

A Book Review of Avery Dulles, S. J.'s Models of Revelation

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About the Fr. Dulles: Avery Dulles, S. J. is one of the most noted American Catholic Theologians of the past century. Avery Dulles converted to Catholicism from Presbyterianism in 1940. Subsequently, he entered the seminary and was ordained into the priesthood in 1956. He received a second doctorate, this one in theology at the Gregorian University in Rome in 1960. At the time of writing this book (1985), Fr. Dulles was a Professor of Systematic Theology at Catholic University (1974-1988). He is currently the Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society at Fordham University. Fr. Dulles is the author of over 700 articles and 22 books. Fr. Dulles also is a past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and has served on numerous Commissions, Committees, and Councils throughout his career. In 2001, Fr. Dulles was named a Cardinal of the Catholic Church by Pope John Paul II.

Introduction

In 1960, Fr. Dulles began teaching courses in revelation. His teaching centered on “the possibility of revelation and its factual occurrence”.¹ In essence, he taught an Apologetics course. As time went on, he became much more interested in two primary questions; “What revelation is and how is it communicated?”.² In a previous book, Models of the Church, Fr. Dulles had seen the relative advantage of modelling the theological description of “Church”. The purpose of this book is to similarly model the theological descriptions of revelation in order to gain insight through methodology. In Models of Revelation, Fr. Dulles in a soft tone, textbook-like style, methodically describes five different modern day concepts of Revelation.

In Part One of the book, Fr. Dulles points out, for each model, the model’s strength and weaknesses. Finding no model sufficiently describes all aspects of Revelation, Fr. Dulles in Part Two describes “a dialectical tool for integrating some of the best positive insights into rival theories, overcoming some of the impasses between opposed schools, and showing up the deficiencies in certain positions”³ method of interpretation, which he calls Symbolic Mediation, which when used in conjunction with the strengths of other models, fills in the gaps and reduces inconsistencies within each model. Fr. Dulles proceeds to address for each model, what is the relationship between Revelation and Christ, between Revelation and the Bible, Revelation and the Church, Revelation and other religions, and Revelation and Eschatology. He then applies Symbolic Mediation within each model in order to produce an enriched understanding of each topic.

The following is a review of the concepts taught in the book.

The Problem of Revelation

Without a prior act of revelation, Fr. Dulles correctly states that there can be no faith, as faith would have no basis, or object. Without faith all of Christianity, all of theology would collapse. Thus, Fr. Dulles indicates that revelation is “foundational to the religious life of the individual, to the mission of the Church, and to the method of theology.”⁴ Because of this it is essential that revelation be properly understood, as much as that is possible. In times past it was previously held that “revelation is a permanently valid body of truths communicated by God in biblical times, preserved and commented on by the Church.”⁵ But times have changed, and in the past century many past truths have been challenged. Fr. Dulles lists eight such modern challenges:

- 1) Philosophical agnosticism – Some feel human reason cannot not go beyond worldly experience. As a result, revelation is simply a myth or a metaphor, not intended to be taken literally.
- 2) Linguistic analysis – Revelatory language contains much paradoxical, symbolic language. Can language about the divine have a true cognitive content?
- 3) Modern epistemology – Human knowledge is subject to the limitations and conditions of the human subject.
- 4) Empirical psychology – Revelation is nothing but more than a state of mind induced by drugs, hypnosis, pathology, activation of transmarginal portions of the brain, etc.
- 5) Biblical criticism – Revelatory accounts are viewed by some as historically unreliable.
- 6) History of Christian Doctrine – Beliefs, formerly viewed as revelatory, have sometimes been re-classified as human opinion.
- 7) Comparative religions – Religions other than Christianity sometimes have conflicting revelations.
- 8) Critical sociology – Appeal to the divine has been used to subdue or control populations.

To be a successful model, these issues will need to be addressed, refuted, or at least neutralized.

In order to evaluate the various models of revelation, Fr. Dulles’ sets up the following criteria:

- Faithfulness to the Bible and Christian tradition
- Internal coherence
- Plausibility
- Adequacy to experience
- Practical fruitfulness

Theoretical fruitfulness
Value for dialogue

Of these criteria, I find the last the most difficult to accept. Ecumenism is certainly a desirable process in order that all may be one. However, to choose a particular model over another simply because it homogenizes the issues is not necessarily truth seeking. Not all purported revelation necessarily has been given by God. Some so-called revelation may be false – false due to malicious intent, or false due to the sincere misinterpretation of events/concepts, or even false due to satanic intervention. A true revelation may be in sharp contrast and, in fact, divisive with “revelatory” beliefs of others. Thus the questions, “What is revelation? How is it communicated?”, could be further refined to “What is true revelation? How is true revelation communicated?”

Models of Revelation

The revelatory models did not develop in a vacuum. In his book, Fr. Dulles gives a brief history of the post-enlightenment developments of the different views of revelation. The concept of revelation has been addressed by many diverse groups, such as atheists, agnostics, Christians, and non-Christians. In each of these groups there are subgroups – rationalists, spiritualists, liberals, conservatives, various denominations within Christianity, those who believe in Scripture alone, those that believe in personal interpretation, those who believe in a magisterial deposit of faith, etc. From these various groups, Fr. Dulles identifies the following models of Revelation:. An example of his teaching style can be seen in the following definitions of the various models:

- 1) Revelation as Doctrine – “Revelation is understood on the analogy of authoritative teaching. God is seen as an infallible teacher who communicates knowledge by speech and writing. The recipients are expected to be attentive and docile.”⁶
- 2) Revelation as History - “Revelation is depicted as a series of historical events which have given the community of faith its corporate identity. God is represented as the transcendent agent who brings about revelatory events and by means of them makes signs to his people (whose) task is to discern and interpret the signs given in salvation history.”⁷
- 3) Revelation as Inner Experience – “Revelation is interpreted on the basis of an immediate interior experience ...(God) communicates by his presence, to which the recipient must remain prayerfully open.”⁸
- 4) Revelation as Dialectical Presence - “Revelation occurs through a powerful, transforming word ...God is the merciful judge, who pronounces an efficacious sentence of condemnation and of pardon. The recipients are obliged to submit obediently to the power of the word, which simultaneously convicts and justifies.”⁹

- 5) Revelation as New Awareness - "Revelation takes the form of a breakthrough in the advance of human consciousness. God reveals by luring the imagination to construe the world in a new way. The recipients of revelation are those who dare to dream new dreams, responding to the call to build a fully human world."¹⁰

In each model, Fr. Dulles gives a brief formula of "revelation is ...", which includes a definition, a description of God's role, followed lastly by the role of the recipient. Thus his models are easily compared and contrasted.

In defining and explaining the various models, Fr. Dulles follows a characteristic pattern – definition, history, major groups or individuals proposing or following the model, followed by a summary of the model, the merit of the model and finally by the criticisms of the model. Fr. Dulles summarizes each model in terms of its content, its form, the response for which it calls, and its relationship to salvation.

Having described the five models of revelation, Fr. Dulles proceeds to discuss the convergences and divergences of the five models with each other. There is a tendency among scholars to believe that his/her own world view is the correct world view. This is, of course, also true in Theology. The various theologians describing revelation believe that their own description of revelation is the correct analyses of revelation. Fr. Dulles has reviewed the various theories and has managed to identify six areas of common agreement to most (but not all) theologians:

- 1) Revelation is a free action of God, bestowing a gift over and above that of creation.
- 2) By revelation, God communicates truths about Himself and humanity, beyond what man is capable of discovering himself.
- 3) Revelation has value for salvation.
- 4) For Christians, revelation is completed in Jesus Christ.
- 5) For Christians, revelation is accessed through the church and its Biblical message.
- 6) Revelation demands faith.

There are also distinct divergences between the different models. From these divergences, one gets absolute contradictions between the various models. Contradictions such as:

- 1) Does revelation give factual data over and above what can be known without revelation? The first two models answer yes, the last three no.
- 2) Does revelation insure infallibility? The first model answers yes, the last four no.
- 3) Can revelation be demonstrated by reason? Models one and five answer yes, three and four answer no, and for model two, it depends.
- 4) Is revelation complete with the end of the apostolic age? Models one and two say yes: the rest say no.
- 5) Is revelation available outside Christianity? Models three and five say yes; the result say no.

So what options are left? Fr. Dulles identifies four options – elect one model, choose the model based on circumstance (eclecticism), harmonization, or starting fresh with a new model (innovation). Fr. Dulles doesn't consider any of the options to be suitable. Instead, he presents another option – looking at the various models with a new lens. Fr. Dulles calls that lens, "Symbolic mediation". The description of Symbolic Mediation, how it applies to each model and how it helps to address the difficult questions he listed in chapter one is the subject of Part II of his book

Symbolic Mediation

God, fortunately or unfortunately, has not chosen to reveal Himself and His plan explicitly, undeniably, clearly within the brain of each and every individual, or if He has, man, due to his nature, has failed to understand the infinite. After all, man is not God. Instead, God has revealed Himself through the use of symbols. In the twentieth century, a host of theologians such as Paul Tillich, H.R. Niebuhr, Karl Rahner, Paul Ricoeur, Langdon Gilkey, Ray Hart, John Macquarrie, Louis Dupre, and Gregory Baum have addressed the issue of revelation as symbolic disclosure.¹¹

Fr. Dulles defines a symbol, as "a special type of sign to be distinguished from a mere indicator or a conventional cipher, ... pregnant with a plenitude of meaning which is evoked rather than explicitly stated."¹² Therefore by their very nature, symbols can be polyvalent in meaning. The meaning itself is like studying the heavens. With a naked eye one sees a limited, but meaningful view of the universe. As one looks deeper into the universe through the use of telescopes, one is struck by the vastness of the universe. Now, with satellite systems, such as the Hubble space telescope and the corresponding wealth of information which it brings, the "infinite" vastness of creation is seen. Because of this nature of symbols, as Thomas Aquinas might say, "it is fitting that symbols would be used to reveal the infinite."

Fr. Dulles finds a number of common properties between symbols and Revelation. For instance, he lists some properties of symbolism:

- 1) Symbolism gives "participatory knowledge – knowledge that is to say, .of a self-involving type".¹³
- 2) Symbolism has a transforming effect – they do something to us.
- 3) Symbolism influences commitment and behavior, e.g. the national anthem or the American flag stirring up patriotism.
- 4) Symbolism opens us up to a greater awareness, involving the element of mystery, e.g. majestic mountains.

These properties of symbolism can readily be applied to Revelation as well. Examples of Christian symbolism include light (God is light), the cross (carry one's cross), the Eucharist (symbol and reality). All these symbols possess the four properties noted above, and reveal aspects of God.

In the propositional model, symbolism enhances the meaning of doctrine and doctrine can enhance the meaning of the symbol.. For example, the symbolism of the

cross is enhanced by the doctrine that by Christ's death on the cross and by His resurrection we are redeemed. Conversely, the doctrine that sins are forgiven through the waters of baptism are enhanced by the symbolic meaning of washing away sins.

In the historical model which looks at Revelation as coming only from historical facts, adding the element of symbolism to the historical factual interpretation allows for a greater range of meaning, e.g. Jerusalem foreshadowing the Heavenly Jerusalem. According to Fr. Dulles, "the symbolic approach maintains the concreteness and realism"¹⁴ of Scripture. Allowing Symbolic Mediation eliminates the need for the historical event to be fully scientifically proven.

In the experiential model, symbolism is important because mere facts cannot express the mystical. Only symbols can, through their inner depth of meaning, express the ecstatic presence of the mystical experience.

Barth in his dialectical model, was very wary of any symbolism which might "involve God in the ambiguities of nature and history".¹⁵ For Barth everything was the word of God alone. However, there are distinct parallelisms between the word of God and symbols. By its nature, the word of God describes more than mere words can define, causing changes in the consciousness of the individual, drawing the reader in, altering the lifestyle of the individual reader. In other words the word of God itself possesses the properties of symbolism discussed above.

The New Awareness model, by its very approach, highly utilizes symbolism. The symbolism of the New Awareness model "invites participation ... does not leave the recipient passive, tend(s) to elicit a high degree of spiritual activity."¹⁶ Because symbols are not rigidly defined, symbols in the New Awareness model allow a transformation to occur as the meaning of the symbol is transferred over time.

Using Symbolic Mediation to Help Answer Tough Problems

Fr. Dulles shows the utility of Symbolic Mediation in understanding Revelation by applying Symbolic Mediation to specific questions within the framework established by each model. Can Symbolic Mediation lead a greater convergence in understanding in the various models? The problems tackled are:

Is Jesus the Summit of Revelation?

Does Revelation Exist in Religions Outside of Christianity?

Is the Bible inspired and inerrant? Is there a fixed canon? Is the Bible self-sufficient?

What is the Church/Revelation relationship?

What is the relation between Revelation and Eschatology?

What is the relationship between Faith and Revelation?

In his usual methodical approach, Fr. Dulles looks at these issues for each of the models, and then applies the lens of Symbolic Mediation to further develop the responses. The following is a greatly shortened example of Fr. Dulles approach. Let's take the question of the Bible and Revelation.

In the propositional model, the Protestant position is that the Bible is the source of all doctrine. The Bible is inspired, inerrant, and self-sufficient and understandable by all. The Catholic version also sees the Bible as a source of Doctrine, but declares also the Teaching office of the Church (the Magisterium) and Sacred Tradition as other equally viable sources. Thus, not all of Revelation is contained within the Bible. Catholics believe the Bible to be inspired, inerrant (even though their definitions may differ), but not self-sufficient. The deposit of the Faith remains with the Church.

In the historical model, revelation is given in the critically examined true reality of the events. Inspiration and inerrancy are not the issues of greatest concern. Of greater concern, is the Bible as the most original source.

In the experiential model, the Bible is not the major factor as far as revelation is concerned. The importance of the Bible is that the Bible “proceeds from and is evocative of revelatory experiences”.¹⁷

In the Dialectical Model, the importance of the Bible is in the Kerygma that is preached in the Church. The events as described in Scripture, if they occurred at all, is not the question, rather it is the meaning behind the events written in the Bible. Inspiration is key, but inerrancy is not.

For those utilizing the New Awareness model, the Bible is not seen as the source of revelation. Revelation itself is always evolving. The Bible is not an objective deposit of Revelation. The canon of the Bible could be altered as a new awareness is revealed.

In examining revelation using Symbolic Mediation, Fr. Dulles references Austin Farrer. Farrer accents the imagery of Scripture. Revelation does not have to be propositional or historical alone. Farrer states “Certainly the events without images would be no revelation at all, and the images without events would remain shadows on the clouds.”¹⁸ Revelation and inspiration become intrinsically bound as these images become entwined into the literary objectification of the event. Considering inerrancy, the inclusion of symbolic mediation into the interpretation of events, reveals that past historical criticism, by being strictly historical, were looking at the text in far too atomistically. On the other hand, the experientialist theologians were far “too much under the sway of the individualist, empiricist psychology”¹⁹, because they ignored the necessary link between experience and expression, between event or words and the symbolism attached. In the dialectical model the concept that God meets His children through the word, can be deepened by viewing the Bible, “in which God inverbalizes and inscripiterates Himself, as an efficacious symbol of God who inspires it.”²⁰ The New Awareness model of the Bible benefits by seeing that the evolving meaning of symbols found in the Bible must grow out of the meanings felt and experienced by past generations. Thus, “the biblical symbols of marriage and family, deserts and animals, kings and warriors, even when they do not exactly correspond tp the conditions of our own life, remain powerfully evocative.”²¹

Symbolic Realism

Fr. Dulles finalizes his book by supporting a model, which he calls Symbolic Realism. The five basic points of this model are:

- 1) “Revelatory symbols are not pure creations of human imagination. God may inspire constructive images, but the figures of speech and the literary imagery are secondary to the real symbols”²²
- 2) Christian revelation is not simply an interpretation of the natural symbols contained in cosmic nature.”²³
- 3) Symbols need not be external. They may contain and mediate the reality they signify, e.g. the human body and the person who comes to reality through the expression of the body.
- 4) Revelatory symbols contain and mediate the reality they signify.
- 5) Revelatory symbols have a twofold truth – they “express, communicate, or produce a transformed consciousness, (but also) give rise to true affirmation about what is antecedently real.”²⁴

Limitations in this Work

Fr. Dulles admits limitations in his work in that he does not address the concept of revelation as espoused in Patristic and medieval times. This is a true limitation in his work as the study of revelation, like any other area, is a process built upon the understanding of previous generations/scholars. One should not neglect pre-enlightenment teaching. A second limitation of this work, as described by Fr. Dulles, is that this description is pre-dogmatic. There remains the task of studying revelation in the light of a total theological system, which would include the concepts of the Trinity, Christology, and the theology of Grace. Fr. Dulles leaves that work to others to follow him. A third limitation, not spoken of as a limitation by Fr. Dulles, is that the analysis is not without its biases. Fr. Dulles admittedly addresses the concept of revelation from a Christian viewpoint, particularly a Catholic viewpoint. Many references to Vatican II and various encyclicals are made. While the thought of theologians on revelation from various Christian denominations is addressed, there is no indication of defined writings or even the lack of defined writings from any of the other major Christian religions, such as Episcopalian, Lutheran, Southern Baptist, Presbyterian, etc. or subset of such groups and other Christian groups, much less Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, etc.

A fourth limitation is the lack of incorporation of Catholic private revelation into the discussion of revelation and intercomparison between private revelation versus the Experiential model.

It must also be stated that this book appears at first to be a review of current thought on revelation theory. By the end of the book, there is a distinct impression that the book is instead devoted to presenting Symbolic Realism as the model of choice, as the solution to the questions, “What is revelation? How is God revealed?”

Finally, it also must be acknowledged that models are models. Models paint a picture in broad strokes, lacking the ability to elicit the fine detail. Models describe the forest, not the trees, much less the leaves. However, often times, without a model, one can become so bogged down in the details, that the overall meaning of the topic studied is overlooked. Consider, for example, the study of weather. If one were to think in terms of the individual molecules in air, one could never make any projection as to the

events of tomorrow. In the case of man, every individual is of infinite worth. We cannot gloss over the individual and the individual's relationship with God, fitting that relationship into a box as if all are alike. The point is, one must always keep in mind the limitations of the model.

It seems clear, at least to me, that Revelation cannot be viewed strictly from any one of the models. Revelation must be viewed like facets of the face of a diamond. God will choose to reveal Himself differently to different people in different times. That does not mean that the Bible is not a source of Revelation, or even that Christ is not the summit, the perfection of Revelation. It does mean that Revelation like the Living Tradition of the Catholic Church is continually growing and deepening, while remaining true to its foundations.

In my life, I am personally aware of Revelation in the form of the deeds and words of Christ (models 2 and 1), of a personal, experiential presence of the Spirit (model 3), of dialectical awareness of personal sin followed by God's healing presence (model 4), of a new awareness of God in my life as one is drawn deeper and deeper into a personal relationship (model 5).

This book will be useful to anyone wanting to get an overview of the various theological views of Revelation, which have been espoused since the beginning of the Enlightenment. until the late 20th century. The reader will find the material methodically present, very suitable for use in the classroom at the college level..

Works Cited

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