

**SYMPOSIUM: JOHN COURTNEY'S MURRAY'S
WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS AT 50**

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Introduction

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Whether rightly so or not, *We Hold These Truths* is the most famous work of a man who is arguably the most important thinker produced by American Catholicism. Born in New York City in 1904, John Courtney Murray entered the Society of Jesus in 1920, was ordained to the priesthood in 1933, and received his doctorate in Theology from Gregorian University in 1936. He joined the faculty of Woodstock College that same year, and in 1941 he assumed the editorship of *Theological Studies*, the Jesuits' scholarly journal, holding both positions until his death in 1967.

Murray was a prolific writer, but the heart of his scholarship is found in a series of articles he wrote beginning in the mid-1940s exploring Catholic teaching on church-state relations and religious freedom.¹ In these articles, Murray sought to renew Church teaching on these questions by disengaging the transtemporal principles governing Catholic thinking on these subjects from historically conditioned efforts to apply them in different political and cultural contexts. These articles played a critical role in laying the intellectual groundwork for the far-reaching development in Catholic teaching on the nature and scope of religious freedom in civil society that crystallized in the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*), a document in whose drafting he actively participated as a *peritus* at the Council.²

Murray's interests, however, were not limited to this subject. He wrote widely on a number of other subjects, most notably about the relationship between Catholicism and what he sometimes called "the American proposition." These writings included reflections on the

intellectual commitments undergirding the American democratic experiment and the compatibility of these commitments with the principles of Catholic faith and morality; the problem of religious pluralism, the “new American solution” to this problem, and the Catholic view of this solution; the difficulties facing American democracy, and the nature and origins of the crisis that he believed confronted it; and the possible contribution of the Catholic intellectual tradition to the articulation of a public philosophy capable of renewing American democracy. *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* consists of a selection of these writings.³

By the late 1950s, if Murray’s writings on Catholic teaching on church-state relations and religious freedom had established him as a major figure in the internal Catholic doctrinal debate on these subjects, his articles and lectures on “the American proposition” had established him as an important presence on the American intellectual scene. The appearance of *We Hold These Truths* in the fall of 1960 brought his work to the attention of a broader audience, and solidified Murray’s position as American Catholicism’s leading public intellectual, as the leading Catholic interpreter of the American democratic experiment and commentator on the state of American public life. It was no accident that when, in December 1960, in the aftermath of John F. Kennedy’s election, *Time* magazine featured a lengthy article on “U.S. Catholics and the State,” its cover featured a portrait of John Courtney Murray.⁴

Coinciding as it did with the election of our first Catholic president, and profoundly influencing both the self-understanding and cultural orientation of American Catholicism and American society’s broader understanding of the relationship of Catholicism to the American project, the publication of *We Hold These Truths* must be seen as a watershed in American Catholic history. It should be stressed, however, that *We Hold These Truths* is not a work of merely historical interest. Today, some fifty years after its original publication, if *We Hold These Truths* is occasionally dismissed as hopelessly passé, it nevertheless remains an essential point of reference in American Catholic thought, a work that continues to attract attention from a wide and politically and theologically diverse range of thinkers. The reason why is not mysterious: Although consisting of a series of “occasional papers” and disavowing any “pretense of completeness” in addressing its topic, *We Hold These Truths* is simultaneously an original reflection on some enduring questions of political order by one of the twentieth century’s most important interpreters and developers of the Thomistic tradition in political theory; and a highly sophisticated reflection—

perhaps the most intellectually sophisticated reflection to date—on the relationship between Catholicism and the American experiment in self-government and ordered liberty.

From the fact that *We Hold These Truths* continues to engage the American Catholic mind, however, it does not follow that a consensus exists about either its proper interpretation or the persuasiveness of its argument (however understood). In fact, its far-reaching and unsystematic character and the complex and nuanced nature of its argument make *We Hold These Truths* a difficult book to interpret, and an ongoing debate rages today about its teaching and implications for the cultural posture that should be assumed by American Catholics. And, if today a wide range of thinkers occupying disparate locations on the theological and political spectrums seek to wrap themselves in Murray's mantle—seeing in *We Hold These Truths* an unequalled starting point for Catholic engagement with what it called America's "civil conversation"—an equally diverse range of thinkers criticize the argument of *We Hold These Truths*, contending that its defects are responsible, at least in part, for some of the problems that have afflicted American Catholicism in the decades since its publication.

In 2010, the Society of Catholic Social Scientists sponsored two panels in conjunction with the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *We Hold These Truths*: a roundtable discussion in Washington, D.C. at the 2010 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, and a second roundtable at the Society's own 2010 Meeting at Holy Cross College near South Bend, Indiana. Their purpose was to explore the argument, historical impact, and relevance of *We Hold These Truths*. The essays composing this symposium are based on presentations delivered at these events.

I wish to thank the contributors for their willingness both to participate in the roundtables and to contribute to this symposium. It is my hope that these essays contribute in some small measure to the ongoing discussion of a book that has had a profound influence on the world of American Catholicism.

Notes

1. Unfortunately, these articles as a whole have never been collected in book form. For an annotated bibliography of these articles, see Murray, *Religious Liberty: Catholic Struggles with Pluralism*, ed. J. Leon Hooper (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 27-39. This volume contains three of the later articles in this series, as well as an earlier article that was not published in Murray's lifetime. Readers should be aware, however, that Hooper's interpretation of Murray's thought is, to put it mildly, controversial. See Robert P. Hunt, review of *The Ethics of Discourse: The Social Philosophy of John Courtney Murray* by J. Leon Hooper, *Journal of Law and Religion* 7, 1 & 2 (1990): 485-490; and "The Quest for the Historical Murray," in *Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Moral Foundations of Democracy*, ed. Kenneth L. Grasso, Gerard V. Bradley, and Robert P. Hunt (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 197-218. For an overview of Murray's life and thought, see Donald E. Pelotte, S.S.S., *John Courtney Murray: Theologian in Conflict* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975).

2. For a recent set of essays exploring the significance of the Declaration and the issues surrounding it, see *Catholicism and Religious Freedom: Contemporary Reflections on Vatican's II's Declaration on Religious Freedom*, ed. Kenneth L. Grasso and Robert P. Hunt (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). For the writing of the Declaration and Murray's role in it, see Richard J. Regan, *Conflict and Consensus: Religious Freedom and the Vatican Council* (New York: MacMillan, 1967). Although he played a prominent role in its drafting, Murray harbored reservations about the Declaration's account of the foundations of the right it affirmed. For Murray's own account of the Declaration's drafting and concerns about its argument, see Murray, "Preface" and "The Declaration on Religious Liberty: A Moment in Its Legislative History," in *Religious Liberty: An End and a Beginning*, ed. John Courtney Murray, S.J. (New York: MacMillan, 1966), 7-11, 15-42; and "Arguments for the Human Right to Religious Liberty," in *Religious Liberty: Catholic Struggles with Pluralism*, 229-244. For an account of a private conversation in which Murray expressed his reservations, see Francis Canavan, "Murray on Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom," *Communio* 9, 4 (1982): 404-405. While *We Hold These Truths* is today Murray's most famous and widely cited work, given the amount of time and energy he devoted to them, their intellectual depth, and the far-reaching influence on the Church's social magisterium they have exerted, his writings on church-state relations and religious

freedom are beyond any question the most important part of his work: They have had the most far-reaching influence and are the key to understanding his political theory.

3. *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960; Lanham, MD: reprint, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). John Quinn's contribution to this symposium explains the genesis of *We Hold These Truths*. For a brief overview of Murray's thinking on "the American proposition," see Robert W. McElroy, *The Search for an American Public Theology: The Contribution of John Courtney Murray* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989). For helpful collections addressing this aspect of Murray's work, see *John Courtney Murray and the American Civil Conversation*, ed. Robert P. Hunt and Kenneth L. Grasso (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992); *We Hold These Truths and More: Further Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition/The Thought of Fr. John Courtney Murray and Its Relevance Today*, ed. Donald J. D'Elia and Stephen M. Krason (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1993); and *John Courtney Murray and the Growth of Tradition*, ed. J. Leon Hooper S.J. and Todd David Whitmore (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1996). The most complete bibliography of Murray's writings to date can be accessed at http://woodstock.georgetown.edu/library/Murray/0_murraybibhtml

4. Douglas Auchincloss, "U.S. Catholics and the State," *Time*, 12 December 1960, 64-70.

