


January 1994

# Book Review of The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System, by Avery Dulles

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## Recommended Citation

Canale, Fernando L., "Book Review of The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System, by Avery Dulles" (1994). *Faculty Publications*. Paper 32.

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Avery Dulles. *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System*. New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992. xi + 228 pp. \$24.95.

When Vatican II opened the doors of Roman Catholicism to modernity, it prompted a series of theological ventures, as Catholic theologians tried to relate their tradition to new discoveries in science, history, and philosophy. In *The Craft of Theology*, Avery Dulles addresses the aftermath of Vatican II from the perspective of doing theology.

Chaps. 1-3 deal with general contemporary issues in theological methodology. Chap. 1 starts by clearly stating the need for moving from the 19th- and 20th-century neoscholastic structures (4) to a "postcritical" version of Catholic theology (5) under the inspiration of thinkers such as Polyani, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Balthasar. As it tries "to reunite the creative with the cognitive, the beautiful with the true" (15), postcritical theology is, according to Dulles, to be conceived as an art rather than a science (8). Theology is thus defined as the art of correctly articulating Christian symbols (8). The title of the book seems, in fact, to reflect this emphasis as it replaces the traditional "science of theology" with "the craft of theology". In chap. 2 the idea of symbol, which Dulles understands on the basis of Karl Rahner's ontology of symbol (20-21), is explored. Symbols and symbolic language, which belong to a first-order language, provide the material and referent of theological discourse. Theological discourse belongs to a second order of language (19). In chap. 3 Dulles explains and justifies his usage of theological models as relevant methodology facilitating the appropriate technical evaluation of the many theological options available today.

Chap. 4 is Dulles' appraisal of fundamental theology, which he basically perceives as rational apologetics. Since Christian faith "cannot be justified by public criteria" (54), fundamental theology should, he suggests, study the process of conversion (54). Chaps. 5-7 discuss the sources of theology, namely, Scriptures (chap. 5), tradition (chap. 6), and ecclesiastical magisterium (chap. 7). The relationship between theology and philosophy is explored in chap. 8, while theology's relationship to the physical sciences is investigated in chap. 9. Chaps. 10 and 11 deal with the teaching of theology in the university and address the issue of academic freedom. Finally, the emphasis on truth and tradition is brought to its logical conclusion as guidelines for ecumenical theology, as suggested in chap. 12.

Since the Protestant Reformation, and particularly throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Christianity has fragmented itself into a multiplicity of theological systems and traditions. With Vatican II, Roman Catholicism has experienced the same fragmentation in the theological realm (vii-viii). In full awareness of the divisive nature of theological pluralism, *The Craft of Theology* is written in order to help Roman Catholicism (viii-ix) by calling its theology back to basics, namely, the perennial, philosophical principles as expressed in Aquinas' scholasticism, to the richness of tradition, and to the authority embodied in the teaching magisterium of the Church.

Dulles is well aware that the task of systematic theology requires specific commitment to a philosophical tradition (119). However, how should the philosophical foundations of theology be chosen? At this point, the revisionistic post-modernity of Dulles' thinking is apparent. Kant's criticism of the rational proofs of the existence of God seems to be implicitly assumed (29) as a limited interpretation of reason's powers (51), replacing the traditional aristotelic-thomistic interpretation. Following Polanyi, reason, the agent that creates the variety of theological systems (50, 52), is reinterpreted as "creative imagination" (30). Consequently, reason is unable to decide between competing systems (60). As reason is weakened, tradition is strengthened to fill the vacuum. From the very beginning we are told that only the Church possesses the "sort of instinct or phronema" (9) necessary for selecting the philosophical ideas that determine the true system of theology. In the final analysis, then, the Church thinks in us and we in the Church (66). Consequently, Scripture is to be understood as the "book of the Church" (69), which has no "normative value except as read in the light of tradition and under the vigilance of the magisterium" (98).

*The Craft of Theology* successfully explains that Vatican II cannot be used as a justification for the existence of divisive, theological pluralism within the Church. It is true that Vatican II had a pastoral rather than theological goal, and that it called for the opening of Roman Catholic theology to modernity. However, the possibility for a pluralistic reinterpretation of the philosophical foundations for theology is nowhere to be found in the various documents produced by the council. On the contrary, the philosophical principles undergirding Vatican II are the same traditional perennial principles of scholastic philosophy embodied in Thomistic theology. Consequently, our author argues, contemporary Catholic theology should build its openness to modern and postmodern thought on the basis of such perennial, philosophical principles. As always, Roman Catholicism is conceived to engage in open dialogue with the philosophies of the times.

Yet, if Catholicism is to preserve its identity, its classical tradition should survive in any future system (133). Dulles represents the traditional, official understanding of Catholicism, both theologically and institutionally, as a viable option in postmodern times. Unfortunately, the scientific dimension of theology is somehow de-emphasized in favor of its confessional dimension. Thus, *The Craft of Theology* does not penetrate into the theological-philosophical search for the rational ground of theology demanded by postmodern criticism. On the contrary, Dulles' voice calls Catholic theologians back to faithfulness to the Church. Other voices in contemporary Catholicism, however, are calling for new interpretations of the philosophical ground for theology. Only time will tell what trend will carry the day in the future. Dulles seems to be right when he argues that the Catholic project of theology finds its ultimate foundation and authority in the supernatural mediatory ministry of the Church. However, one wonders if it is possible for Catholic theology to stand only on the basis of the authority of the Church, without its traditional, independent ground in absolute reason.