

## The Enduring Influence of *We Hold These Truths*

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*John Courtney Murray's landmark work, We Hold These Truths, was conceived and brought into being by the editors of Sheed & Ward, who wanted to bring Murray's work to a broad cross-section of America. When it first appeared, the book was reviewed favorably in both religious and secular journals. Political conservatives were particularly enthusiastic about its defense of natural law principles and its opposition to secularism. By the late 1960s, liberal Catholics interested in legalizing abortion began citing its distinctions between public and private morality. In the 1980s, neoconservative Catholic thinkers embraced the book for much the same reason that conservatives had endorsed it in 1960. While many other Catholic thinkers on both the left and right have grown more critical of the work in recent years, neoconservatives have remained its most dedicated adherents.*

Fifty years have now passed since the publication of Jesuit Father John Courtney Murray's landmark book, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*. The book had not come about through Murray's initiative, and it included no original essays from him. Instead, it was the brainchild of the editors of the Catholic publishing house, Sheed & Ward, who sought to reprint some of Murray's key articles and bring them before a wide cross-section of the American public for the first time. Before the book's appearance, Murray was, according to one reviewer, "probably for most Americans a mystery figure, more talked about than heard, more quoted than read."<sup>1</sup>

The book sold briskly and was hailed by most secular and religious reviewers as a major scholarly achievement. A Doubleday Image paperback edition was released in 1964, but the book went out of print in the 1970s. By then, many progressive Catholics judged it dated in light of the dramatic changes ushered into the Catholic Church as a result of Vatican II. By the 1980s, *We Hold These Truths* had been rediscovered and Sheed & Ward brought out a new edition. In the years since, it has continued to attract notice from Catholic scholars; and in 2005 Rowman & Littlefield—which purchased the Sheed & Ward imprint in 2002—issued another edition of the book, prompting yet another round of scholarly appraisals.

## I

A member of the faculty of Woodstock College, the Jesuits' premier American school of theology, and editor of *Theological Studies*, Murray by the mid-1950s was seen as one of American Catholicism's most important voices on church-state issues. In 1957, Philip Scharper, the new editor-in-chief at Sheed & Ward and a former Jesuit seminarian who studied under Murray at Woodstock College, invited Murray to contribute to a book the press was planning to publish about the moral evaluation of films. Murray politely declined, citing his many obligations.<sup>2</sup> The following year Scharper appealed to him to produce a book on the making of the Catholic mind, but Murray again declined.<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 1959, Frank Sheed, the publisher of Sheed & Ward, met with Murray and asked him to bring out a book on American pluralism. Murray was receptive and noted that such a book could serve as a "primer of pluralism, paying special attention to the dilemmas posed to and by Catholics in a pluralistic society."<sup>4</sup> Scharper wrote telling Murray how "personally and professionally delighted" he was at the prospect of working with him on the book. Along with his letter, Scharper enclosed an outline that he described as "extremely tentative . . . and designed only to serve you as a convenience."<sup>5</sup>

In December 1959, Scharper mentioned to Murray that "Mr. Sheed has told me to 'keep after' you about your manuscript but his editorial courage is greater than mine . . . I will be happy for whatever comes, when it comes."<sup>6</sup> As the months passed, however, Scharper became more involved in producing the book.<sup>7</sup> He helped select the essays for the book and suggested a title: *The American Experiment and the Catholic Experience*.<sup>8</sup> The book incorporated revised versions of thirteen of Murray's essays originally published between 1950 and 1958; the topics ranged from more abstract matters such as the proper understanding of the First Amendment's religion clauses, to public policy issues such as aid to parochial schools. In July, Scharper sent the manuscript to a sympathetic censor in Burlington, Vermont, and within two weeks an *imprimatur* had been secured even though Murray had included a section defending America's constitutional provisions regarding church-state separation.<sup>9</sup>

In September, Scharper informed Murray that the book was ready to go to print. He was pleased to report that it had been selected as the Thomas More Club's Book of the Month for October and that the initial print run would be 14,000 copies, which was "not bad for a Catholic publisher!"<sup>10</sup> Murray, for his part, was quite appreciative of all the help that he had received, and in the Foreword acknowledged the assistance he had been given:

There is, however, one editorial debt that may not be overlooked. It is owed to Mr. Frank Sheed and Sheed & Ward's gifted editor, Mr. Philip Scharper. The existence of this book, and therefore any usefulness it may have, are due to them. Not only to their interest, but also their talent for tactful harassment. The author's need of *vires a tergo*<sup>11</sup> measures his gratitude which is therefore great.<sup>12</sup>

## II

Murray's book appeared in late October just days before the presidential election and reviews began to appear immediately. John Cogley, a friend of Murray's, gave a thorough and largely positive account of it for the *New York Times*.<sup>13</sup> While declaring that *We Hold These Truths* was "probably the most significant Roman Catholic statement on American democracy ever published," Cogley qualified his praise by expressing reservations about those essays of Murray's which dealt with current political concerns: "The book's treatment of state aid for parochial schools . . . and the morality of modern war sometimes struck me as particularly lacking in the sense of the real, or at least the realistic." Murray was a strong advocate of aid to Catholic schools and a stalwart anti-communist. A liberal Catholic, Cogley noted that Murray was in fact quite conservative: "The proud name of conservative has been put to some odd uses in recent years. . . . If that were not so, I would not be hesitant in saying that *We Hold These Truths* represents a major conservative statement on the meaning of America."<sup>14</sup>

The following month it was reviewed in *Commonweal* by Daniel Callahan, a young progressive Catholic who had become friendly with Murray in the early 1950s when Murray held a visiting professorship at Yale.<sup>15</sup> Callahan amplified some of the points that Cogley had made:

This collection shows that those writers most decisive in shaping Father Murray's political theory are representatives of the American neo-conservative tradition. . . . Doubtless there is some sense in referring to Father Murray as a 'liberal' Catholic—as long as one keeps in mind that he vigorously rejects almost all of the philosophical premises of traditional liberalism. Given these intellectual roots, it is not surprising that Father Murray should be scornful, even sarcastic, of the view that society can be sustained by a pragmatic or relativistic system of values. He states quite bluntly, for one thing, that 'the

American proposition rests on the more traditional conviction that there are truths; that they can be known; that they must be held; for if they are not held . . . there can be no hope of founding a true City, in which men may dwell in dignity, peace, unity, justice, well-being, freedom.’<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, conservative scholars were even more effusive in their reviews. William F. Buckley, who also had come to know Murray at Yale, wrote a breezy and reverential analysis for the *National Review*.<sup>17</sup> In his review, Buckley lavished praise on Murray describing him as “a man with commanding knowledge and piercing intuition” whose “analysis...leave[s] the reader stunned with admiration and pleasure.” Like Cogley and Callahan, Buckley viewed *We Hold These Truths* as an essentially conservative work: “[There is] enough to give true conservatives great nourishment, but not so much as to suggest he holds the Liberals to be unredeemable—that would be unpriestly.” In support of this view, Buckley pointed to Murray’s staunch opposition to communism and his call for the recovery of the natural law principles articulated by the Founders.<sup>18</sup>

A more scholarly, but equally favorable review appeared in *Modern Age*, a conservative quarterly founded by Russell Kirk in 1957. (One of the essays in *We Hold These Truths* had first appeared in *Modern Age* and Murray credited the journal in his acknowledgements.) Willmoore Kendall, the reviewer, had taught political science at Yale and so he was acquainted with Murray also.<sup>19</sup> Kendall was thrilled with Murray’s intellectual achievement:

Hitherto, the task of pronouncing dead and ready for burial the “movements”—liberalism, positivism, scientism, scientific humanism—that even today dominate the . . . American universities, has been left to men of distinctively European formation, and it is good that we should at last be able to point to a fellow countryman who can take good care of himself . . . on this level of controversy.

Kendall was left with a few questions. He was not sure that the American Founders were as free from John Locke’s influence as Murray had claimed and wondered whether natural law on its own could serve as the basis for civil society. Still, he ended with a commendation:

Here, in a word, is a book long overdue for those American conservatives who find themselves, nowadays, hard put to . . .

say what it is in the American political system that they should be trying to conserve, and what it is in the present American environment that accounts for their (eminently justified) apprehensions as to whether its conservation is any longer possible.<sup>20</sup>

If political conservatives applauded Murray's book, theological conservatives were not nearly as impressed. Monsignor Joseph Fenton of the Catholic University of America addressed the book quite critically in an article on church-state relations that appeared in the *American Ecclesiastical Review*. He acknowledged the allure of Murray's arguments:

Certainly it would be more fashionable on the part of the Church . . . to speak and to write as if the Church, objectively, had no right to anything more than freedom from oppression on the part of the various states that make up the world society in which we live. Likewise it would please liberals both outside of and within the Church's membership if the magisterium could teach that, in these enlightened days, a truly democratic state has no objective obligation or ideal higher than that of granting true liberty to the Catholic Church and to all the other religious organizations within its borders.

While this might seem like a clever tactic, Fenton insisted that "it would be a rejection of the Church's own commission and obligation. It would be a contradiction of basic truths the Church is meant to teach and to guard until the end of time."<sup>21</sup>

A conservative Jesuit, M. Joseph Costelloe, also expressed serious reservations. Evaluating the book for the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, Costelloe acknowledged that Murray had presented his arguments about the importance of natural law with "clarity and precision." Like Cogley, however, Costelloe was not as impressed by Murray's treatment of contemporary political issues. He focused in particular on Murray's chapter on censorship, where he criticized Connecticut's law against birth control devices and drugs saying it revealed a "characteristic Comstockian-Protestant ignorance of the rules of traditional jurisprudence."<sup>22</sup> He took a similarly libertarian approach with respect to obscene publications. While granting parents the right to determine what their children read, Murray saw little role for the government to intervene—unless the pornography involved violent images.

For Costelloe, this was simply not enough:

The moral of all this seems to be that today when books that have been banned not only in Ireland and Spain but also in Canada, Australia . . . and even France, can be bought at almost any corner drug store, it is high time that we forget the old bromide of American “Puritanism” and join forces in opposing something more than the “pornography of violence.”

Costelloe further noted that Justice William O. Douglas had approvingly quoted from Murray’s chapter in his January 1961 dissent in a case involving film censorship.<sup>23</sup>

The impact of *We Hold These Truths* (in conjunction with his role at the Second Vatican Council) established Murray as perhaps American Catholicism’s most influential thinker. In 1965, Cardinal Richard Cushing of Boston solicited Murray’s views on a Massachusetts statute forbidding the sale of contraceptives. By that time, Massachusetts was the only state other than Connecticut which forbade such sales, and Cushing had concluded that the statute was outdated, a relic from another time. Murray responded with a lengthy memo stating that “Catholics may and should” support the bill. As contraception was widely practiced and not considered wrong by many religious leaders in the state, it was difficult for authorities to enforce the law. In his view, moreover, contraception involved private morality and was therefore “beyond the scope of law.” Cushing followed Murray’s line of argument almost verbatim when he testified before the state legislature, and shortly thereafter the law was repealed.<sup>24</sup>

In 1967, *We Hold These Truths* was invoked by a prominent Jesuit supporter of liberalized abortion laws, Father Robert Drinan, then the Dean of Boston College Law School. Earlier that year, Drinan had called for the legalization of abortion in “hard cases” (rape, incest and defects in the child); by the fall of 1967 he was calling for the repeal of all laws against abortion. In support of this claim, Drinan quoted from Murray’s censorship essay: “Law seeks to establish and maintain only that minimum of actualized morality that is necessary for the healthy functioning of the social order. It does not look to what is morally desirable or attempt to remove every moral taint from the atmosphere of society.”<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Drinan made clear that he considered abortion to be morally wrong.<sup>26</sup> One can only guess how Murray would have viewed his confrere’s statements on abortion, because Murray had passed away that summer.

### III

Within a decade of Murray's death, progressive Catholics took a new look at his writings and determined that they needed considerable updating. Father John Coleman of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, for example, had hoped to draw on Murray in promoting a theology of liberation for North America. However, he was disappointed at Murray's failure to employ biblical images in his writings. Coleman wanted scholars to employ the Scriptures—as Latin American liberation theologians had done—to remind people of their obligation to promote justice and charity for the poor and oppressed among them. Instead, Murray had embraced a natural law approach, thinking it would suit America's pluralistic society. In reality, though, Murray's understanding of natural law had theological dimensions to it: "to non-Catholic eyes, the natural law has often seemed more Catholic than natural."<sup>27</sup> Finally, Coleman expressed dismay at Murray's priorities. Murray, he believed, had privileged freedom over justice and saw only a minimal role for the state.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1980s, Father Richard McBrien of the University of Notre Dame addressed Murray's work in his study of church-state relations, *Caesar's Coin: Religion and Politics in America*. A more mainstream liberal than Coleman, McBrien had little interest in liberation theology and was not disturbed by Murray's libertarian tendencies. Like Coleman, however, he concluded that much of *We Hold These Truths* was dated. In *Caesar's Coin*, McBrien declared that he was "attempting . . . to update and move beyond the extraordinary achievement of Murray's work . . . now that we find ourselves in a universe of moral, religious and political discourse so different from his own."<sup>29</sup>

His misgivings notwithstanding, McBrien drew extensively on Murray in his chapter analyzing the controversy surrounding abortion. Recounting Governor Mario Cuomo's speech at Notre Dame where he had claimed that he was "personally opposed" to abortion but did not want to limit legal access to it, McBrien invoked Murray in Cuomo's defense. Like Drinan before him, McBrien cited Murray's essay on censorship in *We Hold These Truths*. Civil law, he quotes Murray as saying,

enforces only what is minimally acceptable, and in this case socially necessary. Beyond this society must look to other institutions for the elevation and maintenance of its moral standards—that is, to the church, the home, the school and the

whole network of voluntary associations that concern themselves with public morality in one or another aspect.

McBrien then added a postscript of his own: “In other words, even if the law cannot help, society is not bereft of resources in the fight against abortion.”<sup>30</sup>

As McBrien was invoking Murray in support of his views, neoconservatives were looking to Murray as well. In 1984, Richard John Neuhaus, a Lutheran minister and former 1960s radical, published *The Naked Public Square*. Neuhaus argued that mainline Protestantism had unraveled in America and left a vacuum that secularists were trying to fill. Characterizing the secularists’ views as “exceedingly dangerous,” Neuhaus invoked Murray in support of his claim that “the democratic reality could not be sustained on narrow secular grounds.”<sup>31</sup> Three years later, in *The Catholic Moment*, Neuhaus, still a Lutheran pastor at the time, contended that it was the Catholic Church with its emphasis on natural law that was poised to take on the role once played by mainline Protestantism.<sup>32</sup> In this work, he made even more references to Murray’s work and for the first time began to speak of the “Murray Project.” He said that Murray’s “emphasis on realism and virtue . . . found expression in the ‘American Proposition’ and could be uniquely sustained by philosophical insights drawn from the classical Christian tradition, especially in its Roman Catholic form.”<sup>33</sup>

George Weigel has put forward similar view in his writings. In *Catholicism and the Renewal of American Democracy* (1989), Weigel lauded Murray as the “most eminent theorist of the American experiment.”<sup>34</sup> Arguing that American Catholicism was deeply divided between radicals associated with the *National Catholic Reporter* and the reactionaries of *The Wanderer*, Weigel contended that Murray’s work could help bridge the divide. Murray would have recognized the increasing danger the nation faced from secularism, but he would not have wanted to adopt the “fortress mentality” favored by many Catholic traditionalists. In his more recent writings, Weigel has continued to look to Murray as a guide for the Church in America and throughout the world.<sup>35</sup>

While Neuhaus and Weigel have hailed Murray, other conservative Catholics have been more critical. David Schindler, for example, maintains that in his efforts to safeguard freedom, Murray tended to separate it from all other goods, including truth. With respect to the First Amendment, Schindler argues that Murray stressed religious believers’ freedoms from government interference to such an extent that he saw little role for the state in promoting religion. He thus

unintentionally contributed to the privatization of religion and the secularization of society.<sup>36</sup>

#### IV

Despite its odd provenance, *We Hold These Truths* has exerted a significant influence on American Catholic thinkers ever since its publication five decades ago. In recent years, scholars have tended to view it more critically than those who reviewed it upon its initial release. Both progressives such as Coleman and conservatives such as Schindler fault it for what they perceive to be its overemphasis on freedom. On the other hand, McBrien and Weigel appreciate Murray's defense of liberty. For McBrien, Murray is a useful ally against social conservatives who want to ban abortion and other practices that they consider immoral. For Weigel, Murray's defense of religious liberty and limited government is of critical importance for Catholic neoconservatives who seek to battle secularism and statism at home and totalitarianism abroad. However they view Murray's book, Catholic scholars have found that *We Hold These Truths* is a work that they cannot ignore.

## Notes

1. Daniel Callahan, "The Compatibility of American Pluralism and Catholicism," *Commonweal*, November 25, 1960, 232.
2. Scharper to Murray, June 3, 1957, and Murray to Scharper June, 14, 1957, Sheed & Ward Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, Notre Dame, IN (hereafter SWP-UNDA).
3. Scharper to Murray, April 25, 1958, and Murray to Scharper, May 3, 1958, SWP-UNDA.
4. Quoted in Donald Pelotte, S.S.S. *John Courtney Murray: Theologian in Conflict* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 75.
5. Scharper to Murray, May 8, 1959, SWP-UNDA.
6. Scharper to Murray, December 16, 1959, SWP-UNDA.
7. Scharper's son Stephen claims that his father chose the essays and edited them. See Stephen Bede Scharper, "Philip J. Scharper and the Editorial Vocation: Publishing Ideas of Consequence," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 21 (Summer 2003): 26.
8. For the tentative title, see Scharper to Murray, March 22, 1960, Box 8, Folder 648, John Courtney Murray Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Divisions, Washington, DC.
9. Scharper to Rev. Barry Fontaine, July 12, 1960, and Scharper to Murray, August 5, 1960, SWP-UNDA.
10. Scharper to Murray, Sept 15, 1960, SWP-UNDA.
11. A force from behind.
12. John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), xii.
13. Cogley describes Murray as "a close friend" in his Oral History Interview, February 28, 1968, UNDA.
14. John Cogley, "Catholic Tradition and American Present," *New York Times*, October 30, 1960.
15. For Callahan's friendship with Murray, see Philip Gleason, *Contending With Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 280.
16. Callahan, "The Compatibility of American Pluralism and Catholicism," 232-33.
17. For Buckley's friendship with Murray, see Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950-1985* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 37.
18. William F. Buckley, "Nihil Obstat," *National Review*, January 28, 1961, 56-57.
19. For Kendall's friendship with Murray, see Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, "John Courtney Murray: The Optimism of the 1950s," in *We Hold These*

*Truths and More: Further Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, ed. Donald J. D'Elia and Stephen Krason (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1993), 20.

20. Willmoore Kendall, "Natural Law and 'Natural Right,'" *Modern Age* 6 (Winter 1961-62): 94, 96.

21. Joseph C. Fenton, "Doctrine and Tactic in Catholic Pronouncements on Church and State," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 145 (October 1961): 275.

22. Murray, 157. Anthony Comstock (d 1915) was a Protestant postal official who campaigned for anti-obscenity legislation.

23. M. Joseph Costelloe, SJ, "Father Murray's 'Reflections,'" *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 61 (May 1961): 812.

24. See Seth Meehan, "From Patriotism to Pluralism: How Catholics Initiated the Repeal of Birth Control Restrictions in Massachusetts," *Catholic Historical Review* 96 (July 2010): 495.

25. Quoted in Daniel Callahan, *Abortion: Law, Choice and Morality* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 446 n.72. Drinan is quoting from Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 166.

26. See Callahan, *Abortion*, 437.

27. John Coleman, SJ, "A Possible Role for Biblical Religion in Public Life," *Theological Studies* 40 (December 1979): 706.

28. For a similar critique of Murray, see David Hollenbach, SJ, "Public Theology in America: Some Questions for Catholicism after John Courtney Murray," *Theological Studies* 37 (June 1976): 290-303.

29. Richard P. McBrien, *Caesar's Coin: Religion and Politics in America* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), x. For his characterization of *We Hold These Truths* as being dated, see page 285.

30. McBrien, *Caesar's Coin*, 165. He is quoting from Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 166.

31. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), vii, 201.

32. Neuhaus was received into the Catholic Church in 1990 and ordained in 1991.

33. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 251.

34. George Weigel, *Catholicism and the Renewal of American Democracy* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 27.

35. See, for example, George Weigel, "The Neoconservative Difference: A Proposal for the Renewal of Church and Society," in *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver and Scott Appleby (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1995), 138-162; and "Truths Still Held?" *First Things* (May 2010): 41-47.

36. See David L. Schindler, "Religious Freedom, Truth and American Liberalism: Another Look at John Courtney Murray," *Communio* 21 (Winter 1994): 696-741.