

Vatican II: Keeping the Vision Alive

Engaging with the World

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IN 1870, while the First Vatican Council (1869-70) was in progress, the radical German theologian, Franz Overbeck (1837-1905), whose own religious upbringing had been Lutheran, delivered his Inaugural Lecture at the University of Basel. The lecture itself argued for what he saw as an inevitable role, in the modern world, for a purely historical approach to the writings of the New Testament within theology. Since at that time even Protestantism had misgivings about allowing too much sway within Christianity to a critical reading of Scripture, Overbeck accepted he was fighting an uphill battle within his own community. As for Catholicism (a term, incidentally, that seems no older than the seventeenth century¹), it would be an understatement to say that a critical reading of Scripture would not, in this period, have been officially regarded as a high theological priority. It was the heyday of Pio Nono, whose flamboyant claims about the nature of authority within the Church – captured ‘in the [doubtless apocryphal] saying attributed to him. ‘It is I who am the tradition’ (*La tradizione sono io*)² – trenchantly endorsed the approach to religious truth associated with Ultramontanism.

In the concluding remarks of his lecture, Overbeck made the shrewd claim that Protestantism was regarded as a foe by the Catholic Church not principally for its heterodox beliefs but because it had

1. See Louis Bouyer, *La décomposition du catholicisme* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1968), 152.

2. James Barr, *Explorations in Theology 7* (London: SCM, 1980), 85.

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He wishes to acknowledge that, in writing this article, he has drawn on some ideas he had first come across in the writings of Robert Morgan and the late James Barr.

forced the Church, from the Council of Trent (1545-63) onwards, to turn in upon itself, thus cutting itself off from the modern world, and establishing, at least in his eyes, an insurmountable barrier between itself and the fulfilment of the huge task that it had set itself, which was to embrace that world in its fullness – and this, presumably, is what ‘ecumenism’ (from the Greek term for the inhabited [Earth]: ‘*oikoumene*’) fundamentally means. Overbeck argued that since the time of Trent, Catholicism had simply been living from its own rigid, dogmatic obduracy and was finally withering away, ‘ending in a series of dogmas such as the one it has given birth to today before our very eyes’. The latter reference is obviously to the dogma of Papal Infallibility, defined at that First Vatican Council.

BEARING WITNESS

Overbeck would thus have been surprised, and perhaps even gladdened, by what happened almost a century later. For in 1962 a Second Vatican Council was called in order to address the very problem he had so deftly pinpointed in that 1870 lecture. The rigidity he detected in Catholicism did not turn out, after all, to be a kind of religious *rigor mortis*.

For one thing, the Council did do was to strive to give expression to the ancient truth of Christianity that the Church is not an end in itself, but exists for the sake of the world: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life’ (Jn 3:16). The Church’s *raison d’être* is to bear witness to God’s love for humanity in Christ. In other words, if as an institution it were to cease to engage with the ‘world’, the whole point of its very existence would be lost, and it would, and indeed should, in Overbeck’s words, ‘wither away’.

THE MODERNIST MOVEMENT

The tensions between the Catholic Church and the ‘world’ had been growing from the sixteenth century. In the nineteenth century they became perhaps even more perceptible, after the attempted restoration of Catholic order in Europe following the upheavals of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic period. As the nineteenth

century came to an end, these tensions morphed and took on a new intensity when they provoked, not some new conflict between church and world, but a clash within the Catholic Church itself. This came in the shape of what is called the Modernist Movement, which was a kind of Catholic intellectual and spiritual civil war, 'won', if that's the proper expression, by the forces of traditionalism over against the would-be modernizers, whose voice within the Church was effectively silenced.

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In the short to medium term, people may of course be silenced: all human history bears witness to the fact. In the long term, however, the questions they raise cannot be killed off so easily, and have a habit of rising from the dead. And so it was within the Church. The pressure of the unanswered intellectual and spiritual questions, raised mainly by European Catholic thinkers from the late nineteenth century onwards, ultimately proved to be irresistible. While such thinkers could be quietened temporarily, their continuing search for answers turned out to be like a source flowing into a dam that finally burst its banks. The Second Vatican Council was the result of this irresistible pressure for some acknowledgement that the Catholic Church would have to engage with the modern world if it were not to face the future of institutions that refuse to do so: a diminishing relevance and final lack of visibility on the radar of human consciousness.

Cynics might interpret the Second Vatican Council as an opportunistic move by the Catholic Church, a last throw of the dice as it were, to save itself from irrelevance. But those who shared and still share the Church's basic sense of its mission will view the Council as a courageous if perhaps over-optimistic effort to face up to the difficult questions posed by the Church's need to refocus and redefine its mission in a rapidly changing, unpredictable, and always dangerous world.

THE CHURCH'S SELF-UNDERSTANDING

At an inner-Church level, Vatican II was also continuing the in-

terrupted work of Vatican I, broken off in 1870 before it had had a chance to complete its task of defining Christianity and the nature of the Church for the modern age. The participants at Vatican II were dealing with no less momentous a task. Yet, as *Lumen Gentium* (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) specifically acknowledges, the Council was under no illusion about the provisional nature of its insights. It speaks of the Catholic Church and Christian people generally as being a 'pilgrim people', who are on the way to final truth. It doesn't claim to be stating the last word about God or the world or the Christian Revelation.

This might be worth recalling at a time when, understandably, with the Council now half a century old, people tend naturally to look back and try to assess what it was all about and what it has led to.

LOOKING FORWARD

The current interest in commemorating Vatican II is therefore perfectly comprehensible. It does, however, raise the question whether looking back should not be complemented by looking forward. As Christianity is concerned with the End of Time, it is perhaps also worth paying some attention to St Paul's advice about 'forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead' (Phil 3: 13-14).

The fact that Christianity is a religion focused on the End means it will never find an adequate intellectual or institutional expression in history. It is a faith always seeking understanding, and a compelling expression in history. The Catholic Church's current anxieties may be part of the price that must be paid for accepting that 'here we have no abiding city' (Heb 13: 14). Among the many lessons Vatican II and its aftermath have to teach the contemporary Church, this may not be the least important.

FACING ENLIGHTENMENT QUESTIONS

Behind the anxieties and uncertainties in the modern Church is undoubtedly the fact of the European Enlightenment. Whatever criticism this movement might attract, it did throw up questions for Christianity that have not yet been answered convincingly. These questions will not simply go away, since they are questions that reason

asks, and that it is reasonable to ask. As Immanuel Kant put it in his late work, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793): '[A] religion which rashly declares war on reason will not be able to hold out in the long run against it.'³

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH ANXIETIES

Granted, the demand for new answers to old questions is not entirely new within Christian history. However, the specific challenge of modernity is one that can hardly be underestimated, particularly when account is taken of the deep-seated, almost atavistic fear within Christendom of what Peter Pawlowksy has called 'ideological infiltration'.⁴

This anxiety about error and 'the desire ... for "sound teaching"',⁵ have accompanied the Christian Church since the early days of its mortal struggle with Gnosticism in the first centuries, to the point of becoming second nature to the Church, especially to its leaders. Clearly, more than intellectual acumen would have to be involved in any attempt at unravelling the complex and ancient web of fear and anxiety still perhaps subconsciously guiding the Church's leadership.

As the Christian faith believes, however, in the 'love that casts out fear' (1 Jn 4: 18), even this problem can surely be tackled with hope. As indeed may the problem of freedom *within* religion, as opposed to simply freedom *of* religion, which Vatican II is frequently congratulated on recognizing. The pilgrim Church can learn to live with its anxieties. But, to steal the title of Lenin's famous work: 'What is to be done?'

Vatican II is credited with launching a whole series of what might be termed 'renewal programmes' within Catholicism. One could point to initiatives in the area of liturgy, or the promotion of a more widespread interest in Scripture, or the enrichment of theological deliberation through serious re-engagement with older strands of Christian thought in the patristic or medieval periods, or the encouragement given to the inner-Christian ecumenical movement, or a recovered interest in inter-religious exploration.

3. From the Preface to the First Edition, tr. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 9.

4. Peter Pawlowksy, *Christianity*, tr. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1995), 33.

5. *Ibid.*

TENSIONS RE-EMERGING

Despite this, since the end of the Council, the Church's pilgrim path has seemed to become increasingly uneven and thorny. Older tensions, evoked earlier, which seemed to have become less acute during the euphoria of the Council itself, have resurfaced, sometimes with renewed venom. Nor is there any comfort in the notion that 'theology' can act as some kind of soothing balm for religious wounds since, if anything, it can sometimes appear to exacerbate differences and intensify the odium that, where religion is concerned, never seems to be in short supply.

What is possibly more ominous than continued squabbling within the circle of faith, is, however, a growing indifference towards the message of Christianity within the world at large in which the Church lives and moves. While Vatican II may indeed have wished to achieve a new openness towards the world, there does not seem to be too much evidence that the world has, since the Council, become perceptibly more interested in the Church (except, possibly, in its sins). Is it a question then of the Church's 'unrequited love' for the world? Or might it be the case that the Church is offering the wrong message?

These are clearly big questions, with no easy or obvious answers. It could well be that an antagonism or, worse still, an indifference on the world's part towards Christianity is simply an unchanging historical pattern, something that the Church will just have to accept.

FAILURES AND NEW DEPARTURES

In the face, then, of what increasingly looks like the faltering of Christianity in Europe, one of its former strongholds, one could perhaps take some comfort from the fact that this is hardly the first time in human history that Catholicism has been declared to be in danger of imminent demise. It has, until now, continued to remain resilient. However, as long as modern Christianity fails to give a convincing account to the world of the hope that is in it, even this comfort may not stretch too far. Yet a constant feature of biblical religion is that human failures or false starts have often been the prelude to new, inspired departures. This pattern can be perceived from the Garden of Eden onwards: why should it stop now?

Why indeed, and who could pretend to know? What one might say, however, is that a precondition for such new departures would appear to be a willingness to place one's own preferred truths and favourite convictions lower in the scale of things than one's faith in God. Vatican II may in retrospect be seen as Catholicism's entry into a more difficult and ambiguous world, which other Christian Churches had been trying to cope with for rather longer. Moreover, the vital differences in the Christian community no longer seem to be those that exist *between* various Christian churches, but much more those that exist *within* all those bodies.

This brings us back to Overbeck's sense that a critical reading of Scripture, and indeed by implication of the entire Christian tradition, was not a luxury but an inevitable necessity for the Christian community in the modern age, even if the acceptance of the legitimacy of such a move would have profound, maybe even incalculable consequences for the Church's own self-understanding.

INTERPRETING CHRISTIANITY ANEW

If it is accepted that the deepest divisions within contemporary Christianity are not between Churches, but within them, this, in turn, would suggest that an 'ecumenical' theology, to take up an earlier reference, will not be at heart concerned with trying to patch up theological disagreements between various Christian traditions. While such inter-denominational work will continue to be useful, to the extent that it may help to reduce or, ideally, to eliminate unhelpful suspicions among Christian people, it may not be as important a fruit of the Second Vatican Council as is sometimes thought.

More urgent than such continuing 'ecumenical' efforts is surely this wider 'ecumenical' endeavour, implicit in the task of interpreting Christianity anew and offering it to the whole world. If the official language of the Council – the already mentioned 'pilgrim people', or the 'people of God', for instance – is taken seriously, then no one can be possessive in relation to Christian truth. If God is truth, which Christianity believes, and Christians are the 'people of God', then, logically almost, one can only be led into the truth by God, but not assume one possesses it fully here and now, and has some kind of copyright on it.

The comment has often been made, occasionally with some regret or dismay, that the Second Vatican Council defined no new dogmas, as if this somehow downgraded it in relation to previous Councils. But what if this 'failing' might be one of Vatican II's most enduring and positive qualities? In specifically not defining any dogma or new teaching, the Council was tacitly admitting that the day had come when Christianity itself was no long a system whose existing doctrines just had to be continually added to or refined, but was now recognized as a reality whose meaning in modern times had become radically contested and uncertain, for those who believed in Christian truth,

Seen in this light, Vatican II was indeed a new beginning, a relaunching of the mission of Christianity. Our age may in many respects be like the primitive age of the Church, when it was unclear what would emerge in the future, and how the new religion would finally look on the world stage. Looking back to the early Church, it's relatively easy to see what happened, but to the actors at the time, the future was very uncertain and open. Our age may constitute a similar age of transition, and Vatican II may come to be seen as a key moment in shaping Christianity's meaning for the foreseeable future.

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That said, it is useful to remember, and was indeed implicitly recalled by Pope John XXIII in initiating the Council, that renewal does not mean starting from scratch, as if this were ever possible. Just as the young Christian Church did not abandon everything from its parent religion, Judaism, neither need modern Catholic Christianity abandon everything from its past. But the beliefs (or 'dogmas', to use again a term that has fallen on bad times) of the Christian Church are like the grammar of a language. A grammar belongs to the essence of a language, but is no substitute for actually communicating in the language, in speech or in writing.

Similarly, the beliefs of Christianity, its grammar as it were, belong

intrinsically to Christianity, but they have no ultimate justification if they don't make possible the living out, rather than simply the abstract understanding of, the Christian faith.

In short, Councils and their theologies – and Vatican II should prove to be no exception in this regard – will always be secondary to the business of living the Christian life and of being or trying to be in contact with the living God. At the same time, the adage coined by Thomas à Kempis: 'Man proposes, but God disposes', should hang like a Sword of Damocles over any suggestions for future ecclesiastical developments, if for no other reason than that it merely restates a much older piece of biblical wisdom that is likely to be no less true in a post-Vatican II world than in any other.

Learning to live truthfully and honestly – Contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.

✠ Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury
address to the Synod of Bishops, Rome, October 2012