

John Courtney Murray

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John Courtney Murray (September 12, 1904 – August 16, 1967), was an American Jesuit priest and theologian, who was especially known for his efforts to reconcile Catholicism and religious pluralism, particularly focusing on the relationship between religious freedom and the institutions of a democratically structured modern state.

During the Second Vatican Council, he played a key role in persuading the assembly of the Catholic bishops to adopt the Council's ground-breaking Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*.

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Life and education

John Courtney Murray was born in New York City in 1904 and entered the New York province of the Society of Jesus in 1920. He studied Classics and Philosophy at Boston College, receiving bachelor's and master's degrees in 1926 and 1927 respectively. Following his graduation, he travelled to the Philippines where he taught Latin and English literature at the Ateneo de Manila. He returned to the United States in 1930 and was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1933. He pursued further studies at the Gregorian University in Rome and completed a doctorate in sacred theology in 1937. Returning to the United States, he taught Catholic trinitarian theology at the Jesuit theologate in Woodstock, Maryland and, in 1941, was named editor of the Jesuit journal *Theological Studies*. He held both positions until his death in Queens, New York in 1967. He died of a heart attack.

Work

Postwar reconstruction

While his background and training suggest a heavily theoretical bent, Murray became a leading public figure, and his work dealt primarily with the tensions between religion and public life. His best-known book, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* [3] (http://woodstock.georgetown.edu/library/Murray/whtt_index.htm) (Sheed & Ward, 1960), collects a

number of his essays on such topics. In his capacity as both representative of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and consultant to the religious affairs section of the Allied High Commission, he helped draft and promote the 1943 *Declaration on World Peace*, an interfaith statement of principles for post-war reconstruction, and successfully recommended a close constitutional arrangement between the restored German state and the Church, including the dispersal of state-collected taxes to German churches.

Following a lectureship at Yale University in 1951–1952, he collaborated on a project with Robert Morrison MacIver of Columbia University to assess academic freedom and religious education in American public universities. Ultimately, the proposal argued for tax aid to private schools and for sympathetic exposure of religious faiths in public schools. The project was both nationally influential and personally formative, as it deepened Murray's understanding of and esteem for American Constitutional law.

With his increasingly public role, several American bishops consulted Murray on legal issues such as censorship and birth control. He argued against what he saw as the reactionary and coercive practices of some Catholic bishops, instead advocating participation in substantive public debate, which he suggested offered a better appeal to public virtue. Instead of civic coercion, he argued, presenting moral opinions in the context of public discourse enabled Americans to both deepen their moral commitments and safeguard the 'genius' of American freedoms. From 1958 to 1962 he served at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, applying just war criteria to Soviet-U.S. relations. In 1966, prompted by the Vietnam War, he was appointed to serve on Lyndon Johnson's presidential commission that reviewed Selective Service classifications. He supported the allowance of a classification for those opposed on moral grounds to some (though not all) wars — a recommendation not accepted by the Selective Service Administration.

Tensions with the Vatican

Murray's public involvement was complicated by the Catholic doctrines of salvation and church/state relations. While in 1940 Murray himself had argued in support of the claim that there was no salvation outside the Church, by 1944, his endorsement of full cooperation with other theists led to Catholic complaints that he was endangering American Catholic faith. At the time, many Catholics recommended minimal cooperation with non-Catholics for fear that lay Catholic faith would be weakened. Similarly, he advocated religious freedom as defined and protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Murray eventually argued that Catholic teaching on church/state relations was inadequate to the moral functioning of contemporary peoples. The Anglo-American West, he claimed, had developed a fuller truth about human dignity, namely the responsibility of all citizens to assume moral control over their own religious beliefs, wresting control from paternalistic states. For Murray this truth was an "intention of nature" or a new dictate of natural law philosophy. Murray's claim that a new moral truth had emerged outside the church led to conflict with Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, pro-secretary of the Vatican Holy Office, and the eventual Vatican demand, in 1954, that Murray cease writing on religious freedom and stop publication of his two latest articles on the issue.

The Second Vatican Council

In spite of his silencing, Murray continued to write privately on religious liberties and submitted his works to Rome, all of which were rejected. He was finally invited to the second (but not the first) session of the Second Vatican Council in 1963, in which he drafted the third and fourth versions^[1] of what eventually

became the council's endorsement of religious freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*, in 1965.^[2] After the council, he continued writing on the issue, claiming that the arguments offered by the final decree were inadequate even if the affirmation of religious freedom was unequivocal.

Murray then turned to questions of how the Church might arrive at new theological doctrines. If Catholics were to arrive at new truths about God, he argued, they would have to do so in conversation "on a footing of equality" with non-Catholics and atheists. He suggested greater reforms, including a restructuring of the Church, which he saw as having overdeveloped its notion of authority and hierarchy at the expense of the bonds of love that more foundationally ought to define Christian living.

References

- ↑ "Religious freedom-- Vatican II modernizes church-state ties", Agostino Bono, Catholic News Service, 12 Oct 2005, retrieved 15 May 2007.[1] (<http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0505798.htm>)
- ↑ "Dignitatus Humanae Personae", Second Vatican Council, 1965, retrieved 15 May 2007 [2] (http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html)

External links

- Published and Unpublished Works (http://woodstock.georgetown.edu/library/Murray/0_murraybib.html)
- Essays on Murray's Thought (<http://woodstock.georgetown.edu/bljcm.htm>)
- A compilation of writings by and about Fr. John Courtney Murray, SJ. (<http://johncourtneymurray.blogspot.com/>)

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