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Catholic Teaching on Religious Freedom A Book Review

In this day of growing religious controversy and conflict around the world, nothing could be more important than to understand why people of different faiths support or do not support religious freedom in political society. Moreover, what does religious freedom mean? Does it require secularized societies in which religions are free only if privatized and kept out of public debate? Does it mean establishing only a religion that will tolerate other religions in subordinate roles? Does it mean freedom only for the true religion? Or can it mean equal freedom for diverse religions in public as well as private life within the same political society?

Until the second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church in the early 1960s, one would have to say that the subject of religious liberty was highly undeveloped within the Catholic Church. Yet with that Council's statement on human dignity (*Dignitatis Humanae, DH*) a revolution in thought and action within the Church was initiated. What is the nature of that document? What are its implications? Why was it written? Given the importance of the Catholic Church around the world, and particularly in relation to the growing influence of Islam, what can we learn from this revolution within the Catholic Church that might help us to understand Islam, secularism, and other Christian understandings of religious freedom?

The book you must read if you want to understand the significance of *Dignitatis Humanae* and its unfinished agenda more than 40 years after it was written is *Catholicism and Religious Freedom*, edited by Kenneth L. Grasso and Robert P. Hunt (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006; 800-462-6420; www.rowmanlittlefield.com).

Following a very helpful and illuminating introduction by Grasso and Hunt, nine chapters of *Catholicism and Religious Freedom* follow: "The Freedom of the Church and the Responsibility of the State," by Robert P. George and William L. Saunders Jr.; "Two Concepts of Religious Liberty: *Dignitatis Humanae* v. the U.S. Supreme Court," by Robert P. Hunt; "*Dignitatis Humanae* and the Development of Catholic Doctrine," by Avery Cardinal Dulles; "*Dignitatis Humanae*, the Catholic Concept of the State, and Public Morality," by

Francis P. Canavan; “The Promised Time of *Dignitatis Humanae*: A Radical Protestant Perspective,” by Thomas Heilke; “Persuaded, Not Commanded: Neo-Calvinism, *Dignitatis Humanae*, and Religious Freedom,” by David T. Koyzis; “On Proposing the Truth and Not Imposing It: John Paul’s Personalism and the Teaching of *Dignitatis Humanae*,” by John F. Crosby; “An Unfinished Argument: *Dignitatis Humanae*, John Courtney Murray, and the Catholic Theory of the State,” by Kenneth L. Grasso; and “The Architecture of Freedom: John Paul II and John Courtney Murray on Religious Freedom,” by David S. Crawford.

Why was this particular Declaration from Vatican II so revolutionary? Grasso and Hunt argue in their Introduction that *Dignitatis Humanae* (DH) “marks a dramatic expansion in the Catholic understanding of the proper scope of religious liberty. At the risk of oversimplifying, it might be said that, prior to the Second Vatican Council, Catholic thinking on the whole subject of religious liberty took its bearings from the following premises: that individuals are obligated to embrace religious truth; that Catholicism is the one true religion; that religious liberty is to be understood as an empowerment, as the moral right of individuals to profess and practice their beliefs; that total care of the common good . . . is committed to the state; and that religious truth is an integral element of this good.” These premises had supported “the legal establishment of Catholicism as ‘the religion of the state’” as well as “sharp limits on the religious freedom of non-Catholics.”

Dignitatis Humanae, therefore, “not only effected a dramatic transformation in the Church’s teaching on the subject of religious liberty,” according to Grasso and Hunt. “It represented a pivotal step in the far-reaching development of Catholic social teaching that George Weigel has aptly called ‘the Catholic human rights revolution.’ Indeed, as Walter Kasper has observed, *DH* must be ‘considered a watershed in the long and controversial history of the relationships between the church and the development of the concept of freedom in the modern era,’ a milestone in the long-standing conflict between the Church and ‘the modern idea of freedom.’”

Two things about *DH* may surprise the reader of this book. First, the Vatican Council that adopted it did not finally agree on the rationale or intellectual foundations for it. They left that to future church leaders and scholars as part of an “unfinished agenda.” Second, and perhaps even more surprising, is what Grasso and Hunt describe as “the widespread neglect of *DH* in contemporary American Catholic thought. After all, if *DH* is among the Council’s major texts, it is also the one in which American Catholics and the American Catholic experience played a particularly important role. It was no accident that the Declaration was often referred to during the Council as the ‘American’ schema. . . . Ironically, however, American Catholic scholars have exhibited little interest in addressing the Declaration’s unfinished agenda, and *DH* does not assume the sort of central role in American Catholicism’s engagement with contemporary American public life that it has played in, say, John Paul II’s engagement with the contemporary world.”

It is against the background of these two surprises, and particularly the second one, that the volume under review was written. Grasso and Hunt articulate their two objectives for the book as follows: “The first is what the Second Vatican Council called *ressourcement*,

a return to the sources, in this case to *DH* itself” in order to understand it in relation to “some of the competing conceptions of religious freedom articulated by other Christian traditions and by secular sources.” Their second objective “is equally straightforward: to begin the long-overdue task of addressing the questions that collectively constitute *DH*’s unfinished agenda.

With respect to both of the book’s objectives, the editors point out that “it is perhaps significant that these essays focus so heavily on the work of two thinkers: American theologian John Courtney Murray and Pope John Paul II. The reasons for this are readily apparent. While Murray’s influence on [*DH*’s] writing was certainly not determinative . . . and he was not entirely satisfied with the final draft of the Declaration, there can be no question that his work at the Council left its imprint on the Declaration.” John Paul II’s importance “does not stem from his role in its drafting” but rather “from the treatment of *DH* in the social teaching of his papacy. Through his encyclicals and addresses he emerged as one of its leading interpreters by insisting on the Declaration’s centrality to the Church’s social magisterium.”

For a contemporary study of religious freedom that engages and illuminates the best of contemporary Catholic thought on this subject and that is highly relevant to ongoing American debates over religious freedom, this is the book to buy.

—The Editor[©]

Related Readings:

Kenneth L. Grasso, Gerard V. Bradley, and Robert P. Hunt, eds., *Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1995).

Robert P. Hunt and Kenneth L. Grasso, eds., *John Courtney Murray and the American Civil Conversation* (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992).

Keith Pavlischek, *John Courtney Murray and the Dilemma of Religious Toleration* (Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1994).

John Witte, Jr., *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment*, second edition (Westview Press, 2005).