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Book Reviews: Struggle, Condemnation, Vindication: John Courtenay Murray's Journey toward Vatican II, Barry Hudock

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Barry Hudock

Struggle, Condemnation, Vindication: John Courtenay Murray's Journey toward Vatican II (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015). 216 pp. \$AU19.95

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At John Courtenay Murray's funeral in August 1967, homilist Walter Burghardt SJ cited Murray's own words: 'Courage! It's far more important than intelligence.' Providentially, for the Catholic Church and beyond, generous servings of these two qualities have been given to Murray – Jesuit priest, theologian and innovative thinker. The statement itself is an apt epigraph for both the man and Hudock's book.

These days, even if we don't know of Murray, we generally assume what he struggled to achieve. His ideas, honed through scholarly debate, were espoused at the magisterial level and ultimately informed Vatican II's 1965 document on religious freedom. Perhaps relevant here are George Weigel's remarks concerning St. John Paul II, namely, that his actions raised serious questions about the idea of historical inevitability. Things can be changed. There are humane ways to 'bend the curve of history' (Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, 9). There is a measure of truth in this statement that could apply equally to John Courtenay Murray.

This book's title captures its trajectory and purpose. The first two thirds of the study explore Murray's theological 'struggle' and 'condemnation' prior to the Council. In a tale of jousting in theological journals, Murray's main combatants were fellow American theologians Joseph Clifford Fenton and Francis J Connell. Progressively, the contest of ideas and arguments became interwoven with political and ecclesiastical intrigue. Enter from stage right, Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani. In July 1955, Rome forbade Murray to write on 'Church-State' matters. Earlier that decade, Henri du Lubac and Yves Congar, with other Jesuits and Dominicans, were silenced.

The 'vindication' phase commenced with John XXIII's pontificate and plans for an Ecumenical Council. Murray published his landmark work *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* in 1960. In early 1963, Murray was appointed an

expert (*peritus*) at Vatican II, at the request of Cardinal Francis Spellman. With the support of United States Bishops and others, e.g., Bishop Emile de Smedt of Bruges, debate (and the refining) of *Dignitatis Humanae* continued for two years until its final Council approval in December 1965. Yves Congar's emphatic *Journal* comment on the 'tremendous applause' from the Bishops when de Smedt introduced the original text two years earlier was now fully realized and this was 'a DECISIVE moment in the life of the Church AND OF THE WORLD' (127).

Hudock, using short chapters and a fast-moving style, demonstrates control of his material in guiding us through key issues and debates. Such matters were not about theological nit-picking. They had the *gravitas* associated with ideas that change people's lives and institutions. 'Battle-lines' was not an inappropriate phrase.

The author skillfully distils the evolution of Murray's thought, from its fifth century Gelasian foundations, about what is permanent teaching and what is historically conditioned (chapters 5-7). Concerning Church and State, there was an 'in-house' Catholic terminology, namely, 'thesis/hypothesis'. In the accepted view, the 'thesis' (or ideal) was the 'confessional state' where governments recognized Catholicism's unique status yet could place restrictions on other denominations. With the 'hypothesis' (or the exception, namely, a particular historical situation, where the Church was in a minority, for example in the USA), freedom of religion was a needed accommodation. Murray viewed the thesis/hypothesis approach not as firm doctrine but as 'received opinion' (17). He disagreed with its underlying assumptions, namely, that there existed 'exclusive rights of truth' and that 'error has no rights'. For Murray, rights could 'predicated only of persons (or of institutions)' (35, 133).

Church-State relations were not the only matters under question. At stake was the Church's own self-understanding, particularly in its stance toward the modern world, shaped by the Enlightenment and post-revolutionary Europe. This applied, most especially, to human and political rights. Central for Murray (and others), was the need for the Church to engage with, and learn from, democratic institutions since, with their emergence, the civil order 'grew up' (45). They provide the context where the worth of persons together with the shared and conscientious pursuit of truth and the common good are best realized.

This study is well-researched, sure-footed and clearly written. It is a 'popular' book, aimed at the undergraduate or non-academic but interested reader. The author observes, 'this is one hell of a story' (xxiii), a drama needing to be told so that Murray and his contribution are not forgotten by a younger generation. It offers helpful resources, a list of relevant writings by Murray and other scholars; a time-line of his life and key events plus a helpful index.

It is for others to advance on earlier scholarly work (e.g., of Donald Pelotte, Joseph Komonchak etc.) and assess Murray's thought in the light of the past fifty years. This is especially the case today where religious liberty for Christians is under serious threat, for example in the Middle East and on the African continent. Also, the Church's moral authority has been seriously diminished by issues such as sexual abuse. Finally, today's catch-cry often goes beyond 'freedom of religion' to 'freedom *from* religion'. In such a context, how would 'courageous' and 'intelligent' John Courtenay Murray respond? We are indebted to Barry Hudock for this accessible, timely, and, overall, engaging book.