological Studies* in 1954, and after ordination in 1956 he wrote 19 articles for the journal and reviewed numerous submitted manuscripts. Readers of *TS* are more than likely familiar with Dulles' theological corpus and, therefore, I need not summarize his contributions here. Instead I will try to place him on the theological spectrum of postconciliar theologies, arguing that his own self-designation as a postcritical theologian is an apt characterization of his theological method and helps distinguish him from some other theological options in the postconciliar period.

I find particularly unhelpful the labels "liberal" and "conservative" for characterizing any theological system, even though I know that Dulles has been tagged from time to time with both labels. While labels are often misleading, they serve a heuristic or pedagogical purpose for characterizing periods of thought, even as they fail to capture the complexity of an individual's thought. Labels are unavoidable for this essay, however, both because they were used for purposes of identification in the immediate postconciliar era, and because Dulles himself used them to identify theological positions.

Although known primarily for his work in ecclesiology because of his popular and most widely distributed *Models of the Church* (1974, and subsequent editions), Dulles was in fact a fundamental theologian who focused his research throughout his career on issues of revelation and faith. In fact, in my view, his most significant contributions to theology are in the areas of revelation and faith where he published his most important books, *Models of Revelation* (1983, 1992) and *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (1994). Apologetics was also a continuing subject of study, but other than his *History of Apologetics* (1971, 1999, 2005), a synthetic historical summary of major movements in the discipline, he never really constructed a systematic account of apologetics for the postconciliar period—although he called for such a development.

In 1991, Dulles aptly called his own theological method postcritical and thereby placed himself historically on the very broad spectrum of

postconciliar modern Catholic and Protestant theology.⁵ He suggested that the history of theology could be understood in terms of successive attitudes to criticism: precritical, critical, and postcritical. In the precritical stage of development, prior to the rise of the new sciences in the 17th century, although theology used various philosophical insights to reflect critically on faith, it rarely applied criticism to the canonical sources of theology. With the rise of the new sciences and the application of observation and mathematics and critical history, theology entered into a new stage that Dulles called the critical era. During this period, which undermined to some extent the authority of Aristotle, theology gradually applied the tools of doubt and criticism to the canonical sources. Also within this period, a paracritical approach, usually associated with Protestant dialectical theology, developed; it accepted the tools of criticism but made faith itself impervious to criticism. Likewise evolved a countercritical stance, generally associated with the evidentiary tradition and Catholic neo-Scholasticism, which sought to vindicate Christianity by appealing to critical sources and exact syllogistic logic. In the second half of the 20th century, a postcritical era emerged that accepted the gains achieved by the critical enterprise but scrutinized and critiqued its presuppositions and methods.

Schools of thought labeled “postcritical,” “postmodern,” or “postliberal” had a family resemblance, and Dulles saw himself in the circle of theologians who belonged in one of these schools. He identified the general postcritical movement with the works of Michael Polanyi, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Peter Berger, and Robert Bellah, and with the theologies of Hans Urs von Balthasar and George Lindbeck whose methods were in “some respects postcritical.”⁶ One might also include Joseph Ratzinger and many others in this category. Although Dulles placed himself in the very large circle of modern theologians, he did not completely identify his own theological methodology with either Balthasar or Lindbeck or others who might be identified in the postmodern or postliberal circles. In calling himself a postcritical theologian, Dulles was relying, as he had since the mid-1960s, on the insights of Polanyi, whose works on the philosophy of science resonated with his own conception of theology. What Polanyi had done for science, Dulles wanted to do for theology.

A postcritical theology was open to the contributions of the modern turn to criticism, but Dulles noted at least four general presuppositional and

⁵ “Theology for a Post-Critical Age,” in *Theology Toward the Third Millennium: Theological Issues for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. David G. Schultenover (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1991) 5–21.

⁶ “Theology for a Post-Critical Age” became the first chapter of Dulles’ *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (1992; New York: Crossroad, 1995) 3–15, at 5. On what I have in mind by the broad spectrum of postcritical or postliberal or postmodern theologies, see *Modern Theologians*, chaps. 6, 14, and 19.

methodological flaws in the critical enterprise that he periodically applied to biblical and historical scholarship. The critical approach had a bias toward doubt, failed to recognize that doubt itself had a fiduciary basis, was incapable of applying criticism universally and consistently, and neglected the social and tacit dimensions of knowledge. There were indeed reasons of the heart, presuppositions, and instincts of an educated conscience that were impervious to critical analysis and beyond the human capacity to express fully. Postcritical theology, in Dulles' view, began with the presupposition of faith (conceived of in Polanyian terms as tacit knowledge), a hermeneutics of trust, not suspicion or doubt, and ended with a constructive, not a destructive, purpose.

Catholic theology, in particular, is an ecclesial discipline that flowed from dwelling in the Church's life of faith and is a systematic methodological effort to articulate the truth implied in that faith. Theology's method, therefore, could not be spelled out in terms of mathematics or syllogistic logic; it depended upon "a kind of connoisseurship derived from personal appropriation of the living faith of the Church."⁷ No detached scientific approach could ever appreciate the meaning of the Christian symbols; only by living within the community of those signs could one value their meaning. The problem for the theologian who dwelt within the Christian symbols was to make them intelligible, as far as possible, both to those within and outside the community of faith.

The aim of Dulles' own postcriticism was to establish an intellectually respectable theological method in an age of "drift and confusion."⁸ Although aware of the benefits and usefulness of the critical approach to the sources, Dulles saw his own approach as an attempt to transcend the objectivism of the critical approach and the subjectivism of what he called the paracritical approach to theology. Theology as a postcritical method pointed to the reality of the mysteries, their truth, and their universal validity. Dulles hoped, in his conception of postcriticism, to avoid the pitfalls of rationalism that he perceived in the critical approach and of the fideism that characterized the Kantian and post-Kantian approaches of some modern theologians. The postcritical theologian emphasized the necessity of conversion "as a self-modifying act that enables one to look at the world with new eyes." Although theology rested on faith, and faith had a cognitive dimension that could be persuasively presented, nonetheless faith was indemonstrable to those outside its commitment, and the truth of faith could not "be established from within the framework of the unconverted."⁹ Postcritical theology was deeply concerned with truth, the reality of the tacit dimension of faith, the validity as well as the limits of the cognitive enterprise, and the

⁷ *Craft of Theology* 8.

⁹ *Ibid.* 14.

⁸ *Ibid.* 7.

confidence that it could set forth a “plausible, comprehensive, and appealing” vision of reality.¹⁰ It was not a retreat into the objective or the subjective, but a process that brought the two dimensions into a kind of dialectical harmony.

Dulles’ postcritical theology emerged gradually during his long career and can be first seen in his appropriation of and judgments on the inherited Scholastic manual theology and his use of a models approach to the church, revelation, and faith. Even though consistency and continuity characterized his theology with respect to his understanding of its aims and methods, his theology was not static. It developed and matured over time, and his theological emphases varied in response to his Ignatian *sentire cum ecclesia* and his reading of the needs and signs of the times.¹¹

Like many others educated in the preconiliar era, Dulles knew the neo-Scholastic manual theology so prominent in seminaries like Woodstock College and the Gregorian University. He learned from the manual tradition the method of distinguishing the various theological opinions and the need to bring the various traditions into some kind of synthetic whole. He also thoroughly knew Denzinger and often quoted from it. His preconiliar education, however, was not confined to the manual tradition. As an undergraduate and as a law student at Harvard he had read Newman and Karl Adam. In the 1950s, as a Jesuit scholastic, he read, outside of classes, the *nouvelle théologie* of de Lubac, Daniélou, Congar, and others. He was also exposed to the American Catholic biblical revival and the emerging American Catholic ecumenical movement associated with his Woodstock mentor, Gustave Weigel, and his Gregorian dissertation director, Jan Witte.

By the time Dulles began his teaching career at Woodstock College, Maryland, in 1960, during the preparatory years of Vatican II, his own theology was a dialogue between the manual tradition and the emerging renewal that was going on in the *Nouvelle Théologie* and the biblical and ecumenical movements, as his own class notes and handouts reveal. His first courses, on Christian revelation, followed the manual approach with some considerable attention to the newer views of revelation that had emerged in the post World War II period. The course included a systematic examination of biblical inspiration and apologetics, and an introduction to Scripture. Another course Dulles taught, introduction to the New Testament and the Gospels, was in fundamental theology, focusing on the issues modern biblical scholarship was raising for theology.

¹⁰ Ibid. 15.

¹¹ On Dulles’ reading of the signs of the times, see my “Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ, and the Signs of the Times,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 16 (2009) 183–208.

When Dulles started teaching at Woodstock he relied on René Latourelle's Gregorian University class notes on revelation. These helped Dulles introduce students to the historically sensitive dimensions of the theology of revelation. He also found Latourelle's work important as a starting point for his own research on the doctrine of revelation. Latourelle had advised Catholic students to interpret Catholic magisterial definitions of revelation historically since they originated in very particular historical circumstances and tended to resonate with them. Dulles followed Latourelle in advising students to consider not this or that single magisterial document to be exhaustive of a doctrine on revelation, but to consider the totality of the church's utterances. From that totality one could grasp the meaning of the doctrine. What Latourelle suggested for the doctrine of revelation could also be applied to other areas of church teaching. Revelation itself, moreover, had a historicity to it, and that must be taken into account in accessing and interpreting what had been revealed.

Dulles was not slavishly dependent on Latourelle as his 1964 review of the latter's *Théologie de la révélation* (1963) reveals. The book was published before the major debates on revelation had been concluded at the council, and, therefore, Latourelle did not have access to *Dei Verbum* and to some of the theology behind it. Dulles argued in his review that Protestants had worked on the doctrine of revelation since the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Catholics were behind the times in this regard. In the immediate past Catholics had focused so much attention on the sacraments as the means of grace that they tended to neglect the "salvific power of the word of God."¹² Latourelle's book, the fruit of a decade of work, was a welcome Catholic contribution to the issue. Although his method was quite traditional, his focus, like that of other contemporary theologians (Marie-Dominique Chenu, de Lubac, Congar), centered on the Christocentric, historical, interpersonal, and biblical dimensions of revelation and criticized the excessively apologetical, abstract, and propositional approaches of the 20th-century neo-Scholastic manual tradition. In Dulles' view, however, Latourelle left some questions unanswered and issues underdeveloped or undeveloped: among other things, the universality of revelation and its ongoing reality beyond apostolic times, the extra-doctrinal dimensions of revelation, the ultimately mysterious and unfathomable and symbolic nature of revelation—areas that would become the focus of Dulles' own research.

During the first decade after the council, Dulles separated himself more and more from the Scholastic manual tradition of theology and became one of its staunchest critics. The manual tradition was increasingly presented in terms of what Dulles and others called "non-historical or anti-historical

¹² "The Theology of Revelation," *Theological Studies* 25 (1964) 43–58, at 44.

orthodoxy.”¹³ The council had moved in a new direction theologically, and the victory at the council belonged to those who had an understanding of the historicity of the human condition and the historically conditioned nature of the biblical, dogmatic, liturgical, theological, and catechetical traditions. Dulles’ historical consciousness was a reflection of his examination of the conciliar debates and documents, but it was not entirely the result of the council. As an undergraduate at Harvard, he had developed a historical sense in his study of medieval and Renaissance philosophy and literature, and as a scholastic he had read, among others, Congar’s and de Lubac’s historical studies. The council, nonetheless, was a decisive moment in his theological transformation.

The critiques of nonhistorical orthodoxy extended beyond the manualists to those in the postconciliar church who resisted not only the new directions of the council but also the postconciliar ecclesial reform movements in theology and church structures. Those who resisted change and wanted to hold on to the *status quo ante*, Dulles periodically categorized as intransigents or reactionaries or ultraconservatives. They had a static and abstract concept of the church and of doctrine and were thus out of tune with the dynamic, personalist, historically conscious, and ecumenical dimensions set forth in the council. Dulles criticized in particular the tendency of the 19th- and early 20th-century Catholic theological manuals to identify revelation with dogma.

As his class notes and articles published during and immediately after the council demonstrate, Dulles was in tune with the theological orientation of the progressives at the council, and in the years after the council that identification became even stronger. Like other progressives he was aware of the historically, socially, and culturally conditioned nature of the Bible, dogma, doctrine, and theological constructs. This progressive mentality became evident in his primary area of research, the doctrine of revelation. The personalism and historical consciousness, evident at the council and in the preconciliar progressive mentality, had a decisive impact on his understanding of revelation. He began to interpret revelation, for example, more and more in terms of a personal encounter with the mystery of the revealing God and less in terms of the almost exclusive neo-Scholastic identification of revelation with doctrine and dogma. Like *Dei Verbum* and many of the postconciliar theologians, Dulles saw revelation itself as the mysterious encounter with God and emphasized the primacy of this personal encounter over the verbal, and thus secondary, formulations of dogma.

The task of theology in the postconciliar period, Dulles frequently noted, following the lead of Pope John XXIII’s opening message to the Second

¹³ Dulles borrowed the term from Michael Novak’s “The School of Fear,” in *The Open Church: Vatican II, Act II* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) 52–70.

Vatican Council, was to restate the Christian message in the “literary forms of modern thought.”¹⁴ Historical investigation and retrieval of the Catholic tradition of dogma and doctrine were certainly necessary but primarily for the sake of reformulating it in a modern idiom that made the meaning of those past declarations relevant to modern times. Influenced by the *Nouvelle Théologie*, personalism, Polanyi, Newman, Blondel, Rousselot, and the transcendental Thomism of Rahner (his favorite theologian during this period of his career), Dulles made the so-called turn to the subject a major part of his theological orientation. His emphasis on the subject and faith as inherent parts of the revelatory experience, however, tried to avoid the pitfalls not only of the dogmatism of the manual tradition but also of the immanentism of certain Modernists, following Blondel’s lead in this regard. Dulles’ *Survival of Dogma* (1971) was the culmination of his early postconciliar reflections, arguing not only for the survival of dogma but also for dogma reconceptualized as a symbolic mode of communication. One reconceptualizes, he argued periodically, in order to preserve the content of the faith.

Although Dulles shared much of the mentality of the postconciliar progressive theologians, he developed his own distinctive theological voice during the early years after the council. His models approach to theology, which emerged first in his *Models of the Church* (1974), became the hallmark of his career as a postconciliar theologian. This approach to theology, of course, was not unique to Dulles; H. R. Niebuhr, following Ernst Troeltsch, had previously applied ideal types to theology, and subsequent American theologians like Dulles found the models approach useful within the contemporary situation of theological pluralism.

Dulles’ models approach to theology helps the historian place Dulles within the context of the history of theology and particularly within the history of the postconciliar era. In his own use of models, he demonstrated where he aligned himself and where he parted company with various traditional and postconciliar theologies. It would be impossible in such a short essay as this, however, to show how he placed himself in reference to the multiple 20th-century theologies. My aim here is more modest—to demonstrate Dulles’ place within some major theological currents in the postconciliar period.

Models of the Church was a classic period piece. Somewhat distinctive of Dulles’ theological methodology, *Models* reflected many of the issues and concerns in the postconciliar Church. It manifested theological pluralism in Catholic and Protestant traditions and was, in his view, theological

¹⁴ See, e.g., “Symbol, Myth and Biblical Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 27 (1966) 23. For the reference to the pope’s opening message, see *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: American, 1966) 715.

medicine needed to bring healing and unity to an increasingly ailing, contentious, and divided American Catholic community in the early 1970s. *Models* was also an extension of Vatican II's use of multiple images to describe the Church and an attempt to underline the Church's fundamental trinitarian and christological dimensions. It demonstrated, moreover, the inadequacy of single images or theological constructs to reveal the totality of that mystery. In this respect it revealed Dulles' continuity with an apophatic theology of an earlier era, a theology that would characterize his theology throughout his career. In the theological enterprise of faith seeking understanding, the theologian knew more than he could say, as Dulles, following Polanyi, repeatedly observed. *Models* was ecumenical, too, in its grappling with Protestant as well as Catholic concepts of the Church and with a spectrum of Catholic ecclesiological perspectives. Absent from his examination of theological pluralism, however, was any substantial treatment of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, a lacuna, with some minor exceptions, that would continue to characterize his dialogue with diverse theological systems in subsequent years.

Models was primarily an exercise in ecclesiological method.¹⁵ Dulles was well aware that his approach was not a systematic theology of the church, but rather "an introduction that might be called a 'dialectics.'"¹⁶ To some extent the study aimed to put different positions in a dialectical relationship, acknowledging in *sic et non* fashion the benefits and limits of the root metaphors that undergirded different theological systems. And in this respect, Dulles acknowledged, the methodology developed "from my scholastic background—the desire to group the '*opinionones*' by schools and to make sure that one had taken advantage of what was valid in them and answered the difficulties they would raise against one's own position."¹⁷ Dulles' models methodology was also a useful pedagogical device. He was always the teacher and sought out ways to communicate the various theological opinions to his classes. This approach provided an effective way to introduce students to the theological pluralism within the Catholic and Christian tradition, showing students that they themselves could develop their theology by standing on the shoulders of the great theologians of the past and present. Because of his general sacramental approach to theology, however, Dulles' use of a models theology was not dependent on nor consistent with the models approach of Niebuhr and Troeltsch.

¹⁵ For Dulles' own explanation of his method, see "Umrisse meiner theologischen Methode," in *Entwürfe der Theologie*, ed. Johannes B. Bauer (Graz, Austria: Styria, 1985) 51–70.

¹⁶ Dulles to John M. McDermott, July 21, 1987, copy in Dulles Papers, Walsh Library Archives, Fordham University, New York (hereafter DPFU).

¹⁷ Dulles to McDermott, 10 August 1987, in DPFU.

Dulles' models method was also an acknowledgment of the relativist and historicist dimensions of the human condition and of theology itself. In recognizing the necessity of investigating the spectrum of theological responses to a particular issue, he also pointed to the humility required in the Catholic theologian to be in communion not only with the Church's doctrines but also with the great theologians of the past. One's own theological contribution to what John Courtney Murray called "the growing edge" of the tradition, in Dulles' estimation, could be creative, paradoxically, only if it were in communion with the tradition and the great minds that preceded one's own era.

Although in his later career as a theologian Dulles modified the methodology of his models, he never departed from what he saw as its benefits. On the major questions he addressed, Dulles assembled the leading pro and con positions and tried to reconcile the truths contained in them. Such an approach contributed to unity and truth in a world he characterized in his early career as one of diversity, pluralism, and development. After the mid-1970s, though, he characterized that world more and more as one of contention and polarization. The shift in his assessment of the signs of the times in Church and society did not, however, change his basic theological methodology, only the emphasis he gave to elements in his thought. In the period after the publication of his *Models of the Church*, he continued to use his method, applying it to revelation, faith, ecumenism, and a host of other issues. One of his last articles, in fact, was "Models of Apologetics" (2006).¹⁸

Dulles' early writings in the decade or so immediately after the council were subjected to a spectrum of reviews, the full range of which cannot be represented here. The negative reactions to his work, though, reflect something of the pluralism in postconciliar theology and help to place Dulles on the postconciliar theological spectrum. One side—characterized by Dulles as ultraconservative or reactionary—charged him with relativism, subjectivism, and Modernism; and charged his works with contributing to the confusion in the postconciliar Church.¹⁹ From the other side, variously designated as radical reformist or ultraliberal, he was criticized for the less than adventuresome nature of his approach to theology. The early Dulles' theology was, in one theologian's view, the "current middle ground of theology, the sound and safe theology of the Council itself." He represented the "new orthodoxy" of Vatican II, which was already being "surpassed by a radical wing that cannot tarry at this resting point but must pass on."²⁰

¹⁸ *Evangelization for the Third Millennium* (New York: Paulist, 2009) 115–27.

¹⁹ For one of many examples, see Dan Lyons, "How Sound Is Avery Dulles?" *Twin Circle*, August 4, 1972, 7, 10.

²⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether's review of *Dimensions of the Church* (1967), *Cross Currents* 18 (1968) 110–13.

Some of Dulles' more moderate critics thought his views of the institutional Church were a caricature,²¹ and more liberal critics asserted that he was overly optimistic in his assessment of the role of the pope and bishops and put too much confidence in the hierarchical Church.²² So balanced and low-keyed was his approach to theology that some might conclude, as Richard McBrien remarked, that "[Dulles] is at heart a conservative. And he is."²³

Dulles in fact leaned to the side of the conciliar progressives, making him open to the charges of the conservatives. He was not, however, a relativist. For him historical consciousness and awareness of the historical relativity of the human condition did not lead inevitably to relativism. Historical study permitted one to see how the immutable truths of faith could be expressed with the help of contingent, variable representations. Dulles relied on the conciliar statements and sought to bring conflicting systems into some kind of synthesis, opening him to the charges of the radical postconciliar reformers. He was not, however, holding on to the *status quo ante* in the period immediately after the council because he sided with the postconciliar reformers and those who were open to the development and reformulation of doctrine; he wanted only to distinguish, in continuity with the longer Catholic tradition, between true and false reform and between true and false reformulation. To some extent, what he once said about Blondel could be analogously applied to himself: "As frequently happens to those who seek to mediate between extreme positions, Blondel found himself attacked from both sides."²⁴

By the mid-1970s, after a decade of revolutionary changes in the Church and society, with recurring signs of statistical declines within the Church, Dulles became increasingly more critical of some progressive directions in the postconciliar Church. Even though in the immediate past he had been mildly critical of some reform programs (Küng, Moran, McBrien) that he thought overstepped the boundaries and trajectories of Vatican II, he gradually became more forceful in his critiques of the immanentism inherent in some of the more radical or more popular theological proposals of the day and defined his own position within the progressive movement more circumspectly than he had in the past. By 1985, the date of the extraordinary

²¹ See John R. Sheets, S.J., review of *Models of the Church*, *America* 130.11 (March 23, 1974) 224.

²² See James Langford, review of *The Survival of Dogma* (1971), *Catholic World* 214 (1971) 136; and Dominic Crossan, review of *Revelation and the Quest for Unity* (1968), *Critic* 27.2 (October–November 1968) 92–94.

²³ Richard McBrien, review of *Models of the Church*, *National Catholic Reporter*, March 29, 1974, 7.

²⁴ *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University, 1994) 109.

synod of bishops, he was becoming more identified with the emerging new evangelization program that John Paul II, following Paul VI, articulated in his many papal declarations and encyclicals.

One of the first signs of an emerging critique of the optimism of the 1960s was evident in the "Hartford Appeal for Theological Affirmation" (1975), which Dulles helped construct and signed.²⁵ The "Appeal" called for a recovery of a sense of transcendence in the churches and in theology, and was explicitly a reaction to the emerging secular and death-of-God theologies of the 1960s. In defense of the "Appeal" of various Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox theologians, Dulles pointed out that the declaration was trying to unmask certain "latent heresies" in the culture. By "latent heresy" he did not mean a direct or explicit attack on Christian revelation, but a mental universe of many unspoken assumptions that were "out of harmony with Christian faith." The real target of the "Appeal" was the "tacit knowledge" that came from living in the secular tradition, and the knowledge and assumptions that went along with it could "scarcely be verified by objective measurements."²⁶ Hartford's statement resonated with some postconciliar progressive theologians but created a storm of protests from others, revealing something of a split within the progressive theological communities. Dulles was on the side of the progressive centrists, critiquing directions in theology and church life that he believed had excessively accommodated to the secular *Zeitgeist*.

Something of this emerging critique was also evident in Dulles' June 1976 review of David Tracy's revisionist *Blessed Rage for Order* (1975). That review also revealed an emerging divide in the postconciliar progressive wing of Catholic theology. Like Tracy, Dulles accepted pluralism in theology, and the benefits and integrity of secularity and modernity; but for Dulles there were specific limits to that acceptance. According to Dulles, Tracy had excessively accommodated to the secular mentality by appropriating the empirical model of the positive sciences in his conception of fundamental theology. In Dulles' view, Tracy saw a firm religious commitment as "unnecessary, even dangerous" in fundamental theology. Dulles was diametrically opposed to this conception of the task, asserting that the Catholic theologian required an explicit religious commitment to Christianity to explain it adequately to the modern pluralistic and secular world. He maintained that the "fundamental theologian may legitimately draw upon the testimony of tradition" because fundamental theology was "inseparable

²⁵ Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Against the World For the World: The Hartford Appeal and the Future of American Religion* (New York: Seabury, 1976).

²⁶ "Unmasking Secret Infidelities: Hartford and the Future of Ecumenism," in *Against the World for the World* 57–58.

from dogmatics.”²⁷ Thus, in the contemporary world, an adequate apologetic for Christianity presupposed commitment and denied the possibility of a scientific objectivity or rationality, as Dulles thought Tracy’s revisionist theology proposed. Dulles’ critique was no mid-1970s conservative backlash, but an enduring feature of his own understanding of what constituted fundamental theology. This 1976 cleavage was significant because at the time Dulles was president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and Tracy vice-president, and they both had adherents in the organization.

A year after the review of Tracy’s work, Dulles defined his own theological orientation clearly in terms of the benefits and limits of adaptation. In the *Resilient Church* (1977), he situated himself on the postconciliar theological spectrum in Catholicism:

Unlike many ecclesiastical conservatives, I hold that adaptation need not be a form of capitulation to the world, but that an adapting church should be able to herald the Christian message with greater power and impact. Unlike certain liberals, I am deeply concerned that the church, in its efforts at adaptation, should avoid imitating the fashions of the non-believing world and should have the courage to be different. Difference is not to be cultivated for its own sake but is to be fearlessly accepted when Christ and the the Gospel so require.²⁸

In the 1960s and early 1970s, Dulles had optimistically supported church reforms, the benefits of adaptation and reinterpretation in theology, and the values of personalism and historical consciousness. In the mid- to late 1970s he had not abandoned these ideals, but he was much more critical of the nature and extent of some church reforms and theological reformulations.

By the early 1980s a slight shift in Dulles’ theology became evident in his *Models of Revelation* (1983). He continued to be in dialogue with major 20th-century theological systems from Catholic neo-Scholasticism and conservative Protestant Evangelicalism to the transcendental theologies of the postconciliar period. But his own theological voice comes more clearly to the fore in this text than in *Models of the Church* where he was intent on emphasizing the pluralism in theology. *Revelation* was a much more mature work in theology, and he considered it his most serious and substantial theological work up to the 1990s. Like his earlier work, it was descriptive of the various theological interpretations, but it was more systematic than the earlier work because he wanted to make a theological statement that in fact transcended the conflicts in the pluralism inherent in the various models he described.²⁹

²⁷ “Method in Fundamental Theology: Reflections on David Tracy’s *Blessed Rage for Order*,” *Theological Studies* 37 (1976) 310, 311.

²⁸ *The Resilient Church: The Necessity and Limits of Adaptation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977) 1, 5.

²⁹ *Models of Revelation* (1983; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992, 2003) xx, 35.

In *Models of Revelation*, Dulles developed his own voice on revelation and set himself apart from some and identified with other 20th-century theologians by naming his own symbolic approach to revelation “postcritical.” The postcritical approach to revelation underlined the “tacit awareness and symbolic communication”³⁰ that was inherent in revelation itself. Dulles’ symbolic approach, which had been developing ever since his late 1950s encounter with Tillich’s thought, was an attempt to escape both subjectivism and objectivism by focusing on the dialectical relationship between faith and revelation, both of which “coexist and constitute each other by their mutual union.”³¹ Dulles continued to appeal to Rahner’s understanding of revelation as “simultaneously anthropocentric and theocentric,”³² a view that supported a “dialectical balance” between “transcendental and predicamental revelation.”³³ Nevertheless, he put Rahner in his discussion of the “inner experience” and “new awareness or consciousness” models of revelation,³⁴ even though he did not identify Rahner with either of these models.

By criticizing the “inner experience” and “new awareness or consciousness” models of revelation,³⁵ Dulles was in fact offering at least an implicit appraisal of Rahner and to some extent distinguishing his own theology from elements of Rahner’s transcendental theology. He criticized the experiential model for, among other things, its neglect of the biblical categories of the deeds and words of God as media of experience itself and the new awareness model for its restriction or denial of the cognitive value of revelation. Rahner was not explicitly charged with either of these judgments because of his more dialectical approach to revelation. The explicit critiques applied more to some of Rahner’s transcendental disciples who were less dialectical than Rahner himself.

Dulles’ critique of Rahner’s transcendental theology became much more obvious and explicit in his theology of faith, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For* (1994).³⁶ In my view, *Assurance* was one of his most significant works in fundamental theology. Dulles presents the biblical and traditional notions of faith, compares and contrasts various models of faith, and offers his own constructive theology of faith in dialogue with the tradition and other contemporary theologies. As in other texts where he used a models approach, in this mature work, he distinguished his own theology of faith from that of some of his contemporaries, as is evident, for example, in his examination of Rahner and the transcendental theologies that followed

³⁰ Ibid. 271–72.

³² Ibid. 100.

³⁴ Ibid. 70–72, 98–99.

³⁶ *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (1994; New York: Oxford University, 1997).

³¹ Ibid. 280, 280–83.

³³ Ibid. 101, 70–72.

³⁵ Ibid. 78–83, 111–14.

Rahner's path. For much of his earlier career Dulles had relied on Rahner's theology and shared much of his post-Kantian transcendental turn to the subject, but gradually, as Dulles developed his own voice in theology, he began to see some weaknesses in Rahner's approach, and here and there indicated in his writings where he was parting company with Rahner.

In *Assurance*, Dulles quotes, approvingly it seems, Balthasar's criticism of Rahner's transcendental theology "for being too anthropocentric, too much focused on the subjective component of faith."³⁷ In Dulles' opinion Balthasar was unsympathetic to theories, like Rahner's anonymous Christianity, that seemed to minimize the importance of explicit belief in Christ. Dulles himself interpreted Rahner's transcendental notion of faith as "a radicalization of the trend inaugurated by Blondel and Rousselot." Rahner had emphasized the interior light of faith "as being by itself a kind of subjective or transcendental revelation, and thus as permitting an act of faith even where unaccompanied by the explicit transmission of any specific revealed truths." Although Rahner's transcendental notion of faith acknowledged that the human spirit had an intrinsic dynamism to realize itself explicitly, Rahner seemed to be saying that the explicit acceptance of Christ or the Christian proclamation was of secondary importance with respect to salvation: "If one accepts that proclamation, one does so because it is seen as the best articulation of what one already believed in an implicit or nonthematic way." Dulles found Rahner's transcendental notion of faith hard to square with the New Testament (e.g., with Rom 10:17, "faith comes from hearing") and traditional notions of faith as an explicit acceptance of the gospel. He noted, too, other general evaluations and remarked that although Rahner's views and theories were shared by large segments in postconciliar Catholicism and had a great "appeal to critical minds,"³⁸ "his synthesis, brilliant and comprehensive as it is, has not as yet won anything like a consensus, even among Catholics."³⁹ Ultimately Dulles found Rahner's transcendental notion of faith and his theory of the supernatural existential "vulnerable" because Rahner tended "to subordinate without eliminating the historical and conceptual aspects of faith."⁴⁰

By 1994, Dulles no longer spoke, as he had in 1983, of the "dialectical balance" in Rahner's notions of transcendental and predicamental revelation. He still accepted Rahner's notion of the human spirit's inner dynamism toward the transcendent, but he put much more emphasis on the necessity of categorical (outer word) revelation than he thought Rahner had done. In his personal correspondence, Dulles remarked to a fellow theologian in 1997 that "my emphasis falls less on the religious question of

³⁷ Ibid. 150, 151.

³⁹ Ibid. 152, 153.

³⁸ Ibid. 165.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 267; see also 166, 172–74.

how we get to God [as with Rahner and Tracy] than on the relational question of how God gets to us.”⁴¹

After *Assurance*, during the last decade or more of his life, Dulles turned more and more toward what he called evangelical theology, emphasizing that faith comes from hearing (*fides ex auditu*). This new emphasis was an attempt to modify what he increasingly considered an excessive stress on the transcendental in postconciliar theology, but he was not abandoning the transcendental turn. His new stress on proclamation was not a turn away from the postcritical but was consistent with it and with his models-approach to theology, as he continued to emphasize the multiple but complementary models of evangelization, catechesis, and apologetics.⁴²

Evangelical theology, by definition, was a systematic reflection “on the ways in which the Holy Spirit transforms the gospel into the power of salvation for all who believe.” By “evangelical,” of course, Dulles had in mind the Catholic connotation of that term, as it was defined comprehensively by Paul VI and John Paul II. It encompassed everything from primary proclamation of the gospel to the transformation of society and culture in tune with the gospel values of justice and peace. Evangelical theology was a reflection on basic religious conversion and on the “implications of the gospel for our understanding of reality as a whole.”⁴³ Such a theology called for conversion to Christ and commitment to the Church. Dulles was well aware that there were trends in contemporary Catholic theology that he found “less than friendly to evangelization.”⁴⁴ He named seven obstacles (a radical separation between faith and belief, metaphysical agnosticism, religious pragmatism, cultural relativism, religious or soteriological pluralism, individualistic notions of freedom, and antiauthoritarianism) that he perceived as impediments to the development of evangelization in Catholic theology.⁴⁵ Although in his talks and lectures during the last years of his life, he became much more evangelical than he was in his earlier years, he did not develop in any systematic way what could have been called an evangelical theology. As he lay on his hospital bed during the last nine months of his life, unable to talk or write,

⁴¹ Dulles was here commenting on how he understood fundamental theology. He maintained that “fundamental theology might be understood as a reflection from within faith on the dynamics of conversion. Such conversion, as I see it, depends upon God reaching us through real symbols of his presence and especially on the testimony of committed believers (who themselves become pre-eminent symbols)” (Dulles to Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, December 10, 1997; see also Dulles to Laurence Hemming, October 4, 1999; both letters in DPFU).

⁴² See in particular the posthumously published *Evangelization for the Third Millennium* (New York: Paulist, 2009) 90–127.

⁴³ Ibid. 80.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 81.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 81–89.

he was able to finish editing, with the help of his research assistant, Dr. Anne-Marie Kirmse, his last book, *Evangelization for the Third Millennium*, a collection of previously prepared articles and talks.

Reviews of Dulles' major works after the mid 1970s, like previous ones, were generally appreciative of his comprehensive dialogue with the theological traditions, his clarity, synthetic skills, and balanced judgments. The reviews, too, had the requisite focus on the limits of his work, demonstrating the spectrum of theological pluralism and the diversity of expectations in the postconciliar period. Among the critics, Protestant Evangelical theologian Carl Henry, for example, thought that Dulles' views on revelation represented a radical subjectivism that undermined the propositional truth that Dulles himself intended to protect.⁴⁶ Others asserted that his theology was in general excessively abstract or "armchairish," lacking emotive power, that it was unaffected by the practical/political and global issues that theologians needed to consider, or that his classical approach to theology seemed unrelated to the current pastoral challenges to faith.⁴⁷ In 1993, Leo O'Donovan asserted that Dulles had maintained a fundamental continuity with his earlier theological positions, but noted that some theologians thought Dulles was "growing more conservative and deferring too much to ecclesiastical authority."⁴⁸ Some who noted a conservative turn in Dulles' approach to theology criticized his understanding of postcritical theology and his emphasis on a hermeneutics of trust, maintaining that Dulles' postcritical approach turned out to be a noncritical approach with respect to the hierarchical magisterium, and that his hermeneutics of trust gave too much confidence and not enough suspicion to magisterial decisions.⁴⁹ Another critic asserted that his views on the magisterium, his particular notion of the ecclesial dimension of theology, and his "too sanguine" notions about the hierarchy's "benign use" of disciplinary measures against theologians would be more appreciated by "those on the right than those on the left."⁵⁰

⁴⁶ See Carl F. J. Henry, review of *Models of Revelation* (1983), *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27 (1984) 77–81, esp. 81.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., William E. Thompson, review of *Models of Revelation*, *Theological Studies* 45 (1984) 357–59; John Pridmore, review of *Assurance of Things Hoped For*, *Modern Believing* 36.2 (July 1995) 52–53; and Richard P. McBrien, review of *Assurance of Things Hoped For*, *Worship* 69 (1995) 462–63.

⁴⁸ Leo J. O'Donovan, S.J., review of *Craft of Theology*, *Theological Studies* 54 (1993) 759–61, at 761.

⁴⁹ See the following reviews of *Craft of Theology*: Maurice F. Wiles, *Theology* 96 (1993) 402–4; Anne E. Carr, *Journal of Religion* 73 (1993) 643–44; Bernard Cooke, *America* 168.2 (January 16, 1993) 19; and James Corkery, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 82 (1993) 97–100.

⁵⁰ Mary Hines, review of *Craft of Theology*, *National Catholic Reporter*, September 11, 1992, 30.

I agree with O'Donovan's insistence on Dulles' postconciliar consistency on the principles of pluralism, historical situationism, the magisterium of theologians, conscientious dissent, and many other issues that would place him in the broad company of the conciliar and postconciliar progressives. Of course, he nuanced these positions according to the new questions that arose during the period and according to his own reading of the needs and signs of the times. Within the postconciliar progressive tradition, he identified himself as a postcritical theologian with affinities to the postliberal and postmodern developments. Within the postcritical tradition, moreover, he was first of all an ecclesial-transformative theologian whose Ignatian sense of thinking with the mind of the Church made him, in his early career, a proponent of the reforming directions of the Second Vatican Council because that was the mind of the Church. After the mid-1970s, he increasingly supported the papacies of Paul VI and John Paul II because he believed they were articulating the mind of the council and of the hierarchical Church, which Ignatius of Loyola had admonished his followers to accept. His hermeneutics of ecclesial trust and continuity separated him on specific controversial issues from some postconciliar progressive reformers; thus his own theology became one of the theological barometers for measuring pluralism and polarization that existed in the immediate postconciliar period. Within the circle of those who emphasized the ecclesial dimension of theology, he became, particularly in his last years, increasingly evangelical. He focused on the needs to proclaim the gospel anew, to reemphasize conversion to Christ in all areas of human activity, to develop new ways and resurrect old ways of handing on the faith to new generations, to reestablish the Church's missionary dimension, and to become involved in the transformation of culture. In this he saw himself again in conformity with the fundamental intent and objective of the Second Vatican Council.

Historians of theology and historical theologians are not prophets and do not have the distance from their contemporary subjects that will allow them to predict what of contemporary theology will pass the test of time. But it seems fair to say that future historians will look back upon this postconciliar era and select Dulles' models approach to theology as a classic representation of what characterized many of the dominant themes, issues, and directions of theology in the immediate postconciliar period of theology. Dulles is a representative and a critic of significant trends in postconciliar theology. Almost all of his contemporary reviewers—critics as well as admirers—agree that he was distinguished for his creative and synthetic use of models, the quality and comprehensiveness and clarity of his work, the balance of his judgments, the wisdom of his insights, the courage of his criticisms of his contemporaries and friends, and the depth of his loyalty to the tradition and to the hierarchy.