

“WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED, FATHER DULLES?”
THE SOTERIOLOGY OF AVERY DULLES, S.J.

by

Tim L. Anderson
Ph.D. in progress Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Assistant Professor of Bible and Theology
at
WESTERN BAPTIST COLLEGE
Salem, Oregon

Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting
Santa Clara, California
November 21, 1997

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly pluralistic society, American evangelicals are having to face theological traditions from every quarter of the Christian spectrum. This issue has come more to the center stage with the advent of Evangelical and Roman Catholic dialogue made especially manifest in the Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus inspired “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” statement of 1994 and their subsequent dialogues. At this juncture, however, Evangelicals, with a tendency toward an insular mindset, have not clearly understood inclusive oriented Roman Catholic soteriology or their major theologians. Not every Evangelical even knows who, say, Richard John Neuhaus is, let alone knows what he believes on the cardinal salvific doctrines that separate him from Evangelicals. This is even more the case when Neuhaus stated that “Father Avery Dulles, probably the most respected Catholic theologian in America was for all practical purposes a member of the drafting committee and was unstinting in his help at every step of the way.”¹ This paper will attempt to solve this knowledge problem by beginning with Avery Dulles, S.J.

This paper will show Dulles’s soteriology has weathered the tests of his own numerous ecumenical encounters over the years. It will then give a delineation, extracted from his writings which center mostly on doctrines of revelation and the Church, of the crucial elements of faith and conversion in his soteriology. It will not only reveal his Catholic soteriology, in which his locus of authority is found in his consistent appeals to the magisterium of the Catholic Church as well as the Scriptures, but also his conservative inclusivistic post-Vatican II Catholicism. However, in order to illustrate his soteriology, this paper will attempt to show how a simple question like, “Father Dulles, what must I do to be saved?” might be answered if it was asked concerning infants, the unevangelized, and other people.

¹Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds. *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), xiii.

HIS INCLUSIVE ECUMENICAL ACTIVITIES

Avery Dulles is truly a significant American theologian due in part to his vast experience in ecumenical dialogue since the early 1960s. Anne-Marie Kirmse lists his ecumenical activities from 1962 up to 1989 as being a member of the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Commission on Christian Unity (1962-1970); a consultor to the Papal Secretariat for Dialogue with Non-Believers (1966-1973); and was a current member of the United States National Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue and the Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultation in the United States. He also contributed to three of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Statements, one to the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue, and a study paper of the World Council of Churches. He was also serving on the drafting committee of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue which was preparing the statement on "The One Mediator, The Saints and Mary."² In 1975, Dulles was also a part of the drafting and publishing of "An Appeal for Theological Affirm-ation," or what has become more commonly known as the "Hartford Appeal."³ Most recently, and more important for Evangelicals, he also has had a significant role in the present Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) statement and continuing dialogues.

Kirmse notes that his dialogue in addition to the above activities takes place primarily through his writings which present "the teachings of his colleagues, Catholic and non-Catholic, in the theological community, both past and present, and then to explain and evaluate their positions."⁴ Thus, it is clear that Dulles is a veteran player in ecumenical dialogue and is not a stranger to pushing the relations between Roman Catholics and Protestants to new levels even in light of unfavorable responses.

²Anne-Marie Rose Kirmse, "The Church and the churches: A Study of Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Developments in the Writings of Avery Dulles, S.J." (Ph.D. Diss., Fordham University, 1989), 42.

³Kirmse, "The Church and the churches," 43.

⁴Ibid. A good example in this context would be his "Ecumenism and Theological Method," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 17 (Winter 1980),40-48 or more recently his "The Unity for Which We Hope," in *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission*, edited by Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), 115-146.

CRUCIAL ELEMENTS OF HIS SOTERIOLOGY

Christian theologians recognize that soteriology is made up of various aspects presented in Scripture on salvation. Since Dulles's views are not an exception to this, it is important to turn to what he has written on the nature of faith in salvation, conversion, and the role of the Church in salvation.

Faith

For Dulles, as for most Catholics, faith is necessary for salvation. He says that without God's offer and its free acceptance, humans cannot share in the divine life. Thus, when responding to God's word and to his invitation to communion, faith brings about a deep union with God. Faith clings to or depends on God as the sole source of all grace and salvation. When one establishes a right relationship with God (or "justification") faith sets the believer on the path to eternal life. Salvation in what he calls "the full sense" is the ultimate fruit of faith. Therefore, eternal life will be the lot or possession of those who believe. Yet those who believe are those who also strive to put their faith into practice and persevere in faith to the end.⁵

On the surface, this may seem to be consistent with evangelical views of salvation. Yet it is sad to note that in this teaching, which is consistent with Catholic belief, faith may set the person on the right path to eternal life, which is not an assured result of their faith. Salvation may not be lost, as in Arminian teachings, but salvation from punishment in the afterlife may not be gained if the cooperation of one's faith with one's deeds does not measure up to a certain standard by the end of one's life. With no ultimate assurance of eternal life, the Catholic, as a result of Dulles's view (though not expressly stated), is left to wonder if and how much time they will spend in purgatory to make up the difference.

⁵Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 279.

Conversion

What does Dulles believe about conversion? What are his views on the dynamics of passing from one state to another with regard to one's relationship to God? On the one hand, Evangelicals have traditionally stressed the need for true conversion resulting from the activity of evangelism. The nonbeliever in accepting the gospel turns to God through Christ's sacrifice in dependence and away from their sin in repentance. The turnings are the human responsibility in their salvation motivated by God's Spirit. Dulles's view is similar but is oriented toward an inclusivist Roman Catholic position, even though he presents it in cautious manner. Before a clear understanding of his view on conversion can emerge, four aspects of conversion need to be established.

To begin with, most noticeably, is his description of conversion as a continuous process demanded of Christians at every stage of their Christian life, a life which is not a static condition because believers never have their faith fully and securely in their hands.⁶ This is in keeping with his view of faith noted above. Nevertheless, he does stress as well that the initial point of conversion is a radical transformation of one's values and beliefs. This issue becomes clearer in light of the next two aspects.

Second, conversion is brought about by the Church through the proclamation of the word of God and personal testimony. He states that his concern is

the process by which people are brought to explicit Christian faith, that is to say, to an acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Such a conversion, as is evident, commonly occurs through the ministry of the Church, which as a community of faith brings the message of the person of Christ within reach of potential believers.⁷

Third, Dulles concedes some interesting dynamics with regard to conversion finding himself

⁶Dulles, *The Craft of Theology*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), from the chapter "Fundamental Theology and the Dynamics of Conversion," 53-68, which was previously published under the same title in *The Thomist* 45 (April 1981), 175-193.

⁷Ibid., 62.

in significant agreement with the “transcendental conversion” position of inclusivists. This aspect of conversion overlaps with what will be discussed later on the unevangelized, but the context here helps shed light on his overall view of the dynamics of conversion.

He notes that these inclusivists hold that conversion does not occur in the very acceptance of the Christian message but in a more fundamental act of faith which is made possible by an internal gift of God’s grace which is even accessible to the unevangelized.⁸ They say that for one to have an experience of grace, one does not need to have heard the name of Christ or the gospel, but what is important is an accepting response to the workings of God’s grace which is or which includes an act of divine or saving faith. He goes on to summarize their view as Christian belief being a particular thematization of a basic transcendental conversion which does not require a new conversion for its acceptance. And yet, he is unwilling to leave this discussion without stating what he “personally” holds. For him, as for most Catholics, God’s grace is at work everywhere, “and that a fundamental act of saving faith is within reach of every human being.”⁹ But one is not quite sure what he means by that because he is also convinced that the gospel message of what God has done for us in Christ adds something to alter the basic structure of faith itself. Christianity’s message of God appearing on earth in the person and career of Jesus of Nazareth is something that humans could never have come up with by themselves. God, through the gospel, enables humans to relate to him in a new way, “thanking and trusting him because of what he has actually done for us in the incarnate life, death, and resurrection of his Son.”¹⁰ On the other hand, “those theologians who treat faith simply as a transcendental experience of God, taking place in the inwardness of the human spirit, tend to

⁸Ibid., 57.

⁹Ibid., 57-58.

¹⁰Ibid., 58. He challenges those who speak of faith in the context of the standard definition of fundamental theology as the demonstration of the credibility of the Christian message and the claims of the Church by the unaided light of reason. Yet reason always operates within a context of faith in that reason is not only at work in the approach to faith by the unbeliever, as the traditionally rationally oriented fundamental theologians would espouse, but that it is in the act of conversion itself, and also in all the mental activity of believers. Ibid., 56.

minimize the historical element in the Christian religion and to overlook the crucial role of mediation through the living community of faith.”¹¹ Later he says that unbelievers evaluate viable religious faiths ultimately by its ability to provide ultimate meaning and abiding value. Sounding like Karl Rahner, he states that Christians are convinced that the perception of God obtainable through Jesus Christ is able to provide these benefits more effectively than any other faith.¹²

Fourth, he stresses authentic conversion as a work of God because no one can convert themselves. Thus, in looking at this conversion process from the point of view of faith, one will have good reason to suppose that God operates immediately in the depths of the human spirit or “psyche,” arousing virtues that simply cannot be accounted for circumstantially. Once a person responds to these interior graces, they “may be raised to a very high degree of personal perfection.”¹³ An evangelical anthropology, however, finds this Catholic Semi-Pelagian view of innate virtues which are common to all humans objectionable in light of the biblical evidence of man’s innate sinfulness.

In summary, Dulles’s concept of conversion is a combination of the traditional Semi-Pelagian Roman Catholic fundamental theology which stresses the role of reason with the modern existential views of Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan which stress an encounter with the Transcendent. This allows him to dialectically embrace different traditions at the same time. Evangelicals might be pleased to hear him speak of “an acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,” whereas Roman Catholics would be pleased to hear his stress on the progressive nature of conversion which is in keeping with their anthropology. In any case, the evangelical position comes out on the short end of the soteriological stick because in his view initial conversion has nothing to do with sola fide.

The Church and Salvation

¹¹Ibid., 61

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 62.

In discussing the role of the Church in salvation, Dulles is a firm believer that the teachings of Vatican II should serve as a directive and corrective of American Catholic theology. In his book *The Reshaping of Catholicism*,¹⁴ he establishes from Vatican II the view of the role of the Church in salvation which he implies is normative and comes just short of saying it is authoritative.¹⁵

He makes very strong statements affirming its position that the Catholic church is necessary to the salvation of all human beings. It describes the church “as being, by its very essence, the universal sacrament of salvation.”¹⁶ If it means that “all redemption depends upon the church, an affirmative answer seems to be implied by the term *universal* and is confirmed by the further statement that the church is used by Christ ‘as an instrument for the redemption of all’ (LG 9).”¹⁷ He adds that it states several times that “the church, like baptism, is necessary for salvation (LG 14, AG 7).”¹⁸ However, he does note that these statements may be applied in different ways according to whether one has or has not been effectively evangelized. His following explanation is instructive.

Persons of the first category, in order to be saved, are obliged to be baptized, join the church as a socially organized community, and remain in it. Those of the second category are saved if they accept and live by the grace of Christ in whatever form it is accessible to them (LG 16; GS 22; AG 7). Such grace, calling everyone to salvation, always produces a positive relationship or ordination (*ordinatio*) to the church, so that to accept the grace is to be brought into a dynamic connection with the church (LG). Thus the church is involved in the salvation of all who are saved. It would be contradictory, the council suggests, to affirm the necessity of Christ for salvation and to deny the necessity of his body, whereby he makes himself present in history (LG 14).¹⁹

¹⁴*The Reshaping of Catholicism: Current Challenges in the Theology of the Church*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1988) from the chapter “Vatican II and the Purpose of the Church,” which is from the article by the same title in *Theology Digest* 32 (Winter 1985), 341-352.

¹⁵Dulles affirms Vatican II by stating, “The aggressive, triumphal Catholicism of the post-Reformation period, severely censured at Vatican II, has continued to decay. Chastened by the experience of their own fragility, Catholics are groping for a new identity. Can American Catholics, then, find in their own tradition the resources demanded of them by the present situation? Vatican II, I suggest, may provide grounds for an affirmative response.” *Ibid.*, 17. See also his essay, “Vatican II and the American Experience of Church,” in *Vatican II: Open Questions and New Horizons*, edited by Gerald M. Fagin, S.J. (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984), 32-57.

¹⁶He cites Vatican II’s Constitution on the Church (LG 9, 48), the Decree on the church’s Missionary Activity (AG 1) and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (GS 45), *Ibid.*, 139. For a similar discussion see his *Models of the Church*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1974, revised edition, 1987), 67f.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.* See also Avery Dulles, *Revelation and the Quest for Unity*, (Washington D.C.: Corpus Books, 1968), 103f.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

In short, again for Dulles the Church is a universal sacrament.

This teaching shows how God's grace and the church are inextricably united. It is also noteworthy that on the one hand, this view is not any different from his view of conversion and faith, and on the other, shows his support of a more inclusivistic position.

THE QUESTION ANSWERED

So with the background of Dulles's soteriology of traditional Semi-Pelagian Roman Catholic fundamental theology stressing the role of reason and the modern existential stress on an encounter with the Transcendent, how might he answer the question, "Father Dulles, what must I do to be saved?"

To Infants

Dulles's approach to this question asked by the parents of an infant about to be baptized or a deceased infant (rather than the infant itself obviously) or other interested parties would probably focus first on the difficulty of such a question. In fact, Dulles states, "The faith of baptized infants represents a special case, involving difficult problems that do not arise in the case of adults."²⁰

The one thing that he would probably say we do know about infants in this case is that they are by definition ones who are "incapable of reflective personal acts, including the act of faith" and thus, the crucial issue at this juncture is "whether infants could have faith, and if so in what sense."²¹ Dulles would probably carefully develop a position agreed upon throughout the history of the church by most Catholic-oriented theologians.

Infants, although unable to make personal acts of faith, cannot be saved without faith. They depend on the faith of the Church, which is expressed by the sponsors at baptism. Even if, as the preferred opinion has it, baptized infants receive the virtue of faith, they do not possess it in the same way as adults. In adults, as we shall see, the virtue arises from acts of faith performed in response to the hearing of the word of God. The faith of infants, since it has

²⁰*The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, 239.

²¹Ibid. In this work he cites the views of Augustine, Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, Innocent III, the Council of Vienne (A.D. 1312), Martin Luther, John Calvin, The Council of Trent, Vatican I, Pope Paul VI, and Edward Schillebeeckx of which most parents would not be interested.

not yet in a condition that permits it to proceed into act, is by comparison deficient.²²

However, for Dulles, faith is not equivalent to salvation. Most evangelicals would not disagree with how he develops the concept of the nature of faith.

The act of faith should not be conceived as something that occurs only once, as though it were nothing but a decision made at the moment of conversion. Each act of faith is one of a continuing series of acts, a process in which growth can and should occur. The virtue of faith, correspondingly, is not just a static foundation for the spiritual life but an intrinsic element of that developing life.²³

And yet, they should take exception to how he develops this concept in application to infants. He states that “whatever faith infants receive in baptism is not exactly the same as the habit of faith in an adult” and by this he means that “the infant’s faith does not come from having heard the proclamation of God’s revealed word; the infant is incapable of personal acts of faith.”²⁴ More specifically, he states, “Infants, who lack personal faith, receive grace from the faith of the Church and are thus prepared to make acts of faith, if they freely wish to do so when they acquire the use of reason.”²⁵ Therefore, the salvation of infants is not only laid deftly at the feet of the parents/sponsors, but at the feet of the church whose responsibility it is to perform the sacrament of infant baptism. This shows his view that faith alone does not save, but if one perseveres in good works to the end of their life, then enough merit will be stored up for them, which by implication outweighs their bad deeds.

The question may arise at this point as to whether unbaptized infants can be saved without faith. Dulles would thoughtfully respond by surveying the theological and magisterial options. He would say that,

Revelation appears to be silent on the point, but theologians often conjecture that they too are included in the divine plan of salvation. In some way known to God, they may possibly be saved through the faith of the Church. Perhaps they are given an opportunity to make a personal act of faith at the moment of their death. In view of the universal effects of the Fall and the universal scope of God’s redemptive action in Christ, it seems unlikely that anyone is

²²Ibid., 242.

²³Ibid., 253.

²⁴Ibid., 241.

²⁵Ibid., 253.

destined for a purely natural state of beatitude, such as the ‘limbo of children’ was thought to be.²⁶

So what is his answer to the infant who wants to know how to be saved or more realistically their parents who are concerned for their salvation? He would acknowledge the child’s lack of personal faith and thus stress the need for a strong faith on the part of the parent/sponsor for the child by having them go through the sacrament of Baptism, by which the infant is able to receive faith from the merit of the Church’s accumulated faith on their behalf. This gives the infant an available faith to be used once their rational processes are developed enough to use it in the practice of “dispositions” toward God and good works.

To the Unevangelized

Another group of people, the unevangelized, may ask Father Dulles what they must do to be saved. For Dulles, the ones asking this question may be those “pagans” who did not receive the revelation given to Abraham and his descendants²⁷ or non-biblical religions which are those which are not derived from Judaism or Christianity.²⁸ Knowing the great amount of debate over their destiny and the resulting conflicts they may face as a result of his answer to them, Dulles sets forth a detailed and well reasoned answer for them.

To begin with, he would affirm for them the New Testament as teaching that those patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, who lived before the coming of Christ, came to salvation through their hope in the coming Savior. He would admit that the New Testament speaks “less clearly” about the fate of those who had not received such revelation. Yet he would assert that there are hints “that a saving relationship to God is a possibility even for them.”²⁹

²⁶Ibid., 277-278.

²⁷Ibid., 258.

²⁸Ibid., 267.

²⁹Ibid., 258.

His first line of evidence for this possible relationship for them comes from a few New Testament passages. In his view, Hebrews 11:6 demonstrates that anyone coming to salvation must have faith in a twofold object: God's existence and His rewarding those who seek him. He notes that the passage does not indicate whether that kind of faith presupposes some kind of revelation, "but the author very probably looked upon all knowledge of divine things as a gift of God, and in that sense as revelation."³⁰

He would then summarize the Pauline teaching on this issue by acknowledging Paul's discussions on general revelation to all people but granting that "Paul's intention is to show why the Gentiles are guilty for having failed to believe and to worship God, rather than how they can be saved," that "all human beings, whether Jews or pagans, stand in need of redemption through faith in Christ (Rom 3:9-25)," and that "in the present time of grace there is no other way to salvation (Rom 3:25-26; cf. Acts 14:16; 17:30)."³¹

His second line of evidence for this comes from the magisterium of the Church which in his view "has gradually clarified its position regarding the possibilities of salvific faith for the unevangelized."³² The axiom "Outside the Church No Salvation" has from the patristic age to this century been stated so as to give the impression that explicit Christian and Catholic faith is an absolute condition for salvation. Yet he calms their fears by going on to show the nuancing of this axiom by Pope Pius IX in 1854 and 1863³³, Pius XII in 1943 and 1949, and Vatican II that grants salvific merit to implicit faith.

³⁰Ibid., 259.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Pope Pius IX's 1863 encyclical seemed to establish a precedent for the other later statements listed above when he stated, "You also know that people who are invincibly ignorant of our holy religion, provided that they sincerely keep the precepts of natural law, who are prepared to obey God, and who live honorable and upright lives, can, by the efficacious power of the light and grace of God, attain eternal life; for God, who fully beholds, scrutinizes, and knows the minds, hearts, thoughts, and dispositions of all, in his supreme mercy will by no means permit anyone who is not guilty of voluntary fault to suffer eternal punishments." Ibid.

He wraps up this magisterium section by cautiously granting the possibility that God in his providence may intend “other religions besides Judaism as preparations for the gospel, and their founders hold a position in salvation history for nonbiblical peoples in some way resembling (though not completely parallel to) that of the patriarchs and prophets of Israel” and then adds that, “If one accepts Rahner’s theory of the ‘supernatural existential,’ it becomes highly probable that these other religions are expressions and mediations of supernatural faith, secretly oriented to Christ the universal Savior.”³⁴ But in honesty, he cautiously backs away from the stronger inclusivism by then stating that “in the framework of Catholic Christianity it seems evident that other religions could not offer grace and salvation unless Christ, the divine Savior, were at work in them.” He concludes this line of thought by reverting back to Vatican II type language, by stating, “These religions may be thought to provide helps for salvation to the extent that they assist their adherents to reach out to Christ, the mediator of all saving truth.”³⁵

His honesty would probably lead him to warn the unevangelized that salvation cannot ultimately be obtained by being sincere, having faith in a higher Being, or by having any sort of subjective dispositions. It does not even matter if they have in some sense inwardly experienced God’s grace. “Apart from the objective deed by which God enters human history” and apart from Christ, the one mediator one cannot be saved.³⁶ Then, in a display of conviction, he would probably show his discomfort in the stronger forms of inclusivism and radical pluralism being advocated today by reversing Paul Knitter’s “dictum” “Myth-symbols save. Historical facts do not . . .”³⁷ to say “Myth- symbols do not save. Historical facts do.” He might then add,

The finest subjective attitudes would be of no avail unless there were a correlative reality to which they were oriented. Faith has saving power insofar as it reaches out to, and derives its

³⁴Ibid., 270.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., 271.

³⁷Paul F. Knitter, “Jesus-Buddha-Krishna: Still Present?” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 16 (1979), 657, as cited by Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, 268.

efficacy from, the redemptive action whereby God in Christ reverses the history of sin and draws all humanity toward its true end.³⁸

However, his final comment to them (like the final one in his chapter) in allowance for his conservative inclusivism, he may cite John 12:32 which states, “If I be lifted up I will draw all things to myself.” He may then comment on this that the “all” “may be taken as including everyone who, by God’s grace, searches devoutly for the one true Redeemer and rejoices when and if that Redeemer shows his face” and it allows for the salvation of those who have a hope by faith in a Redeemer that of whom they may not know the specifics.³⁹

The evangelical exclusivist who overhears Dulles’s answer would be puzzled by Dulles’s attempt to hold some sort of exclusivism with Vatican II type inclusivism. He holds the two in a dialectical tension, which for others, it may be simply seen as contradictory.

To Other People

A final group of people, people other than infants and the unevangelized, may ask Father Dulles what they must do to be saved. Dulles’s answer to their question provides insights into his views that, in light of his track record, affect the American ecumenical scene.

The first direction he would probably take these people is to their acknowledgment of a common hope for the betterment of society and their own lives. These aspects of human experience are obviously not as they should be by anyone’s standards. If they are a religious seeker in any sense, he would probably pursue the idea that a certain hope, however vague, prompts thoughts that “the world, and even we ourselves, are not beyond possibility of redemption” and thus prompts a search “for a redeemer from beyond the world, for a God who manifests his mercy and love and who bestows

³⁸Ibid., 271.

³⁹Ibid.

the blessed companionship for which man looks in vain within the world.”⁴⁰

He might test Augustine’s thesis before them that God has made us for himself and the human heart cannot find rest until it rests in him. Whether one can accept this thesis or not depends on whether or not God has convincingly revealed his presence and salvific will in history.⁴¹ The answer to this depends on the difference between proof and sign. He would illustrate this by how one interprets human gestures, like smiles or handshakes. He would develop this by saying,

There is no way of strictly proving that the apparent meaning is really there. Either one discerns it or one does not. The friend knows how to interpret the gesture of his friend. . . . For the religious seeker, too, there may be events, persons, and situations in which the divine meaning of the universe is felt to be symbolically present, so that God is apprehended in them, expressing his being and his attitudes in a historically tangible way. In this way we may speak of Christ and of various events in the history of Israel and of the Church as divine signs.⁴²

In other words, if one is a religious seeker, they will by nature as such, begin to accept God’s revelation of himself in the above ways.⁴³ He might also give tangible apologetic evidence for the biblical Christ if asked.⁴⁴

Dulles might add to this that a supernatural element of faith is found when one is conducive to faith when they rest on God’s grace. God’s prevenient grace is able to show people their need to repent of their sins, to desire the pardon of God, and to hope for God’s gift of revelation and faith. When people are disposed toward the above repentance, desires, and hopes, these dispositions are not causing faith nor do they merit in a strict sense the grace to believe. They are allowing faith to be more likely. When the gospel is duly presented, it will be believed.⁴⁵

⁴⁰Avery Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma: Faith, Authority, and Dogma in a Changing World*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), 50.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., 51.

⁴³He has stated elsewhere that “a non-Christian can see the coherence of the Christian explanation only if he or she is willing to accept the Christian doctrines in a hypothetical way, at least for the purposes of discussion.” Dulles, *The Craft of Theology*, 67.

⁴⁴See Avery Dulles, *Apologetics and the Biblical Christ*, (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1967).

⁴⁵Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, 243.

At some point in the discussion Dulles would probably bring up the subject of baptism because, for him, “Baptism is par excellence the sacrament of faith.”⁴⁶ Hebrews 6:4 and 10:32, in his opinion, describe baptized Christians as having been enlightened. Thus, in the rite of baptism “the presentation of the lighted candle to the baptized with the words, ‘Receive the light of Christ,’ signifies the bestowal of the light of faith.”⁴⁷ He gives qualification to the assumption that faith is brought into existence only at baptism. For example, in the normal adult baptism, they already possess faith in some measure. The ritual’s stated request for faith may be understood by the candidate as the request for a deeper faith within the Church as the community of faith.⁴⁸ But it must be noted that faith is bestowed in certain instances, such as to infants, at baptism.

However, Dulles might give the religious seeker a sense of personal responsibility in that faith, as a response in freedom to grace, may be lost. He might say,

To all appearances, some who once believed have become unbelievers. But the apparent unbeliever may be, perhaps even unconsciously, a searching believer who fails to recognize the doctrines and formulas of faith as expressions and explanations of divine revelation. Such a failure of perception may be culpable or inculpable. In the last analysis only God can judge the question of culpability just as he alone can be sure whether faith is truly absent.”⁴⁹

Far from advocating any security for the believer, he places the assurance of faith (notice clearly that it is not the assurance of salvation) upon the good deeds of the faithful.

As their conversation draws to a close, Dulles may explain the necessity for their conversion. He might draw them to a passage central to faith, by citing Jesus’ statement that “He who loses his life for my sake will find it.” This statement, which is cited in all four Gospels (Matt 16:35; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25 Matt 16:35; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25) shows the road to salvation is living through dying and receiving through giving. He would then summarize his answer

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid., 253-254.

to their original question by stating, “Our willingness to make the venture of being a Christian will in great part depend on whether we can believe that in renouncing ourselves for the sake of others, with full reliance on Christ, we shall come to our full stature as persons,” but “Christ’s call for total conversion--for a ‘transvaluation of all values’--is brilliantly compressed in this one brief sentence, and the entire New Testament might be regarded as an expansion of this basic principle.”⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

The soteriology of Avery Dulles centers around faith, conversion and the role of the Church in which his Roman Catholic Semi-Pelagian and rational/existential fundamental theology, as well as his conservative inclusivism of a post-Vatican II orientation are apparent. By way of illustration, these central aspects of his soteriology are further clarified by the answers he would most likely have given based on his own writings to the question like, “Father Dulles, what must I do to be saved?” if it was asked by infants, the unevangelized, and other people.

This paper has attempted to solve an evangelical knowledge problem by beginning with Avery Dulles, S.J. More work needs to be done, for example, in understanding how his own conversion from the atheism of his college days at Harvard⁵¹ has affected his soteriology and ecumenical dealings, especially with evangelicals. Work is being done on his influence on the ECT document itself.⁵²

The inclusivism allowed by Vatican II has oriented Roman Catholic soteriology and their major theologians. Evangelicals who are in dialogue with Roman Catholics, and who hold to

⁵⁰Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma*, 51.

⁵¹On his conversion experience see his “Coming Home,” in *Where I Found Christ*, ed. by John A. O’Brien (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960), 63-81 and his *A Testimonial to Grace*, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1946).

⁵²Tim L. Anderson, “The Church, Ecumenism and Doctrinal Agreement: The Influence of Avery Dulles on the ECT Document,” (Unpublished paper, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1996).

exclusivism and reject Semi-Pelagian anthropologies cannot afford to ignore the active and prolific Dulles and men like him.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Tim L. "The Church, Ecumenism and Doctrinal Agreement: The Influence of Avery Dulles on the ECT Document," Unpublished paper, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1996.
- Colson, Charles and Neuhaus, Richard John eds. *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995)
- Dulles, Avery. *A Testimonial to Grace*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1946.
- _____. *Apologetics and the Biblical Christ*, Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1967.
- _____. "Coming Home," in *Where I Found Christ*, ed. by John A. O'Brien Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960, 63-81.
- _____. "Fundamental Theology and the Dynamics of Conversion," *The Thomist* 45 (April 1981), 175-193.
- _____. *Models of the Church*, Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1974, revised edition 1987.
- _____. *Revelation and the Quest for Unity*, Washington D.C.: Corpus Books, 1968.
- _____. *The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- _____. *The Craft of Theology*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992.
- _____. *The Reshaping of Catholicism: Current Challenges in the Theology of the Church*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1988.
- _____. *The Survival of Dogma: Faith, Authority, and Dogma in a Changing World*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982.
- _____. "Vatican II and the American Experience of Church," in

Vatican II: Open Questions and New Horizons, edited by Gerald M. Fagin, S.J., Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984, 32-57.

_____. "Vatican II and the Purpose of the Church," *Theology Digest* 32 (Winter 1985), 341-352.

Kirmse, Anne-Marie Rose. "The Church and the churches: A Study of Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Developments in the Writings of Avery Dulles, S.J." Ph.D. Diss., Fordham University, 1989.