

“A Continuum in the Great Tradition”

BY JAMES HITCHCOCK

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Are rival interpretations of nineteenth and twentieth-century Catholic history vying for our attention and making competing claims to be the true history? In "Continuing the Conversation" (September 8, 2000), Robert Egan asked the question and called for a public discussion of the two interpretations that have emerged from antagonistic understandings of Vatican II and the upheavals that followed.

To summarize Egan's main points: In version one, Vatican II, meant to complete the work of Vatican I, was distorted by various secular and cultural ideologies. The papacy of John Paul II is seen to have reestablished balance in the church and to have offered an alternative to the easy acceptance of modernity. In contrast, version two rests on a more positive attitude toward modernity and liberalism. In this view, Vatican II was a dramatic turning point in which the church was tested and renewed by its encounter with the modern world. The papacy of John Paul II is understood as an interruption and even a disruption in the practice of the dialogue, engagement, and collegiality called for by Vatican II.

Have two versions of post-Vatican II history emerged? Are they competing for legitimacy in our understanding of Catholicism? Commonweal put the questions independently to two historians, James Hitchcock and John W. O'Malley. Their replies follow.

--THE EDITORS

The appropriate stance which the church should take toward modernity is, of course, dependent on how modernity itself is understood, an understanding rendered immeasurably more difficult by the announced arrival of "postmodernity."

The difficulty of defining modernity is already present in the difficulty of deciding exactly when and why it began, with answers ranging from medieval nominalism and Renaissance humanism, through Protestantism, the New Science, and the Enlightenment, to industrial capitalism, democracy, and the artistic avant-garde. If modernity is understood as merely the sum total of everything that has happened in Western civilization since the High Middle Ages, it risks becoming a meaningless concept.



Some of these elements were embraced, or at least tolerated, by the church from the beginning. Nominalism was an accepted theological school. The papacy itself patronized Renaissance humanism. The Galileo case notwithstanding, the church has never been anti-science, even less anti-technology, and a persuasive case has been made that in some ways Western science was itself made possible by the Christian view of creation and of the fundamental order of the universe.

In other movements--Protestantism, the Enlightenment, Marxism--modernity chose to define itself precisely in opposition to Catholicism, so that it is impossible to see how any kind of rapprochement could have been effected at the time. With centuries of hindsight, and with the leisure of academic detachment, it may now seem possible to transcend past hostilities and arrive at common ground. But such a judgment is historically naive if it treats these great historical eruptions merely as abstract ideas, ignoring the cauldrons in which they were brewed.

Ironically, while the church is routinely condemned as the perennial enemy of change, in recent times its historical openness to technology has been criticized as the root of Western maltreatment of nature. But if there is anything which is unquestionably modern, it is pervasive technology, and, to the extent that the environmentalists' criticisms are justified, they serve as warnings to the church precisely not to accommodate itself to what seems progressive in each new age. (In the fourth century it was "modern" for the church to embrace the Roman Empire.)

Pius IX's "Syllabus of Errors" is, of course, the prime exhibit of the church's allegedly narrow-minded and intransigent reaction to essentially benign currents of modern culture. But all except a few of the pronouncements in that document are defensible in the light of liberalism as the church then experienced it. Pius IX saw liberalism not as a humane abstract idea but as a movement which proclaimed liberty and in practice threatened the church's very right to exist, just as the Enlightenment had proclaimed freedom and tolerance but helped prepare the way for the French Reign of Terror.



Doctrinal issues aside, what the solemn definition of papal infallibility achieved, among other things, was a declaration of the church's independence from all secular authority, and a papacy now equipped to fight for that independence in an often hostile social and political environment. In the context of the time, movements which favored decentralized ecclesiastical authority, like Gallicanism, were dangerous even to those who espoused them, since a strong papacy was necessary to provide local churches with the resources to resist secular encroachments on their liberties. (If religion provides history's most notorious examples of a hypocritical gulf between proclamations of love and practices of hate, "progressive" political movements rank second only because they do not have nearly so long a history.)

Modern liberal Protestantism has provided a laboratory test of how Christianity might accommodate itself to the forces of modernity. Beginning with the Enlightenment, there have always been Protestants eager to come to terms with Christianity's "cultured despisers," in effect allowing each age's reigning secular orthodoxies to define the acceptable limits of religious belief, But that enterprise has proved chimerical. In each age, Protestant liberals jettison certain elements of their tradition, once considered essential, now dismissed as merely culturally conditioned and hence as obstacles to belief, but this process does not finally result in a solid, permanently valid core of belief, and each age discovers still more things that must be discarded.

Seldom do liberals examine the possibility that modernity itself, in the full sense of the term, is simply antireligious, that rejection of belief is essential to its self-understanding. Thus it cannot be satisfied by partial accommodation but ultimately demands from Christianity a complete surrender. Liberalism in religion succeeds in making faith more credible to modernists only to the degree that it makes it seem less benighted than before. But this very process of accommodation merely confirms modernists in their conviction that they are correct in rejecting belief and in their surmise that believers themselves are gradually recognizing that their faith is incredible. Unbelievers who undergo conversion are almost always attracted to religion's more traditional forms.



Without anticipating whatever surprises history may have in store, it appears that liberal religion will scarcely even exist as an organized movement a generation from now. It does not succeed in winning over the skeptics but (again illustrated in the history of modern Protestantism) persuades believers that they do not need religion at all. It exists to ease its adherents' way into secular modernity.

Religious liberals of all major faiths have labored, over a century and a half, to forge a viable religion that is both faithful to its most authentic traditions yet also modern. But liberal Protestantism ends inevitably in the corrosive skepticism of the Jesus Seminar and of Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, in the "death of God" theology, in a deference toward other religions which makes it now impermissible to affirm the primacy of Jesus Christ. If Pius X painted Catholic modernism with too broad a brush, the modernists themselves were unable, on their own principles, to distinguish authentic from inauthentic new expressions of the faith. The movement included people like Alfred Loisy, whose beliefs could hardly have been reconciled with Catholicism under any circumstances.

The ambiguities of modernity itself are at the heart of the question. Rudolf Bultmann famously asked how a man who turns on a light bulb and shaves with an electric razor could still believe in miracles, to which the simple answer is that many people do. If a man were given an assignment to locate conservative Christians swiftly, and if in adjoining rooms there were conventions of engineers and poets in session, he would be well advised to visit the former. Many technologists are very devout in traditional ways, even though their work places them much closer to the heart of a certain kind of modernity than does the vocation of the poet, which has hardly changed over thousands of years.

One of the many ambiguities of modernity is the polarization between its "hard" manifestations--science, technology, and industrial capitalism--and "soft" versions--the radical subjectivism which is expressed in its purest forms by artists. But every elementary account of artistic modernism emphasizes the sense of fragmentation, the loss of every certitude, inherent in it, so that to be modern in this sense is necessarily to eschew all



religious truth. (When a "modern" artist becomes a believer he ceases to be modern in the true sense.)

The church has in fact eventually accommodated itself to the genuinely positive strains of modernity, and there is much to be said for its chronic policy of caution. Robert Bellarmine was right to warn Galileo that he should not insist on the truth of the heliocentric theory because at the time (and for some time afterwards), it was an unconfirmed theory. The best of the Enlightenment has long been incorporated into Catholic thought, in ways far different from the pell-mell surrender negotiated by some eighteenth-century Christians. In due course the censures of the "Syllabus of Errors" were found (at least in the short run) not to be relevant to certain kinds of political liberalism. Despite Pius XII's *Humanae generis*, orthodox Catholic scholars (including Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger himself) have profitably moved in new theological directions.

The skeptical stance of the church toward modernity apparently institutionalized in the present pontificate has been necessary because, almost as soon as the Second Vatican Council was over, the entire Western world was engulfed in the social and cultural upheaval dubbed "the sixties," during which it was impossible to make measured judgments about change and the church was severely pressured to abandon virtually all of its beliefs.

The phenomenon of the sixties was largely Western, and that too raises an unresolved question about the universal church's appropriate response to modern culture. Modernity is defined almost always in terms of the Western history of the past five hundred years, as though those cultures which did not pass through the revolutionary crucibles of the modern West are simply backward and fated to travel the same road belatedly. (Thus the irony whereby liberals now hope that the next pope will be a Western European, possibly even an Italian, while many conservatives would be happy to see an African ascend the throne of Peter.)

Every dialogue has a senior partner, and the possibility of the church's reaching some kind of rapprochement with modernity depends on who that senior partner is. Liberal religion treats the secular culture as possessing a superior wisdom and restricts religious beliefs to what the



cultural lows, including endorsing every movement deemed to be "progressive" (Marxism, feminism, the sexual revolution, environmentalism).

In the end such liberalism is unable to explain why religious faith has any value at all, since by its criteria the churches manifest merely a long history of reactionary errors. The liberal churches do not reserve to themselves any final right to pass judgment on modernity, and any reservations about its unfolding are automatically deemed obscurantist. (Is abortion progressive and humane or retrograde and violent? That hardly matters, since the spirit of the times demands it.)

Paradoxically, the church can come to terms with what is best in modernity only from a firmly orthodox perspective, in which the church is sure of its status as the senior partner in the dialogue. The charge of "triumphalism"--the claim to superior wisdom and authority--is often made against preconciliar Catholicism, but to the degree that the epithet has validity it must also be applied to Vatican II's supposedly seminal gesture of rapprochement with the modern world--*Gaudium et spes*. The Vatican practice of titling documents by their first few Latin words has helped perpetuate a misunderstanding of the decree, in that "joy and hope" sounds an optimistic note, while the next few words ("grief and anguish") immediately recognize the negative side of modernity.

Gaudium et spes is accommodating to modernity mainly because it refrains from mere condemnation and offers instead a hand of friendship. But it is also a claim of senior partnership on the part of the church. The modern world embraces a fervent dream of human wellbeing. But lacking the gospel of Jesus Christ, all its hopes are doomed to be disappointed. Thus the church stands ready to provide that which alone would allow modernity to achieve its fulfillment.

This conciliar outlook manifests itself in numerous particular ways--the dismissal of atheism as "foolhardiness," the condemnation of abortion as an "unspeakable crime," the reference to the "plague of divorce." But less commonly recognized is the way in which even the "progressive" elements in *Gaudium et spes* grow out of what must be called a classical mentality.



The council discovered the basis for hope in the fact that human beings are asking, "What is man? What is the meaning of suffering, evil, and death? What happens when this earthly life is ended?"--questions which modernity itself has found it impossible to answer and which postmodernity has declared inherently meaningless. *Gaudium et spes* comes to terms with modernity in classical ways, by recalling perennial truths about human nature, conscience, moral law, and the need for religious faith. (Thus also the council's best known rapprochement with modernity--*Dignitatis humanae*--rests upon a classical understanding of human freedom and dignity.)

The thought of John Paul II itself provides a major example of this approach, a broad and ambitious attempt to relate the Catholic faith to everything positive in modern culture. It is not coincidental that the council's decree on the church, *Lumen gentium*, is itself "triumphalistic" (the church as the light of the world) and reaffirms Vatican I's teaching about papal authority.

Part of modernity's unfolding claim for itself, at least since the eighteenth century, has been precisely a kind of temporal and cultural imperialism, the assumption that its ways ought to be binding always and everywhere. But if God is the Lord of history, then he stands in judgment on every age, and modernity cannot, more than any other era, claim for itself a historically privileged position.

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