

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Theology Faculty Research and Publications

Theology, Department of

1978

A Grammar for Dissent - In Response to *The Resilient Church*

Robert Masson

Marquette University, robert.masson@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Masson, Robert, "A Grammar for Dissent - In Response to *The Resilient Church*" (1978). *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*. 337.

https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac/337

A Review Essay:

Grammar for Dissent — In Response To *The Resilient Church* *

By Robert Masson

Richard Neuhaus has reported an amusing and revealing anecdote about Avery Dulles. He said that Dulles was preaching at a church and noticed a huge banner on the wall which proclaimed "God is other people." According to Neuhaus (this part of the story is apocryphal), Dulles took out his magic marker and put in the missing comma after "other."¹ If I am not mistaken in my reading, Dulles wrote *The Resilient Church* with that same magic marker. This leads me to believe that the underlying strokes of the Dulles' pen deserve as much attention as the nine specific ecclesiological themes which *The Resilient Church* develops. It seems to me that these underlying strokes highlight the most urgent issues which the book raises, but I also fear that these strokes may sometimes have the effect of covering over or at least obscuring the very issues they intend to punctuate.

In the preface Dulles explains that he is engaged in a twofold critique: "the first directed against those conservatives who balk at adapting the doctrines and institutions of the Church to the times in which we live; the second, against those liberals whose programs of adaptation are based on an uncritical acceptance of the norms and slogans of Western secularist ideologies" (pp. 5-6). There is no doubt that his critique is intended in a genuinely constructive and positive sense as an appeal for balance and rigor in our ar-

**The Resilient Church: The Necessity and Limits of Adaptation*. By Avery Dulles, S.J. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977. 229 pages. \$7.95 cloth

¹"The Hartford Debate," *Christianity and Crisis* 35 (July, 1975):174.

ROBERT MASSON is associate professor of theology at Loyola College in Baltimore.

THE LIVING LIGHT

tication and embodiment of the Church's vision. This appeal for balance seems to be prompted by two related concerns: first, by a pastoral concern about the vitality of the Church's life; and second, by an equally pastoral but also properly theological concern about what is perceived as a dangerous theological lopsidedness of vision — both on the popular level and in academic circles.

Cause for Concern

The basis for the first concern about the vitality of the Church's life is the sort of thing which is difficult to document with hard evidence. I am a teacher, not a sociologist, and my impressions are admittedly limited. Nevertheless, my own impressions do seem to justify Dulles' worries. To a large extent the post-Vatican II age has been one of internal conflict, confusion, disarray, disorientation, polarization, apathy, turmoil, self-doubt, loss of self-esteem, and crisis of identity (the words this book most frequently employs). As Michael Fahey points out, such "pessimistic expressions far outnumber their opposites."² Although I would agree with Fahey that many of us would be helped in the future if Dulles could "in a less worried mood elaborate more positively on the healthy elements in contemporary church life and thought," I nevertheless think his concerns are justified. Furthermore, I think it is important that someone of his stature who has personally struggled for change, express these concerns and emphasize their urgency.

There is no need here to examine more closely *The Resilient Church's* contention that disillusionment and polarization have often been the end result of naive communitarian visions of the Church, of uncritical identifications of the Church's mission and various socio-political programs and ideologies, of the adoption of confrontation as a strategy in Church "politics," of uncritical accommodations with the secular (whether in liturgy or theology), or of the well-intentioned but misguided impoverishment of tradition, sacrament, and symbol that too frequently accompanied reform.

I also share *The Resilient Church's* concern about the lopsidedness of vision which seems to permeate Catholic thought on the popular level and in academic circles. While I do not believe the criticism of some of the people named (Gilkey or Tracy, for example) was entirely evenhanded, I think

²Cf. review in *Theological Studies* 39 (March, 1978):169.

the shortcomings referred to, *are there* and need to be challenged. Had the book chosen less subtle and articulate theologians, it would not have been difficult to establish its case. I have no doubt from my discussions with students and older laypeople that the real world of non-theologians is peopled by armies of those whom some of Dulles' critics have called strawmen.

Transcendence Versus Immanence

Granting this agreement with what I believe to be the fundamental concern of *The Resilient Church*, granting that this concern is well-founded, and granting that this concern has an urgency which demands public discussion, sharp distinctions, and a taking of stands, I still worry that the strokes of the Dulles magic marker, though bold, necessary, and justified, may *not* result in a more balanced, rigorous, and coherent vision, but rather in greater polarization, more severe rhetoric and polemics, and an obscuring of the Catholic's articulation and embodiment of the Christian vision. Perhaps the strong reactions and misreadings — or at the minimum unsympathetic readings of *The Resilient Church* are evidence of this.

My worries are prompted primarily by the way the book sets up its problematic and the strategy which it seems to be following in its appeal for balance. I also wonder whether these essays have pinned down accurately enough why, as it reports, "many people today have the impression of living in a 'world without windows,' in which anything that even seems to point to the beyond is somehow reducible to the immanent; [or why] the transcendent is regarded as an illusion, comparable to the impression of unlimited distance that can be created by setting up two mirrors opposite one another, so that each reflects the images in the other" (p. 73).

Indeed it is possible to look at the impact of secularization on Catholic thought since the Second Vatican as a loss of transcendence, or as a loss of balance. I think it is questionable though, whether it is so much a sense of God's otherness which has been lost, as it is the *path* to the divine which has been lost. Otherwise, I find it difficult to explain adequately why so many of those who have accommodated in this way (I think of Paul van Buren as an example) still hold on to Christ or at least the vestiges of Christian language despite their inability to say convincingly why they do or should.

I suspect, in fact I am convinced, that the average person, the average Catholic, is to one degree or another a spiritual schizophrenic, who lives most of the time as if there were nothing beyond secular experience, but

THE LIVING LIGHT

who inwardly yearns for the transcendent and for a conceptual framework, a symbolic (sacramental) structure, and a lived experience which could bridge the gap between the vertical and horizontal, and which could bring them together in a way which is reasonable, tangible, and vital. One of the greatest strengths of the Catholic tradition has been its insistence that though God comes to us as grace and as mystery, He nevertheless comes to us in a way which at once is reasonable, tangible, and vital. I cannot see how a Catholic theology could ever coherently reemphasize the transcendent in the way Protestant neo-orthodoxy had or in the way, for example, Anders Nygren and his followers currently advocate.

So although I share the concern that uncritical secular accommodation does not help to rectify the problem, I am also persuaded that a reemphasis of transcendence in itself won't help either. The problem is not which pole should we stress but how can we disclose in theory, sacrament, and our lives *both* God's otherness and His immanence.

Consequently when we see well-intentioned and often very good Catholics proclaiming as their faith that "God is other people," or saying something more sophisticated which seems to imply the same thing, a comma — however necessary and prophetic — is not enough. The radical reaction, and to a degree conclusion, of neo-orthodoxy in the death of God theology is evidence of this.

The Grammar of the Incarnation

What is needed besides the comma is a clarifying phrase. For example, God is other, people — the other who is incarnate in your midst drawing you beyond yourself so that you can discover yourself in Him. As long as we argue over the comma, we force, or at least set up a framework that forces people of good will and good conscience, people who are troubled and often out of touch with the vertical dimension of spiritual life, to choose between one part of the truth for another. For although the phrase "God is other, people" is theoretically orthodox, while "God is other people" is not, the latter phrase despite its heretical implications, often expresses an existential appreciation of God's presence in our midst. To deny the phrase without bringing out this existential truth can be as misleading, especially in today's context, as it would be to deny God's otherness.

As long as we argue over the punctuation it will not be clear that God's otherness, mystery, and grace is essential for an authentic humanity, and

why articulation of this transcendent dimension in thought, symbol, and life is essential for a coherent and catholic expression of the Christian vision. So also, as long as we argue over the comma, it will not be clear that God's grace, God Himself — the mystery who is radically mystery and radically transcendence, is also radically incarnate, radically sacrament, radically for us — confront us in our world, in our history, and in our fellowman, challenging us to share in and to take up His incarnate love.

Now I see little in *The Resilient Church* which explicitly or even implicitly denies this. In fact the references to the Church as a sacrament and sign of God's love, and the explanation of its understanding of the Hartford Appeal seem to suggest to me that such an Incarnational perspective informs this critique. Still, the way the question is set up, the fact that there is little protest against the right, that no one on the right is named, leaves me with the feeling that all we have in *The Resilient Church* is the comma. Although the critique professes a sacramental model, its voice is primarily that of the herald.

In this light, many of Dulles' assertions, despite the qualifications, *sound* themselves onesided. I believe this is why, at least in some cases, the reaction to *The Resilient Church* has sometimes been harsh and unsympathetic. Given the framework established, it is hard to appreciate, for example, the qualifications which provide the context of the statement on page 16 that "right order, according to the Gospel, demands that our love should be focused first of all on God, who alone is absolutely to be loved. The love of neighbor is secondary to the love of God, and must reckon with human defects." This *seems* despite qualifications to suggest a dichotomy between love of God and love of neighbor. Doesn't the crucified Lord call us to love our neighbor to the utmost? Is love of God in any genuine way opposed to loving our fellowman to the utmost?

It also seems that Dulles' approach makes it difficult to appreciate the thrust of a phrase like "Let the Church be the Church" (p. 25) which also was most recently the rallying cry of Anders Nygren in *Meaning and Method*, where he simultaneously accepted some of the most devastating assumptions of positivistic analytic philosophy and some of the most extreme positions of a faith-alone neo-orthodoxy, neither of which, it seems to me, are compatible with a Catholic articulation of the Christian vision.

This context also explains, I think, why some have seen the fourth chapter's defense of the Hartford Appeal as an unconvincing rationalization — like the Hartford declaration, itself a retreat from social involvement, in-

THE LIVING LIGHT

appropriate in the present context, directed against phantom heresies and triumphalistic in tone. Because of the framework it sets up, I fear that this attempt at punctuation in itself will be ineffectual, in itself will come across as onesided despite all the qualifications.

If the discussion which has been augmented by *The Resilient Church* is to contribute to a more balanced and catholic articulation of the Christian vision, then, liberals, moderates, and conservatives all must measure up to the same criterion. It is not transcendence, nor immanence, not somewhere between. It is the Incarnation which is, at least I think for the Catholic, the only grammar which can integrate, and restore balance and vitality to our embodiment and articulation of the Christian vision. We need commas, yes. But even more we need a grammar that will make sense of such punctuation. ■