

Modernity and the Catholic Church

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Abstract: This short article traces the meaning and use of the term 'modern' and gives an overview of the four different responses of the Catholic Church to modernity.

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What is modernity? The term 'modernity' is often taken for granted. The term brings to mind varied pictures and ideas. In our day-to-day life we associate modernity with human rights, democracy, development, autonomy, and so on. In our discourse, we use the term 'modernity' for being the latest, up-to-date, new, fashionable, contemporary, etc. as opposed to the old-fashioned, antiquated or obsolete. To some extent the term conveys all these meanings. In fact, it could be said that to think of modernity is to think in terms of time that is historically new, recent or different.

The word 'modern' comes from the Latin *modus* which means 'measure'. "And as a measure of time, 'just now' with the Late Latin derivative *modernus*, from which all later forms [like *modernitas*, *moderno*, or French *moderne*], derive."¹ According to Gillespie, the term modern was not used to distinguish between "'ancient' and 'modern' until 1460 and was not used in its contemporary sense to distinguish a particular historical period until the sixteenth century. The English term 'modern' referring to modern times first appeared in 1585, and the term 'modernity' was not used until 1627."² It was only from 1627 that the term "modernity" was understood in opposition to antiquity. According to him,

The concept of 'modern' arose in the context of the twelfth century reform of the church, although it had a different signification than it has today. In the belief that they stood at the beginning of a new age, these reformers or *moderni* saw themselves, in the words of Bernhard of Chartres (1080-1167), as dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, lesser

modern for them was thus to stand at the end of time, on the threshold of eternity.³

It was 'only in the 17th century that first Georg Horn (1666) and then Christophus Cellarius (1696) described world history in three stages, starting with antiquity, lasting until the time of Constantine, the middle ages until the end of Eastern Roman Empire, and *historia nova*/modern history beginning in the 16th century.'⁴

Historia nova or the modern age came to be considered superior to antiquity, because in the context of the discoveries and other scientific progress, modernity was thought to carry humanity to greater heights of achievement. It was thought that the application of proper scientific methods would ultimately help humans to "become masters and possessors of nature and thereby produce a more hospitable world for themselves."⁵ The progressive character of modernity, however, is not unambiguous. While it gave us the ideals of equality, fraternity, and liberty, along with technical and scientific progress, economic prosperity, pluralism and so on, it is also marked by environmental pollution, exploitation of the weaker sections, growing individualism, constant stress, fanaticism, intolerance, intensified warfare, violence on minorities, and so on.

Different Responses of the Catholic Church to Modernity

Modernity has not left our reflection on God or our God-experience as well as our God-talk (theology) untouched. Modernity ushered in a secular age "in which man replaces God as the center of existence and seeks to become the master and possessor of nature by the application of a new science and its attendant technology."⁶ Modernity also saw the rejection of "scholasticism [with its teachings on natural law] in favor of science and religious belief and enthusiasm in favor of a secular world."⁷ However, this does not necessarily mean a rejection of God or religion; rather, it was the rejection of a particular form of religiosity or religious practice and belief. "From the very beginning," says Gillespie, "modernity sought not to eliminate religion but to support and develop a new view of religion and its place in human life, and that it did so not out of hostility to religion but in order to sustain certain religious beliefs."⁸

Within the history of the Church, modernity is mostly associated with the colonial expansions together with wide-spread missionary activity, as also the Renaissance with its cultural and artistic innovations. In spite of this positive interaction with modernity, the attitude of the Catholic Church towards modernity has been largely negative. William McSweeney points out three stages in this attitude.⁹ The Church rejected modernity up to 1878, until the death of Pope Pius IX; it competed with modernity from the time of Leo XIII (1878-1903) until the end of Vatican Council II; and, finally, entered into partnership with modernity in the Post-Vatican period. Staf Hellemans adds a fourth period by dividing McSweeney's the post-Vatican period into two: the 1960s, the years during and shortly after Vatican II, and the period after the 60s. To him "these four periods correspond with the four positions the Catholic church adopted vis-à-vis modernity:" first, the "total rejection of a licentious and impermanent disorder;" second, the "competition against a hostile order;" third, "alliance" with an inalienable modernity; and finally, "an alternative voice".¹⁰

Hellemans explains that from "the time of the French Revolution until 1960, the position of the Catholic church vis-à-vis modernity can be summarized by the word 'anti-thesis'."¹¹ The church in all its intensity and determination condemned modernity for its godlessness. For example, Gregory XVI's encyclical letter *Mirari vos* (1832) condemned the proposal to welcome the new society and its civil liberties as an opportunity for Catholicism, saying that, "(a)t the present moment a brutal malevolence and impudent science, an unrestrained arbitrariness prevail." He considered modernity as a result of "criminal plans by malevolent people."¹² According to him the modernists had provoked unlawful revolutions against the legal order and, therefore, "any form of participation in such a society was fundamentally wrong since its liberties and policies undermined the prominent role of the church in society."¹³ Catholics were advised to stay away from non-Catholic ideas and attitudes, as in a ghetto.¹⁴

Such opposition was kept up by later popes. For example Pope Pius IX (1846-1878) and Pope Pius X (1903-1914) gave no room for theologians to negotiate doctrinal changes within the framework of modernity. Pope Pius X in his encyclical *Pascendi*

*Dominici Gregis*¹⁵ is brutal in his attack on modernists.¹⁶ To him, modernism poses a threat to our faith, and hence to our hope of salvation.

During the time of Pope Leo XIII, a marked difference can be noticed in the church's attitude towards modernity. With him the "compulsive passivity outside the sphere of religion disappeared."¹⁷ Catholics were encouraged to understand the world by engaging themselves in all domains in order to bring a Catholic influence to bear upon the major problems of the day.

Even at this stage the antagonistic attitude towards modernity, new values and institutions remained. Catholics were not to be contaminated by the modern world. They were to be in the world, but not of the world. However, the triumphs of western democracies and the development of the consumer society, etc. made the church's arguments and discourses less and less plausible. Catholic academics and intellectuals could not maintain such hostility towards modernity and, therefore, dialogue became necessary to make the Church relevant in the changing times.¹⁸

In the third stage, beginning with the Second Vatican council, the Church began to have a new view of the world and it began to see the positive aspects in modernity, and entered into a partnership with the modern world. It began to interpret the signs of the times, recognized freedom of religion and with regard to modernity the Church began to be more hopeful and optimistic. It began to adapt itself to modernity. The Council documents, especially *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) gave the impression that the church and the good forces of the modern world were to be united for the common good of all.¹⁹ In these documents, while the fundamentals of faith were reaffirmed, their meaning were explained and brought up-to-date with the modern experience.

The breath of fresh air, however, did not last long. "The radicalization that followed Vatican II - the demand for democracy within the church, for a revision of sexual morals, for a lifting of celibacy for Roman Catholic priests, etc. - all these became a thorn in the side of conservative believers."²⁰ The Church was confronted with rapid decline in its pews and rising tensions and confusions in

its rank and file with regard to the new approaches. It looked as if with Vatican II the Church had decreed its own death warrant. The fourth stage that Hellemans speak about begins here. With the suspicion that the radicals were beginning to interpret the Council as if it was the beginning of the Church and not merely its renewal.

(The) Vatican decided to intervene in order to straighten things out. Doctrinal orthodoxy became important once again - *Humanae Vitae* (1968) can be seen as the turning point here. Conservative priests were appointed as bishops, sometimes against the expressed wish of the diocese. The cautious devolution process which Vatican II had started, was redirected toward more centralization. It seemed almost as if the centre no longer trusted its followers. The resulting restoration which Paul VI had begun, was continued and strengthened under John Paul II. In the same vein, the tone of church leaders talking about modernity once again turned more distant and negative.²¹

In general, the Church's approach to modernity, with the exception of the early 1960s, has been one of distrust and hostility, and uneasiness at best. This uneasiness is understandable when we realize that modernity had shrunk the power and influence of the Church, while modernity itself has gained acceptance and momentum. In many ways, this struggle to be alive to modern conditions without undermining the precious gift she has received in Jesus Christ continues to this day. Today, as McSweeney says, "Catholics are united, not by a bond which imposes common obligations of beliefs and practices, but by their common origin in a religious tradition which has ceased to function as a communal system constraining the ideas and behaviour of its members."²²

Notes:

1. For more details, see Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 2.
2. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, 3.
3. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, 4.

4. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, 5.
5. See Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, 5
6. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, xi.
7. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, xi.
8. Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, xii.
9. See Bill McSweeney, *Roman Catholicism: The Search for Relevance* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), XIII-XV, 236-239.
10. See Staf Hellemans, "From 'Catholicism against Modernity' to the Problematic 'Modernity of Catholicism'" *Ethical Perspectives* 8, no. 2 (June - 2001): 119.
11. See Hellemans, "From 'Catholicism against Modernity' to the Problematic 'Modernity of Catholicism'," 117.
12. Hellemans, "From 'Catholicism against Modernity' to the Problematic 'Modernity of Catholicism'," 117.
13. Hellemans, "From 'Catholicism Against Modernity' to the Problematic 'Modernity of Catholicism'," 117.
14. See McSweeney, *Roman Catholicism: The Search for Relevance*, 236.
15. Pope Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis: On the Doctrine of the Modernists* (Encyclical) (September 8, 1907).
16. For details, see Pope Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis: On the Doctrine of the Modernists*, 1, 2, 3, and 5.
17. Hellemans, "From 'Catholicism against Modernity....," 118.
18. McSweeney, *Roman Catholicism: The Search for Relevance*, 237.
19. Hellemans, "From 'Catholicism Against Modernity....," 118.
20. Hellemans, "From 'Catholicism Against Modernity....," 118-119.
21. Hellemans, "From 'Catholicism Against Modernity....," 119.
22. McSweeney, *Roman Catholicism: The Search for Relevance*, 239.