

**Contact ICSST**  
400 South Orange Avenue  
South Orange, NJ 07079  
Tel: 973.761.9575  
[theology@shu.edu](mailto:theology@shu.edu)

**Institute for  
Christian Spirituality**  
[theology.shu.edu/ICS](http://theology.shu.edu/ICS)

THE POPES AND THE ORDER OF CULTURE: LEO XIII TO BENEDICT XVI

Archbishop Gerety Lecture, Seton Hall, January 26, 2006

Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J.

I feel greatly privileged give this lecture in honor of your Archbishop Emeritus. My personal friendship with, and esteem for, Archbishop Gerety go back at least to 1971, when he invited me to give two weeks of lectures to his priests in Portland, Maine. I still see him several times a year, and am always encouraged to see his liveliness at what most of us regard as an advanced age. I hope that my reflections on faith and culture will harmonize with his insights.

St. Augustine said with reference to time that he knew what it was until he was asked to define it. One might say the same about culture. We are all familiar with it from daily experience, but we find it almost impossible to put in words what we know. In the sense I am going to use the term, a culture may

be roughly described as a set of ideas and attitudes, historically transmitted, that pervades a given social group, inclining its members to feel, think, speak, and act in certain ways. Benedict XVI in a recent book calls culture the "system of notions and thought patterns that preconditions the individual human being." He goes on to say: "The first and foremost component of culture is the common language; then comes the constitution of the society, that is, the government with its subdivisions, then law, customs, moral concepts, art, forms of worship, and so on." Theologically considered, culture is "the system of life into which the Word of the gospel enters."<sup>i</sup>

Some speak as though all cultures were equally good, but this can hardly be the case. Some are primitive, some advanced, and some decadent. The convictions and values embodied in the culture may be right or wrong, good or bad. We must therefore examine cultures critically. We must be on guard to prevent them from corrupting us and must strive to bring them into closer alignment with truth and justice.

I propose in this lecture to consider the relationship between the Christian faith, as Catholics understand it, and the culture of the United States today. Is the dominant culture shaped by Christianity, open to Christianity, or closed against it? How can the Church best resist the prevalent errors and bring the culture into closer harmony with the gospel?

The culture of our nation is frequently called pluralistic. We are a multicultural society with English, Irish, German, Polish, Italian, Hispanic, Vietnamese, African American, and many other ingredients. Religiously, Americans are Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, but also to some extent Muslim, Buddhist, Mormon, new age, humanist, agnostic, and atheist. But in spite of this diversity, there is a dominant stream that derives from the thirteen British colonies that declared their independence in 1776. The dominant culture was originally a form of Protestant Christianity blended with deism. It was further modified by the Evangelical revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by the arrogant capitalism of the nineteenth century, by a variety of philosophical currents, and by successive waves of immigration.

All the inherited cultures, today, are feeling the almost irresistible power of electronic communications, which are shaping a new mass culture, experiential, global, and consumer-oriented. The media are themselves driven to a great extent by commercial advertising, from which they get their funding. While reporting on religion for its news value, the secular media are reluctant to support any specific religion. Here and there, we are seeing signs of practical atheism that dismisses all religious manifestations as obsolete, superstitious, and divisive. Some suspect that the future may be

dominated by a defiantly antidogmatic secularism.

In this situation the Church has to consider her stance. I will put the question as it comes to the Catholic Church and her members, including you and me. Do they assess the dominant culture favorably or adversely? How can they shield themselves from its debilitating influence and counteract what they see as evil in the culture? Several options present themselves. For present purposes it may be sufficient to name four possibilities, which I shall call coexistence with, opposition to, immersion in, and transformation of the culture.

\*

The first strategy, coexistence, might also be called coordination. According to this option, Christians accept the reigning culture for purposes of civil existence while embracing a Christian and Catholic culture in their religious life. This model, if it could be applied to the United States today, would allow Catholics to be fully American in their social and professional life, while being thoroughly Catholic in the sphere of faith and worship. This option is very appealing because it involves no conflict or sacrifice, but offers the best of both worlds.

H. Richard Niebuhr in his classic work *Christ and Culture* describes this as the "synthesis" position.<sup>ii</sup> For Thomas Aquinas and his followers, says Niebuhr, the order of nature, as known to

Aristotle and the Greeks, was good in its own degree, and was to be respected while being supplemented from above by a supernatural order centered on Christ the Redeemer. Christianity and secular culture, according to this view, are related harmoniously as grace and nature, faith and reason, theology and philosophy.

Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) gave official approval to Thomistic philosophy as an outstanding achievement of reason capable of providing a solid foundation for the supernatural order of faith. In his social encyclicals Pope Leo compared the relationship between Church and State with that between body and soul.<sup>iii</sup> While distinct from one another, they are inseparable, and mutually supportive. Leo promoted natural law as giving the basis for morality, justice, and what he called "a common patrimony of the human race."<sup>iv</sup> Of still higher value, in Leo's estimation, is "that great and sacred treasure of the truths that God himself has taught us" by divine revelation. The two bodies of truth are in perfect harmony. For this reason the Church, according to Leo, regards human learning as good, praiseworthy and desirable; she preserves the monuments of ancient wisdom and fosters the progress of science and the arts. Where there is no necessary connection with faith and morals, the Church gives no authoritative judgment but leaves persons of culture free to make their own judgments.<sup>v</sup>

The coexistence model has much to recommend it. Catholic Christianity, like other forms of Christianity, brings with it a rich culture built up over the centuries from its biblical roots. The believer, while cherishing this religious heritage, lives in a secular culture that is shared in common by persons of different religious affiliations. As Pope Benedict XVI says, it is a feature of Christianity, as distinct from many other religions, to accept a double cultural allegiance. The same Christian faith thrives in many cultures, so that people can be, for example, Catholic and American, Baptist and American, Jewish and American. But the synthesis, according to the Pope, is never perfect. The two allegiances are in tension, engaged in a struggle for reconciliation and purification. "Even in epochs of apparently complete Christianization of certain peoples - as seemed to be the case in Europe - the cultural subject constituted by the People of God, the Church, is not identical with each of its particular historical subjects, but retains a larger form, proper to itself, and thereby achieves its importance."<sup>vi</sup>

Appealing though it is in theory, this first model has never been fully realized in practice. As Niebuhr notes, Leo XIII did not find it possible to synthesize Christian faith with the culture of his day.<sup>vii</sup> The model fails to reckon with the corrupting influence of evil on the natural order. It also tends

to underestimate the impact of faith on the believer's social attitudes and conduct. Instead of simply adopting this model, therefore, we must consider the other options, which allow for greater interaction.

\*

The second option, opposition, may be called countercultural. It requires the Church to resist the dominant ethos as sinful or at least inadequate, and to promote an alternative culture. Christians have never ceased to feel challenged by Paul's exhortation: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom 12:2).

To a considerable extent, the early Christians built up an alternative way of life, opposed to the reigning paganism. They abstained from politics, the theatre, the military, and other public manifestations, and resolutely refused to perform civic duties such as proclaiming the divinity of the emperor and offering sacrifices to him. They gathered together in close-knit communities that were distinguished by charity toward poor and weak members and by unwavering faith in the Lordship of Christ.

Sectarian Christianity as exemplified by the Amish, the Hutterites, and similar derivatives of Swiss Anabaptism exhibit the countercultural option at its strongest. But American Catholicism, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had some sectarian features. It flourished in a set

of subcultures that had their own neighborhoods and their own educational and social institutions. These were for the most part ethnic enclaves founded by émigrés from Europe: Irish, Italian, Polish, and German, and other. These minorities were powerful enough to establish their own environments, paralleling many features of the dominant culture. In these enclaves the faith was passed on very successfully from parents to children, who intermarried not with Protestants or Jews but with their own kind. The Catholic Church looked upon the dominant culture with a mixture of envy and disdain. While recognizing that culture's superiority in wealth, power, and prestige, the Church urged Catholics to shun it as a threat to faith and morals.

As I have said, Leo XIII did not find it possible to synthesize Christianity with the culture of his day. Even less did the next few popes find such a synthesis. Pius X, while dedicating his papacy to the restoration of all things in Christ, found the Church surrounded by enemies who raged against the Lord. Benedict XV was deeply grieved by the horrors of the First World War. Pius XI, while instituting the Feast of Christ the King, found it necessary to note the advance of the Kingdom of Satan, which he discerned in Fascism, National Socialism, and Atheistic Communism. Pope Pius XII in his first encyclical, published at the outbreak of the Second World War, gave a thoroughly negative assessment of the reigning culture. He spoke

of signs of a corrupt and corrupting paganism that was spiritually bankrupt, resembling the culture of decadent Rome as described by Paul in the first chapter of Romans. He called for a return to the peace and law of Christ.<sup>viii</sup>

By the end of World War II, Catholics in the Western world needed to hear a more encouraging message. Young Catholics raised in ethnic subcultures were growing restive. The accession of John XXIII to the papacy signaled the dawn of a new day. At the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, he seemed to be disassociating himself from Pius XII by declaring:

In the daily exercise of our pastoral office, we sometimes have to listen, much to our regret, to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. In these modern times they see nothing but prevarication and ruin. They say that our era, in comparison with past eras, is getting worse, and they behave as though they had learned nothing from history, which is, none the less, the teacher of life.

They behave as though at the time of former Councils everything was a full triumph for the Christian idea and life and for proper religious liberty.

We feel that we must disagree with those prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand.

In the present order of things, Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by men's own efforts and even beyond their expectation, are directed toward the fulfillment of God's superior and inscrutable designs. And everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church.

John XXIII in this historic address struck a welcome chord of optimism. He called for a Council that would not issue new condemnations but present the Church as the mother of mercy, speaking with a charity that overcomes discord, promoting peace and brotherly unity among all.

The ensuing Council faithfully carried out Pope John's directives. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, using cautious formulations, taught that the Church "fosters and takes to herself, insofar as they are good, the ability, resources, and customs of each people. Taking them to herself, she purifies, strengthens, and ennobles them" (LG 13). The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World almost unreservedly welcomed what it called "the enormous growth of natural, human, and social sciences," including progress in technology and in the means of communication (GS 54). It urged the faithful to live in close union with the people of their time. "Let them strive to understand perfectly their way of living and feeling, as expressed in their culture. Let them

blend modern science and its theories and the understanding of the most recent discoveries with Christian morality and doctrine.

Thus their religious practice and morality can keep pace with their scientific knowledge and with an ever-advancing technology" (GS 62).

Many American Catholics were relieved at what they saw as a cessation of hostilities between the Church and the modern world. The Pope, they felt, had given them permission to enter into the majority culture in the spirit of our next model.

\*

The third option, immersion or inculturation, may be illustrated from the reception of Vatican II, at least in our own country. The Catholic intellectual élite understood the Council as authorizing them to accept fully the agenda of contemporary society, confident that their secular experience would be perfectly compatible with their faith. It was almost a duty for Catholics, they reasoned, to come fully abreast of their time and to let the winds of modernity blow freely in the Church, sweeping away the accumulated dust from past centuries. With blithe self-confidence they moved out of the Catholic ghettos and swarmed into the mainstream of American culture. They entered freely into mixed marriages. They dismantled their own separate social and educational institutions, or made them less markedly confessional. In philosophy they forsook neoscholasticism and

embraced a variety of modern systems. In biblical and historical study, they adopted the latest techniques of historical-critical scholarship.

In their eagerness to join the larger culture, which was then questioning its own religious roots, Catholics became embarrassed by their own distinctive heritage. Reaching out for what they felt the reigning culture could offer them, they became oblivious of what they had to give, and lost a healthy sense of mission.

A number of missiologists tried to redefine the purpose of Christian missionary activity. Its true aim, they taught, was not to spread Christianity but to enable indigenous peoples to liberate themselves from poverty and oppression. They talked about how much the mission fields had to give to the mission-sending countries. In this radical revisionism Catholics were not alone. Protestants too were seeking to translate the gospel into a message of secular liberation. The proclamation of the traditional faith to non-Christians, they feared, might be a hidden form of aggression.

At a distance of forty years, this style of inculturation appears to have been ill-considered and naive. It went far beyond the moderate and cautious teachings of Vatican II. The winds of change, sweeping through the Church, turned out to be violent wintry blasts. In a famous statement, Pope Paul VI spoke

of the smoke of Satan in the Church herself. Pope Benedict characterizes the doctrine of inculturation, thus conceived, as "artificial and unreal" because it presupposes that faith is culturally naked and that the cultures receiving faith are neutral with regard to religion.<sup>ix</sup> The Catholic faith would have to be seriously mutilated in order to fit smoothly into certain human cultures. The cultures, conversely, would have to be shorn of all religious reference.

\*

The transformation model, our fourth, came into its own as a corrective. Pope Paul VI opened up a new phase in the reception of Vatican II with his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, issued in 1975, on the tenth anniversary of the close of Vatican II. To the surprise of many who had overlooked the missionary dimension of the Council, he declared: "The objectives [of the Council] are definitively summed up in this single one: to make the Church of the twentieth century ever better fitted for proclaiming the Gospel to the people of the twentieth century" (EN 2). He called for a fresh forward impulse in the Church, capable of launching a new period of evangelization (ibid.).

Rejecting secular Christianity, the Pope made it clear that the mission of the Church could not be reduced to the dimensions of a simply temporal project, as was occurring in some forms of political and liberation theology (EN 31). There could be no

true evangelization unless the name of Jesus were proclaimed (EN 22) and unless people were brought to a proper appreciation of the sacraments (EN 47).

For a new evangelization to occur, the Pope pointed out, it would be necessary to reexamine the relationship between the gospel and human cultures. To build up the Kingdom proclaimed in the gospel, the Church must refashion human culture in light of Christian revelation.

The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly of cultures. They have to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel.

But this encounter cannot take place if the Gospel is not proclaimed. (EN 20)

John Paul II, in his long pontificate, expanded on the ideas of Paul VI. Although he sometimes used the term "inculturation," he spoke very often of an evangelization of cultures and a dialogue between faith and culture. The practical materialism of our age, he believed, breeds individualism, utilitarianism, and hedonism.<sup>x</sup> John Paul even spoke of a growing anticulture that exploits selfish interests in destructive ways. He contrasted

the Church's culture of life with the secular anticulture of death. Rather than advocating the adoption of cultures as they stand, he urged the faithful to enter into critical dialogue with them, with the aim of making them more receptive to the gospel. The gospel, he taught, enriches human cultures "by helping them to go beyond the defective or even inhuman features in them, and by communicating to their legitimate values the fullness of Christ."<sup>xi</sup> The evangelization of cultures therefore moves a step beyond counterculturalism and calls for cultural transformation.

Pope Benedict XVI shares the critical attitude of Paul VI and John Paul II toward the cultural landscape of our day. At some points he appears to be in favor of restoring the countercultural model, which is usually associated with the period before Vatican II. In an interview of 1985 he said: "We must rediscover the courage of nonconformism in the face of the trends of the affluent world. Instead of following the spirit of the times, we ourselves must witness [to] that spirit of nonconformity with evangelical seriousness. . . . Among the most urgent tasks facing Christians is that of regaining the capacity of nonconformism, i.e., the capacity to oppose many developments of the surrounding culture."<sup>xii</sup>

In his recent writings, however, Pope Benedict shifts toward a more affirmative stance. In *Salt of the Earth* he concedes that the Church must sometimes have the courage to engage in prophetic

contradiction, but that is not her preferred role. "She is always involved in positive, constructive efforts," attempting to collaborate positively with others.<sup>xiii</sup>

In a speech on "Communication and Culture" delivered in 2002, Cardinal Ratzinger explained that the countercultural posture of nonconformism is one phase of a larger process, aimed at the evangelization of cultures and their transformation in light of the gospel. In evangelization today, he said, we are not addressing a monolithic group but a society torn apart by internal contradictions. In this culture Christian elements coexist alongside of others that are anti-Christian, such as "the disintegration of the family and marriage, the escalating attacks upon human life and its dignity, the confinement of faith to the realm of the subjective and the consequent secularization of public awareness, as well as the fragmentation and relativizing of ethical values."<sup>xiv</sup>

The evangelization of cultures, as Pope Benedict describes it, requires careful discernment. Evangelization cannot be a matter of simple adaptation, as it would be in some superficial forms of inculturation. Rather, "an ongoing and patient encounter between the Logos and the culture is necessary, mediated by the service of the faithful."<sup>xv</sup> The intervention of the Word of God, he says, effects a change that does not destroy the substance but purifies and matures it.

Benedict summarizes his position in three propositions which recall the classic threefold way of affirmation, negation, and synthesis. First of all, the Christian faith is prepared to affirm all that is great, true, and pure in the existing culture. Secondly, faith, while accepting what is good, is also a sign of opposition to whatever in the culture bars the doors against the gospel. And thirdly, Christians must engage in the work of transformation. We cannot achieve this last stage, Pope Benedict maintains, unless we work in the company of fellow-believers, who set up an alternative way of living and demonstrate that it is possible.<sup>xvi</sup>

Applying these three points to our own situation, we may ask, first, what we should seek to preserve. Outstanding Catholic thinkers such as Orestes Brownson and John Courtney Murray have recognized an abundance of wisdom and good sense in the American political tradition, which combines features of traditional Christian morality with a deistically flavored natural theology. By giving a Catholic reading to the human rights proclaimed in our founding documents, Murray sought to bring the Catholic Church from the margins to the center of the American enterprise. The Neo-Conservatives of our day, following in his footsteps, continue to build on what is sound and true in the American tradition, even while recognizing that many constitutional lawyers today have broken with the natural law

tradition. The Neo-Conservatives are convinced that the Bill of Rights, properly interpreted, provides a framework within which Catholicism can continue to function and indeed to flourish.

Secondly, we must ask what is to be rejected in contemporary American culture. Recent Popes have given a clear answer. They speak of philosophical agnosticism, religious indifferentism, moral relativism, practical atheism, and hedonistic individualism. In combination, these deviations result in the quest for momentary gratifications, the degradation of sexuality, and the cult of riches and power. It requires no profound investigation to perceive that these priorities, though patently incompatible with the gospel, are part of the air we breathe. To resist them we must be in some sense countercultural.

Benedict's insistence on the communal dimensions of the transformation model strikes me as especially noteworthy. We cannot successfully evangelize the culture without being thoroughly evangelized ourselves. The capacity to discern what may be preserved, what must be rejected, and what the gospel has to add requires a long and patient formation. Very few Catholics today receive anything more than a hasty and superficial exposure to the mysteries of faith. Even fewer belong to communities that exemplify a fully transformed Catholic culture.

In the early centuries the Desert Fathers in the East and the monks in the West exercised a formative influence on the

dominant culture precisely by immersing themselves in alternative ways of life inspired by the gospel. Throughout the past 1500 years religious orders, practicing radical discipleship, have been dynamos of evangelization.

Today we rely more on the laity, who are in a position to Christianize the culture from within. But the majority of them are too much a part of the dominant culture to make any great impact upon it. New lay movements, such as Communion and Liberation, the Focolarini, and half a dozen others, have been hailed as offering a supplement to the institutes of consecrated life, which suffer from a dearth of vocations. These movements, if they maintain their initial élan, may make a valuable contribution to the renewal and transformation of cultures. In any case it should be clear that the Church in our nation, as elsewhere, needs to develop programs of religious formation in which groups of committed Christians can cultivate deeper experiences of faith, prayer, and worship.

The problem of faith and culture will never be solved. It is inseparable from the human condition. The four options considered in this paper will always contend for acceptance. Each of the four can be defended up to a point. The coordination of faith and culture never ceases to attract us as an ideal, because everything naturally good has a place in the Christian scheme. The countercultural attitude evokes our admiration

because of its uncompromising boldness. Inculturation, by contrast, reflects a commendable desire to adapt our religion to the capacities and needs of various peoples. But of the four models transformation is, I believe, the most adequate.

Incorporating the three elements of affirmation, negation, and synthesis, it captures all that is best in the other three models and blends them into a dynamic unity.

## Cardinal Dulles delivers Gerety Lecture

On January 26, 2006 Immaculate Conception Seminary School of Theology welcomed Avery Cardinal Dulles, S. J. to the Seton Hall campus to present the 2006 Gerety Lecture. Cardinal Dulles, one of the best known and respected American theologians today, holds the position as the Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society at Fordham University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences' Theology Department. The Cardinal is the son of the Former United States Secretary of State under President Dwight Eisenhower and is a convert to Roman Catholicism. He served as a periti, a theological advisor, to the American delegation to the Vatican Council II.

The Gerety Lectures are one component of the Archbishop Peter L. Gerety Fund for Ecclesiastical History established by the former Archbishop of Newark to promote study, research and scholarship in Church history. Former speakers in the series have included John Tracy Ellis, Jaroslav Pelican, Margaret Reher, and Dermot Quinn.

The Cardinal began his talk by explaining that he and Archbishop have had a personal friendship for the past 35 years and, because of his esteem for the former Archbishop, he felt privileged to be invited to present this lecture.

The title of the lecture was "The Popes and the Order of Culture: Leo XIII to Benedict XVI". In it Cardinal Dulles proposed four ways in which, he believes, the Catholic Church in America today could address the secularistic and pluralistic culture that it faces. These four options he called Co-existence with, Opposition to, Immersion in, and Transformation of the culture.

In co-existence Christians can accept our prevailing culture in the civil realm while embracing a Catholic Christian culture in the religious sphere. Although this approach may seem very appealing at first, Cardinal Dulles rejects it because it has never been successfully implemented due to the corrupting influence of evil in the natural order. It also does not take into consideration the impact of our faith on social attitudes and conduct.

Using St. Paul's injunction to the Romans not to be conformed to this world(12-2), the Cardinal described a second option, a countercultural mode of opposition where the Church offers resistance to society's ethos as, at best, inadequate or, more likely, sinful. The Amish and other non-conforming churches were offered as examples of this mode. The American Catholic ghetto culture of the first half of the twentieth century also successfully employed this approach.

But the papacy of Blessed John XXIII and his Council brought a new approach to the fore. The Pope wanted Catholics to enter fully into the world, to embrace the changes and advancements that science and technology offered and to use them to promote peace and unity in the world.

Thus the third option presented, immersion or inculturation, grew organically from the

documents of Vatican II according to Cardinal Dulles. Believing that the Council documents called for a total immersion in contemporary societal mores, many Catholics abandoned long held beliefs and practices to embrace the prevailing culture of the time, thereby abandoning the sense of Church and its mission. While this belief that the Catholic culture could be smoothly assimilated into human culture without doing damage to either, seems questionable today, it was considered by many as only a full interpretation of the conciliar documents.

Pope Paul VI answered this theme with a call for a new evangelization that proclaimed the gospel to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Secular Christianity could never fulfill the mission given to the Church by Jesus. Only a total acceptance of the gospel message and the sacraments could bring about this evangelization.

Pope John Paul II, the Cardinal reminded the audience, spoke very often about the innate clash between the culture of life promulgated by the Catholic Church and the increasing anticulture of death. He taught that we must engage society in a dialogue to help develop a full appreciation and acceptance of the gospel message. We have to move beyond mere counterculturism to a culture transformation.

Although Pope Benedict XVI before his election sometimes seemed to lean towards a pre-Vatican II countercultural approach, Cardinal Dulles believes that he truly favors a more positive and collaborative approach to the question of dealing with contemporary society. The Church must accept and affirm all that is good in society while offering a strong opposition to whatever contradicts the gospel and we must all engage in bringing about this necessary transformation.

The Holy Father believes that we cannot evangelize society if we are not thoroughly evangelized first. While earlier centuries could rely upon religious communities to foster evangelization, today it is the Catholic laity who must lead this change. While the Cardinal does not believe the conflict between faith and culture will ever be alleviated, he feels that some of the lay movements in the Church today can make a major contribution to this cultural transformation.

In closing he stated that although four options presented all have attractive facets, it is only the transformation model that offers the best solution, since it captures the best attributes of the other three in to a 'dynamic unity'. (843)



