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Modernity: Repercussions for Religion and Theology

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Abstract: after a brief overview of the usual division of the history of the Church into three periods, this article provides a bird's eyeview of the quantitative and qualitative changes that occurred in the Church during the modern period. How the modern inventions like radio and television changed an institution like the Papacy is discussed and the comparative study of Vatican II with the early Church shows that modern does not necessarily mean better.

Keywords: history, modernity, Vatican II, Earlier councils.

What is the meaning of modernity? For a long time the history of the Church was divided by westerners into three periods, the latest being modernity.

First came the early Church, which went from Pentecost, the birth-day of the Church, or even earlier with the birth of Christ, until the beginning of the schism (still unresolved) between the eastern and western churches - between Rome and Constantinople - in 1054. The second or middle period was appropriately named the Middle Ages. It went from 1054 - or from around 400 for some who preferred to see the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West as the decisive break - until 1517.

That year saw the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, with Martin Luther nailing his 95 Theses to the castle-gate at Wittenberg in Germany. It also coincided approximately with many other events that were seen as crucial - from a western viewpoint - to the birth of the modern world. There were the voyages of discovery to America, Africa and Asia, and later to Australasia, as well as the founding of missionary churches - both Catholic and Protestant (the description "Protestant" is used hereafter for convenience, while recognizing its inadequacy as a simplification) - which accompanied the colonial expansion. There were also major cultural innovations which affected Christianity greatly: the invention

of printing; cultural and artistic innovations which are associated with the Renaissance. Later, beginning in the eighteenth century, there occurred revolutions which greatly affected the West and subsequently the whole world: the industrial revolution; social and political revolution marked most famously by the French Revolution of 1789; many technological revolutions from the mid nineteenth century onwards; and profound cultural changes. This third period has for long been labelled the modern period or modernity.

This modern period has sometimes been divided into two or three sub-periods. Thus there is the modern period (proper), running to around 1750; after it, contemporary history and maybe the third sub-division of post-modernity, beginning sometime between 1960 and 1980. However, for the purposes of this essay, at least most of the time, I shall take modernity as a whole, for two reasons. First, because the important "repercussions for religion and theology" (as in the article's title) occurred at different times within the five centuries of this (long) modernity from around 1500 to today. It would be a mistake and unbalanced to consider in this essay only some of these repercussions. Secondly, the sub-divisions within modernity are largely based on events within the European church. Within the Catholic Church worldwide-including India - they are much less significant.

1. Quantitative Changes and Presentation

During these five centuries of modernity there occurred a number of major quantitative changes within Christianity and the Catholic Church. Like most changes in quantity, these developments also had qualitative repercussions.

Increase in population

One major change during this period was the ten-fold increase in both the Catholic and the overall Christian population. We may estimate (very approximately, in the absence of precise censuses) that by the early fourth century - when Christianity passed from suffering frequent persecutions to favoured status within the Roman Empire, principally due to the conversion to Christianity of the emperor Constantine - the Christian population had reached some twenty million. By 1300, when the European population peaked (to be followed by the Black Death plagues and other difficulties in the fourteenth century), we may estimate that the Catholic population had reached some 60 million with another 20 million members of

various other Christian churches and communities, principally the Orthodox church.

The French bishops at the first Vatican Council (1869-70), in a revealing comment, reckoned the world's population then stood at around 1,200 million. Of this total, they estimated, some 70 million were Orthodox, 90 million were Protestant and 200 million were Catholics.[1] Today Catholics number over a billion: 1,166 million or 17.4 percent of the world's population according to recent official Vatican statistics[2], with the total Christian population estimated at somewhat more than two billion (over 30 %) of the world's population of some 7 billion. So there has been a six-fold increase in the Catholic and Christian populations in the last one and a half centuries. But, significantly, due to the rapid increase in the world's population during this time, the proportion of Catholics and Christians within the global population has remained quite static, leaving plenty of scope for further evangelization.

This quantitative growth has many qualitative implications. Thus, the Christian community today has quite a different outlook compared with the first two-thirds of its history. Sixty million Catholics in 1300 is roughly the same number as the population of Italy today, 80 million Christians is similar to that of Germany, considerably less than several states in India. Or, if you enjoy playing with statistics, there are probably more Catholics alive today than the total number of Christians who lived throughout the entire first half of the Church's history - during the first millennium AD.

Worldwide expansion

Accompanying this increase in population during the modern period, Christianity moved from a predominantly European religion to one that was truly worldwide. The core of early Christianity, during the first six centuries AD, was formed by the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea; though there were some significant Christian communities beyond - in Ethiopia and Nubia in Africa, in Persia and in India, in China principally due to Nestorian missionaries, and even as far as Baros in Sumatra (modern Indonesia) by the early seventh century. During the Middle Ages, Christianity became more identified with Europe. That is to say, North Africa and western Asia were largely lost to Christianity due to the expansion of Islam, while there was notable expansion for Christianity in central and northern Europe.

The change for Christianity from being predominantly western or European to a truly worldwide religion coincided rather precisely with the modern period. Christopher Columbus reached America in 1492, as European schoolchildren learn. Christianity and the Catholic Church followed. Soon afterwards the coast of Africa was rounded by European sailors, bringing Christianity to the coastal regions of Africa and, subsequently, to many parts of Asia. The best known missionary was Francis Xavier, who died within sight of China in 1552. By this time the Reformation divide was fixed and for long thereafter Protestant missionaries, and the various Protestant churches, worked largely separately from their Catholic counterparts. Australia was reached by English ships under Captain Cook in 1770 and Christianity - through both Protestant and Catholic missionaries - gradually permeated the vast continent of Australasia.

Only recently, principally after Vatican II, during what is sometimes called the post-modern era, has there been serious and widespread cooperation between Catholic and Protestant churches in these newer lands of Christianity. Paradoxically, such cooperation was often better in mission territories, due to the exigencies of the situation and distance from the motherlands, than in Europe. However, Catholicism became inculturated in these regions only recently. For long it remained largely a European export. The establishment of a native clergy also took a long time and was often discouraged.

Modern inventions

Various inventions during the last one and a half centuries have had profound effects upon the presentation of Christianity. Many of them have been in the realm of communications. Photography, radio, television, and an explosion of innovations recently, are specially notable. It may be tempting to think they have influenced only the presentation of Christianity and not its content. But the distinction is not that easy.

The papacy is a revealing case in point. The line of bishops of Rome going right back to Peter has been maintained. But various modern inventions have affected the papacy quite radically since the late nineteenth century. In a nutshell, they have focused much more attention on the person - or personality - of the pope almost at the expense of his office. Until around 1850 few people would have a visual image of the pope or known much about his personality; many

Catholics probably would not have known the name of the pope. In some ways this was healthy: there was respect for the holder of the office, at least among Catholics, without overmuch concern about his personality.

The situation altered radically with the development of photography during the long reign of pope Pius IX (1846-78). Quite suddenly the pope's personality and public image became a major concern for Catholics, accentuated in the case of Pius IX by the drama of his loss of Rome and the Papal States. To photography was added in the early twentieth century the invention of radio and, later in the century, television. The papacy was quick and skilful to exploit the opportunities. Vatican Radio (Radio Vaticana) was inaugurated by Pope Pius XI in 1931 and the development of television worldwide from the 1950s onwards coincided with several favourable opportunities for the papacy in this regard: the sympathetic personality of Pope John XXIII, the worldwide gathering at Vatican II, the extensive papal visits of Paul VI and his successors. On the whole these developments have been received favourably by both Catholics and the wider public. But public opinion can be fickle. There is the danger that more weight is placed on presentation than on content.

These developments in the mass media have affected bishops, clergy and religious (members of religious orders both male and female). Their personalities and presentation may be scrutinized closely. As well as this horizontal dimension, there is a vertical dimension. That is to say, the speed with which directives can be passed (down) from Rome to bishops and superiors of religious orders, and from them to their clergy and religious, has increased dramatically. In a sense this rapid communication is good, but there is the danger that it becomes expected, so that decisions can be rushed. Once again more attention may be given to procedure than to wise and evangelical content.

The Laity - the vast majority of the Christian community, the people of God - are influenced by these developments affecting the clergy. More directly, they are influenced in their beliefs and practice by various modern developments, especially advances in the mass media. Television, mobile phones, emails and other media occupy a considerable part of the waking hours of many people today. They come to form part of the staple diet of their lives. Qualitatively too, ways of thinking and behaviour are affected. In some ways these

developments are very positive. There is an ease of communicating with many people that was unknown before. But the level of contact can be at one remove from reality, through electronic rather than personal contact. Many people may be glimpsed but few known.

There are also vast new possibilities for knowing about the Christian faith, its place among other religions and its context within the modern world. This too is very positive and welcome. On the other hand, there are the dangers that superficiality rather than profundity reigns; that sound-bites become the order of the day; that information focuses on what is news-worthy, or presentable in the form of news bulletins, rather than on the more deeply significant.

Modernity is not a prophet of doom for Christians. It offers them many new opportunities. But it also requires them to think through and act upon their faith in ways that are new and challenging and that were little known to their ancestors.

2. Qualitative Changes?

For the Christian message, the changes outlined above were primarily changes in presentation and communication even though they involved some changes in content. Other alterations more obviously involved changes-or developments or what might appear to be changes-in the content of doctrine.

Galileo provided the most famous case of apparent change in doctrine in the early modern period. Many people, including church authorities, thought his teaching that the earth circled the sun contradicted passages in Scripture which indicate the opposite: Joshua 10.12-13; Psalm 103/104.5; Ecclesiastes 1.5. Eventually and fortunately, as Galileo proved to be right, the Church came to a better understanding of the kind of teaching that is to be found in Scripture: primarily the Bible contains the truths that are necessary for our salvation, therefore its scientific statements may be better interpreted in a figurative rather than a literal sense.

Charles Darwin provided a similar conundrum in the nineteenth century. His teaching on evolution, as expressed principally in his work *Origin of Species* (1857), seemed to many to conflict with the doctrine of creation to be found in the book of Genesis. But Darwin was gradually acknowledged to be substantially correct and the Catholic Church came further in recognizing the kind of revelation

that is to be found in the Bible: truths that are pertinent to our salvation rather than literal expressions of scientific propositions.

The cases of Galileo and Darwin helped the Catholic Church towards a better appreciation of Scripture and divine revelation, though the process was long and difficult. Notable in the twentieth century have been the challenges posed by psychology. In this field, moreover, the way and extent to which the Church needed to changeor refine its teaching was less clear. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), who is widely regarded as the founder of psychoanalysis, has exercised great influence upon the development of psychiatry and psychology as well as upon the social sciences more generally. He explored areas that are profoundly important for Catholic teaching and pastoral practice. Counselling, spiritual direction, the religious formation of laity and clergy as well as many other features of Catholic life have been greatly influenced by Freud's insights and those of later practitioners in this field, especially Carl Jung (1875-1961). Unsurprisingly, inasmuch as depths of the psyche are less verifiable than movements of the sun or animal and human genes, acceptance of Freud has not been a simple "either/or" option for Christians. [Editor's note: This is also due to the fact that in spite of the enormous influence Freud has exercised, the scientific character of many of his theories has been called into question. One author has gone to the extent of saying that Freud set back the scientific study of psychology by "something like fifty years or more".[3]]

Many other intellectuals and personalities could bementioned who have challenged Christian thought and practice quite radically during the last two centuries. Mahatma Ghandi and Karl Marx, or Ludwig Wittgenstein in philosophy, come to mind straightaway. For many centuries western Christianity had been largely in control of its own intellectual destiny, at least western Christians felt that way. Then quite suddenly, with the French Revolution of 1789 and otherhallenges from within, as well as in-depth exposure to the great civilizations that lay beyond its frontiers, western Christians, who still dominated the Catholic Church, were exposed to a wide range of intellectual and other challenges. To their credit they faced up to these challenges and responded to them - at least as a community, however reluctant many individuals may have been - rather than burying their heads in thesand.

So, Christians have kept in mind the Scriptural passages

regarding the fullness of truth in Jesus Christ: "For in him (Jesus Christ) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Colossians 1.19); "For in him (Jesus Christ) the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2.9). But how can these assertions be reconciled with learning from non-Christians? Is it too facile to resolve the conundrum by claiming that the fullness of truth lies in Jesus Christ, but non-Christians have a role in bringing to light what still lies partly hidden in Him: in making explicit what was implicit?

3. Conclusion

To consider this issue of the explicit and implicit, of growth in our knowledge of the Christian message, and to reflect on the repercussions for religion and theology that modernity has introduced, please allow me to conclude this article by considering two topics: Vatican II and the early Church.

Vatican II (1962-5)

For Modernity and its repercussions for Religion and Theology today (the topic of this article), the second Vatican council forms a crucial episode. As the most significant event of the Catholic Church during the last half-century, the council came at the start of what is sometimes called the post-modern era. It helped the Catholic Church - also the wider Christian community - to keep abreast of this post-modern world and to remain a potent and relevant presence within it.

The timing of the council was providential. Western Europe, which was still the centre of theology and of much else in the Catholic Church, was moving into a period of relative peace and harmony after the horrors of World War II (1939-45). Energy and creativity characterized many of the European bishops who participated in the council-both those with sees in Europe and many who were missionary bishops in other continents-as well as the theologians who were assigned to help with writing the conciliar documents. Bishops and theologians from Western Europe dominated the early stages of the council.

But the world beyond Western Europe was in movement too. Its bishops and theologians came to play an increasingly important role as the council matured. India and Pakistan had achieved independence in 1947, Indonesia in 1949. Most countries in Africa

had achieved independence by the time the council ended in 1965. Already independent countries in other continents were growing in self-assurance. Eastern Europe still lay largely under Soviet domination, but those of its bishops who were able to attend the council - notably those from Poland - provided an important prophetic witness which balanced the experience of their western colleagues. Their witness was reinforced by the few bishops from Asian countries under Chinese control who were able to attend the council.

Among the bishops from these countries whosecontributions were specially notable, the following may be singled out: Gracias from India; Rugambwa, Hurley, Zoa and Malula from Africa; Djajasepoetra and Darmojuwono from Indonesia; Wojtyla from Poland. Active, too, were bishops and theologians from the continent of America and from various countries of western Asia.

Number-wise and geographically the council was unprecedented: the first truly worldwide council of the Church. There had been perhaps 300 bishops at the first ecumenical council, Nicea I in 325; some 450 at Chalcedon in 451; a maximum of 230 at any given time at Trent; some 700 at Vatican I, but over 2,400 at Vatican II. At Vatican II, moreover, there were, for the first time, indigenous bishops in significant numbers from all five continents. The number of Catholics whom they represented worldwide had also reached a new peak: midway between the 200 million in 1869/70 and 1.2 billion today.

The range and comprehensiveness of the council's sixteen decrees was unprecedented, at least among the councils of the second millennium AD. Trent had covered a wide range of topics but mostly theological issues in dispute between Catholics and Protestants and reform within the Catholic church. Some of the medieval councils, too, had been quite wide-ranging in their legislation but largely within the orbit of Church reform. Vatican II tackled issues internal to the Catholic church as well as relations with other Christian churches and communities, but it also looked much further afield. Most notable in this respect were the decrees *Nostra Aetate* on non-Christian religions and *Gaudium et Spes* on the church in the modern world; this wider perspective was to be found in many other decrees. *Gaudium et Spes*, moreover, was addressed "to people everywhere" (*GS* no. 2) as well as to Catholics and other Christians - the first time that an ecumenical council had reached out so directly to all people.

The reception of Vatican II has been quite difficult. However, this should not surprise us. Its decrees are lengthy and - partly as a result –open to varying interpretations and emphases. Altogether the sixteen decrees run to over 100,000 words: some 30% of the words in all the decrees of the Church's twenty-one ecumenical councils and twice the length of the first seven councils taken together! Most of the major ecumenical councils, moreover, met with difficult receptions. Certainly this is certainly true of Nicea I and Chalcedon among the early councils. A difficult reception, indeed, may be interpreted as a compliment to a council; it indicates that the council was making important and relevant statements, which almost inevitably would not be easy to digest.

Despite these difficulties of reception - indeed in many ways on account of them - Vatican II has retained its interest and fascination. The remarkable number of conferences and publications honouring the Golden Jubilee of the council witness to this vivacity: in India, for example, this issue of Jnanadeepa as well as the International Conference "Revisiting Vatican II: 50 Years of Renewal" which took place at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram in early 2013. These celebrations and remembrances reveal, too, the council's continuing fascination and relevance for a younger generation who were born after it. Their fresh reflections are important inasmuch as they reveal new ways of understanding and interpreting the council's treasures.

Early Church

"At least among the councils of the second millennium AD" was the qualification which I added when saying "the range and comprehensiveness" of Vatican II's decrees was "unprecedented". It was added because "modernity" for the Church does not necessarily mean improvements upon the early period: "more recently" does not necessarily mean "better". Accordingly, I would like to finish this article with some reflections on the first seven ecumenical councils of the Church, Nicea I in 325 to Nicea II in 787, focusing mainly on the first of them. The comprehensiveness of Vatican II's sixteen decrees was remarkable; yet the range of topics and the attention given to the world beyond Christianity may be considered even more remarkable in these early councils.

Language is a good starting-point. Vatican II kept almost exclusively to Latin for its debates and for the texts of all its sixteen

decrees, even though Latin was already dead as a widely spoken language. Contrastingly, Nicea I, followed by all the other early councils, opted for the best and most widely used popular language of the time, Greek. In this respect they were following the example of the authors of the new Testament and of the earliest Church authorities, who in their desire to communicate the Gospel to as many people as possible were ready to move out of Aramaic and Hebrew, the languages with which these early Christians were probably most familiar, into the *lingua-franca* of the eastern Mediterranean world.

Here we may note two other advantages of the Greek language. First, it was eastward-looking as much as western. Western scholars have tended to put it in the camp of western languages but in reality the Greek-speaking world, and its language, looked more eastwards than westwards: towards Persia and India - where Alexander the Great had campaigned and with which countries there was much trade - more than towards Paris or London. Secondly, Greek was a remarkably flexible and imaginative language yet with a fine intellectual tradition to enrich it - here we think of Plato and Aristotle and others - thereby making it specially suitable for the new theological and devotional vocabulary of Christianity. There is some parallel with English today which - in good measure thanks to India - has become the predominant global language.

The timing of these early councils was also providential. Christianity was enjoying relative peace and the possibilities of open debate after three centuries of persecution. Both this peace and the earlier horrors of persecution helped the Church to proclaim and to deepen its message. In this respect we may see parallels with Vatican II, which occurred as Europe was emerging from the horrors of World War II into the relative prosperity of the 1960s.

Vatican II is applauded for responding positively to modernity, for accepting its challenges and thereby enabling the Church to grow. But in many ways such openness is even more remarkable in the early councils, although less obvious. It is less obvious partly because Christianity had for long been a small church, surrounded by much larger civilizations in the Mediterranean world, and so felt a special need to preserve its identity. Such discretion towards the positive values of other civilizations is paralleled by similar silence, for the most part, in the old and new Testaments: both Jews and early

Christians felt they had to protect their threatened worlds and couldn't afford to be over generous towards outside influences. By the time of Vatican II the situation had changed radically. Christianity, with the Catholic faithful as its majority, was the largest world religion; so the Catholic church could be more openly sympathetic - condescending at times - towards other religions and civilizations.

Careful reading of the early councils reveals, however, an appreciation of the wider world or at least an indebtedness to it. The courage of these councils in embracing the Greek language has been mentioned. Appreciation or indebtedness can be discerned, too, in the creeds and other doctrinal statements of these early councils as well as in their disciplinary canons. The influence of Egyptian and Indian civilizations upon them has been less studied but is surely there. Too close association with Egyptian fertility cults was one reason why Nestorius criticized the church of Alexandria's proclamation of Mary as mother of God, Theotokos. Nevertheless the councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon defended the title. Egypt, and the eastern Mediterranean world more generally, was in close contact with India. Surely there was some borrowing from the great Indian civilizations even though explicit references in Christian sources are rare. Clement of Alexandria's mention of the Buddha is a rare example (*Stromata*, i.15).

Let me finish with three more examples of the courage and balance of the early Church: women, indigenous ordinations, and readiness to consider both doctrine and lifestyle.

Membership of the three ecumenical councils of modernity - Trent, Vatican I and II - has been the almost exclusive preserve of men, though women played some role at Vatican II as "observers / *auditores*". By contrast women presided with distinction at two of the most important early councils: empress Pulcheria at Chalcedon, which formulated the Church's classic definition regarding Christ's divinity and humanity: empress Irene at Nicea II, which proved foundational for the Church's defence of religious art. We can find nothing parallel to their roles in either the medieval or the modern ecumenical councils.

The council of Trent is famous for its decree establishing seminaries for the formation of the diocesan clergy. Nevertheless the Catholic Church was slow to permit young men from outside Europe to be ordained into the diocesan clergy and even more reluctant, for the

most part, regarding priestly ordinations in religious orders. Maybe the higher standards set by Trent gave bishops and superiors of religious orders the pretext for excluding candidates from outside the traditional backgrounds. The early Church was much more open and welcoming towards indigenous backgrounds. We find Asians and Africans among the early popes, perhaps even an ex-slave in pope Anacletus I (79-81). When the tribes who had invaded the Roman Empire converted to Christianity in the fifth and following centuries, there seems to have been no hesitation in ordaining suitable candidates to the priesthood and episcopate. Such generosity of outlook was surely a crucial factor in the successful evangelization of Europe through this period.

Finally, the succinct combination of doctrine and discipline or lifestyle. This combination, or balance, has already been noted in the decrees of Trent and Vatican II. But it is also there in most of the first seven councils, combined in these councils with brevity and succinctness. In terms of doctrine, we may think of the composition of the "Nicene Creed" by the first two councils of Nicea I in 325 and Constantinople I in 381, or the Definition of the council of Chalcedon in 451. Yet both Nicea I and Chalcedon also promulgated disciplinary canons covering a wide range of topical issues. The twenty canons of Nicea I are the most remarkable: the role of women in the church, posture at prayer, castration, the ordination of bishops, priests and deacons, the organization of dioceses and the lifestyle of clergy, reconciliation of heretics and schismatics, public penance for sinners and the community's role in their reconciliation, are all treated with both tact and firmness. There is also brevity of expression: Nicea I's output reaches some 2,000 words in the Greek original compared with over 100,000 for Vatican II.

Notes

1. *Acta et Decreta Sacrorum Conciliorum Recentionum: Collectio Lacensis*, eds. Gerhard Schneemann and Theodor Granderath (Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Herder, 1870-90), vol. 7, columns 845-6.
2. As reported in *The Tablet*, 27 February 2010.
3. Hans Eysenck, *Decline and Fall of the Freudian Empire* (Hammondsworth: Pelican, 1986), 102, cited in "Sigmund Freud" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigmund_Freud#cite_ref-16. Accessed on 6th April, 2015.