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Dahlke, Benjamin: *Katholische Theologie in den USA*. Freiburg i. Br.: Herder 2024. 262 S., geb. € 39,00 ISBN: 9783451397769

German Catholic theologian *Benjamin Dahlke* published this book before the election of Robert Francis Prevost to the papacy on May 8, 2025: since the conclave the book has become more relevant. The fact that Leo XIV is the first pope from the USA compels all those who want to understand his background and formation in the USA, to know more about American Catholic theology and its trajectories.

In the first chapter, “Katholische Theologie im Horizont amerikanischer Kultur, Geschichte und Politik” (9–28), the author provides the reader with an overview of the context in which Catholicism flourished in the USA in the last century, especially since 1945—from Cold War America to the sex abuse crisis in the early 2000s. Chapter two, “Institutionelle Voraussetzungen katholischer Theologie in den USA” (29–68), looks at the changes in the size and role of Catholic colleges and universities with graduate schools, and how this affected and is affecting the type of careers in academic theology; the situation of the seminaries and houses of studies of religious orders, with all the financial and legal constraints that come with operating in the very competitive market of higher education in the USA today. (It should be noted that the book could not take into account the changes for Catholic higher education brought about by the policies of the second Trump administration inaugurated in January 2025.)

Chapter three, “Mit Karl Rahner über die Neuscholastik hinaus. Aneignung und Fortschreibung Deutscher Theologie in den USA” (69–82), is the shortest but also the most particular. It highlights the importance of the translations of Rahner into English (in the USA) and explains the reasons for the interest in Rahner: the departure from the neo-scholastic system that has been so influential, in different ways, since the early 20th century and until the 1970s.¹ For a comparison, it is interesting to look at the effects of the translations of the writings of Joseph Ratzinger (well before the election to the papacy) in the USA, which Dahlke mentions towards the end of the book.

Chapter four, “Unterwegs zu einer American Catholic Theology. Suchbewegungen nach dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil” (83–108), analyzes the role of the most important US Catholic theologian in the middle of the 20th century, the Jesuit John Courtney Murray, well known also for his impact on the development of the doctrine of religious liberty at Vatican II. Murray was the American Catholic theologian for a Catholic Church “with complete ease” in the national moral and political consensus – that is, before the arrival on the scene of the hot-button issues, especially *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 and the legalization of abortion in 1973 (Murray died in 1967 at the age of 63).

¹ See Florian MICHEL: *La pensée catholique en Amérique du Nord. Réseaux intellectuels et échanges culturels entre l'Europe, le Canada et les États-Unis (années 1920–1960)*. Paris 2010.

After Murray, Dahlke looks at the new advances in American Catholic Theology (Robert Schreiter, Roger Haight).

Chapter five, “Konflikte zwischen kirchlichem Lehramt und akademischer Theologie” (109–134), lists some of the most famous cases of ecclesiastical and Vatican attempts to investigate and intervene on US Catholic theologians for their publications and public statements: Charles Curran about Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae*, Elizabeth Johnson for her book *The Quest for the Living God* (New York 2007), and Roger Haight for his *Christology*. It is very true for Catholic theology in the USA (maybe less for other Catholic Churches around the world) that “[e]ine Theologie, die zugleich amerikanisch und katholisch sein will, muss offenbar mit solchen Konflikten rechnen, ohne dass sie sich notwendigerweise einstellen” (134).

Chapter six, “Wahrer Gott und Wahrer Mensch? Katholische Beiträge zur historischen Jesusforschung” (135–163), analyzes the problem of the acceptance of the historical-critical method in US Catholic academia and the *Jesusforschung* after Vatican II in America. The case of Scott Hahn is deservedly mentioned as representative of a new wave of academic theologians who converted to Catholicism in the last few decades. His response against the historical-critical method has been widely received by the new generations of Catholic clergy. It is a sea change from the time when scholars such as Raymond Brown (1928–1998) represented American Catholic biblical scholarship.

Chapter seven, “Theologische Innovation durch sozialen Wandel. Kontextuelle Christologien und der US-Katholizismus” (164–185), looks at Black Christology, Latino Christology, Feminist Christology, and Asian Christology. Chapter eight, “Von der Abgrenzung zur Begegnung. Ökumene and ökumenische Theologie in den USA” (186–207), gives a good sense of the directions of an academic tradition where there is no “ecumenical theology” as a separate discipline, and where departments of Catholic theology have become, especially after Vatican II, constitutionally ecumenical, with the hiring of many non-Catholic theologians. At the same time, there have developed since the 1990s forms of “political ecumenism” (interconfessional alliances in the culture wars about emerging social issues) that represent quite a change from the perspectives of classical, 20th-century ecumenism.

In chapter nine “Zukunftsperspektiven” (208–215), the author points out a few issues that are important for all those who interact with academic theology. The future of Catholic theology in the USA is uncertain because it is very tied to the future of the number of courses in theology taught in the “core curriculum” of courses that all students in Catholic colleges and universities must take to graduate. The problem is that fewer courses in the core curriculum and fewer Catholic colleges and universities implies a decrease in the number of professional (lay) theologians. At the same time, this restructuring gives space to more “intentional” and militant institutions of Catholic higher education where theology is often affected by anti-modern, “culture war” perspectives, with evident political leanings, even flirting sometimes with Christian nationalist views. On both sides of the ideological spectrum, the dominance of English language in global academia has amplified the voice of American Catholic theology but also risks making it more parochial as fewer and fewer American academic are able or willing to read (review, teach, engage with) Catholic theological scholarship that is not written or translated into English. Finally, the abandonment of Neo-Scholasticism has liberated energies but also poses the question of the kind of metaphysical basis on which to found the theological discourse. The book ends with a very long and useful section with bibliography and sources (216–259).

Dahlke’s book does a very good job in presenting, in a concise but accurate way, a picture of the Catholic theological landscape of one of the most influential Catholic churches in the world where

academic theology is now in a situation of uncertainty not just for the sustainability of the university system. On the one side there is the temptation to fall into the “Make American Great Again” narrative, in which religion and Catholicism specifically play a distinct role in the plan of “giving America back to God and giving God back to America”. On the other side, there is an academic theology that has embraced the latest methodological turns (gender, the post-colonial, etc.) and has generously opened itself to new perspectives and voices, but struggles to maintain a relationship with the ecclesia, not just the bishops but also the people of God. The most important development is that Catholic theology in the USA was part of and contributed to the European theological tradition: now the assumption of a closeness between Catholic theology in the USA and Europe is less true than it was in the past. But such a special relationship still exists, however in a retroverted way, on the right-wing conservative and traditionalist side of the spectrum, where “Europe” means the pre-Vatican II period or non-Vatican II theology. We will need to pay attention to the trajectories described by Dahlke because what happens in US Catholicism and its theological circles has effects on the global Church and beyond.

Reviewer:

Massimo Faggioli, Dr., Prof. in Historical & Contemporary Ecclesiology, Loyola Institute at Trinity College Dublin (massimo.faggioli@gmail.com)