

Review Essay*

The Impossible Irony of Vatican I*

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It is hard to imagine the rhetorical dexterity and scholarly finesse it takes to transform the facts of a nineteenth-century church council—particularly one described as “lumbering and fumbling” (119) and marked by an “excruciating tedium” (163)—into a gripping good read. Yet, with *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church*, John O’Malley has done just that. In his new book, O’Malley takes us from the early years of Pius IX’s papacy (which began with indications of a promising liberalism), through the kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara, the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception, and the infamous *Syllabus of Errors*, to the convocation of the First Vatican Council on 8 December 1869 as an expression of hardened resistance against the problems of rationalism, materialism, and religious indifference posed by the modern world. With characteristic economy and clarity, O’Malley tells the story of Vatican I and the making of the ultramontane church—and, most importantly, why it matters. “‘The past,’” he reminds us, citing Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*, both in the epigraph to the book and in its final sentence, “‘is never dead. It’s not even past.’” To what extent and in which ways the specter of Vatican I haunts the Catholic Church of today are questions that linger at the margins of the book, questions never answered directly by the author but posed, persistently, to the reader.

Vatican I, which joins David Kertzer’s *The Pope Who Would Be King* (2018), John McGreevy’s *American Jesuits and the World* (2016), and Nancy Schultz’s *Mrs. Mattingly’s Miracle* (2011) to fill out the picture of nineteenth-century Catholicism,

* John W. O’Malley, *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018) 320 pp., \$24.95 hb., ISBN 9780674979987. Page references appear in parentheses within the text.

is the outgrowth of O'Malley's dazzling, award-winning, and fifty-year scholarly career—and it shows. One of the delights of *Vatican I* is that it reads like a primer in church history from the Reformation through the Second Vatican Council, offering glimpses of critical moments in the European past, from the rise of the printing press to the florescence of the seventeenth-century Jansenist heterodoxy to the revival of Gregorian chant, all the while never losing sight of the ways in which each of these historical points took its place along the line that leads, in O'Malley's assessment, straight to Vatican I and the centralization of ecclesial authority in the hands of the pope. The focus of *Vatican I* is on *Pastor Aeternus*, the conciliar decree that defined papal primacy (“papal preeminence in governing”) and papal infallibility (“papal preeminence in teaching”) (6). Contextualizing the council within the broad penumbra of the political, cultural, and intellectual facts of Gallicanism, the French Revolution, the Italian Risorgimento, the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, Romanticism, liberalism, and the rise of historical-critical scholarship, O'Malley teases out from the tangled mess of early modern European history the several threads that, woven together, made of *Pastor Aeternus* a historical “inevitability” (21).

Over the space of five chapters (only two of which focus on the events of the council themselves), O'Malley explains how it is that the Catholic Church “in a relatively short time moved to a new and significantly more pope-centered mode” (1). It was not always the case that Catholic families the world over knew “the pope's name and recognized his face” (240); that papal visits and papal addresses drew crowds by the thousands; that popes enjoyed celebrity status in popular culture. Given the events of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—events which included no fewer than three papal exiles in fifty years—it would have been nearly impossible to imagine the resurrection of the papacy on the eve of Vatican I. Coupled with the significant challenges posed by emerging democratic forms of government and a growing confidence in the powers of human reason—not to mention the legacy of the French Revolution, which had devastated the institutional church both within and beyond France—these tumultuous circumstances would have seemed, to any reasonable observer, to have guaranteed the ebb and eventual eclipse of papal power and prestige.

It is to O'Malley's credit and an indication of his perspicuity as a historian that he can see, even within this shadowed prehistory of Vatican I, the seeds of what would become with *Pastor Aeternus* a full-throated assertion of ultramontanism (a term that translates literally as “the other side of the mountain” and came, by the early modern period, to indicate the exercise of papal power beyond Rome). The way O'Malley sees it, as much as the French Revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath, Enlightenment liberalism, and the general sociopolitical unrest that swept Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries called into question traditional faith and practice, they also created conditions just right for the revival of religion. The story of Vatican I, as O'Malley tells it, is one that ought to remind us that history is never

linear and modernity never monolithic, that perhaps what merits our attention as historians are the swirls and eddies within the main current as much as the velocity and direction of the current itself. This is not an argument for the reinscription of the popular/elite binary as a heuristic for understanding the past (which O'Malley rightly contests); rather, it is an argument for a sensitivity to minority positions, unintended consequences, and pockets of resistance and diversity that have the potential, slowly and over time, to reroute the flow of history.

The slow agglomeration of power that accrued to the Holy See over the course of the nineteenth century was not, as one might expect, kick-started by popes hungry for power but rather by clergy and laity who recognized in papal infallibility “the only viable answer to the cultural, political, and religious crisis ignited by the French Revolution and its pan-European Napoleonic aftermath” (3). For Catholics wary of the heavy hand of the state and alienated by the rapid changes wrought by the intellectual and cultural transformations of the eighteenth century and beyond, a robustly ultramontane church headed by an infallible pontiff promised a port in the storm. At various points on the narrative road to Vatican I, O'Malley illuminates unexpected twists and turns—such as (on a large scale) the birth of Romanticism as a reaction to the spiritual aridity of the Enlightenment and (on a small scale) the unexpectedly enthusiastic reception of the pope in Paris on the occasion of Napoleon's coronation—which, taken together, present a picture of Catholic resilience and tenacity against the currents of skepticism, secularism, and the state.

As it took shape over the course of the nineteenth century, the doctrine of papal infallibility rested less on theological grounds and more on political and practical ones. Papal primacy and infallibility, as O'Malley puts it, “were not abstract doctrines but newly discovered solutions to the problems of the day” (61). Although theologians like Jesuit Robert Bellarmine, one of the leading figures of the Catholic Reformation, had sounded the notes of ultramontanism as early as the turn of the seventeenth century, nineteenth-century iterations of papal primacy and infallibility went much further than Bellarmine could have imagined. For ultramontanists like Joseph Marie de Maistre, Henry Edward Manning, and others, the Holy See “was not merely the center and guarantor of the church's unity but the source of it” (62). Aided by the power of the press (more on that later), the ultramontane cause gathered steam over the nineteenth century until, by the time the bishops had assembled in Saint Peter's Basilica for the first church council in three hundred years, the issue had forced its way to the top of the agenda.

Already before the council opened, the stage was set for the eventual definition of the twin doctrines of papal primacy and infallibility. In contrast to past precedent, the agenda at Vatican I was set not by bishops but by commissions operating out of the papal curia whose job it was to prepare the documents that would form the basis for discussion at the council. O'Malley dedicates a considerable portion of the book's third chapter to a richly informed discussion of the preparatory work leading up to the council and the elaboration of conciliar procedures—the upshot

of which is to suggest that the deck was stacked from the beginning against those (including, perhaps most notoriously, John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton and Ignaz von Döllinger) who opposed the definition of papal infallibility. For all its shortcomings and imbalances, however, O'Malley concludes that Vatican I was fair—fair enough, anyway: “Whatever reservations one might have about Vatican Council I, its freedom should not be one of them” (231). Ultimately, of course, on 18 July 1870, just two months before the Italians captured Rome and forced Pius IX to retreat to the Vatican and adjourn the council, *Pastor Aeternus* passed by a final vote of 533 *placet* (for) and two *non placet* (against). Eventually, even those prelates who had objected to the definition and left Rome, rather than voting their consciences and sowing division among their ranks, signified their acceptance of the decree in the aftermath of its promulgation. It was a fitting end to the discussion and debate about a decree justified as a means of “safeguarding the unity of the church” (190).

What makes the story of *Pastor Aeternus* and its place within the broader context of Vatican I worth telling, however, are the many fissures that fractured the veneer of unity upon which its justification rested. O'Malley expertly exposes the fault lines in the ultramontane debate both before and during Vatican I—fault lines that crissed and crossed at unpredictable angles—generating a picture of almost dizzying complexity. Well before the council opened, proponents of ultramontanism defended the idea of a strong, centralized papal authority on a diversity of grounds. De Maistre founded his own apology for ultramontanism in *Du pape* (1825) on the practical and political argument that a papacy reformed in the model of an absolute monarchy offered the only guarantee of peace and stability in the Europe of the future. Felicité de Lammenais proposed instead something more like a theocratic democratic ultramontanism based on a balance between centralized papal authority and the usual array of liberal freedoms. In Germany, Joseph Görres (whose *Athenasius* [1837] invoked the Holy See as a counterbalance against the interference of the state) mobilized the emotional and sentimental piety of Romanticism in defense of the ultramontane cause; Prosper Louis Pascal Guéranger (abbot of Solesmes) linked ultramontanism to the movement for the revival of traditional Roman liturgy over and against local church innovations; William George Ward (probably the most extreme and voluble ultramontanist from across the Channel) framed papal supremacy as necessarily incompatible with liberalism and of the broadest possible reach.

Even as the diffuse debates surrounding ultramontanism crystalized into the issue of papal infallibility at Vatican I, the diversity of positions represented at the council persisted in ways belied by the simplicity of the final votes, which offered only the options of *placet* and *non placet*. Thankfully, and with the clear precision those familiar with his previous work have come to expect, O'Malley distills the key questions that drove the debates about infallibility at the council into a set of five related queries, each of which touched in different ways on the scope and

conditions of papal infallibility. First, how exactly did papal infallibility relate to the traditional infallibility of the church (which had, since the earliest councils, pronounced on matters of doctrinal orthodoxy)? Was papal infallibility separate from the infallibility of councils? Second, was papal authority absolute? Or was it, instead, subject to revision and “possible correction” (195) by church councils? Third, was papal infallibility personal, belonging to the pope himself and not just to “certain of his acts” (195)? Fourth, if not, what were the conditions necessary to make a papal pronouncement infallible? And finally, which kinds of things were properly the subject of papal infallibility, anyway?

In the fifth and final chapter of *Vatican I*, O’Malley gives his readers something best described as the post-game highlights of the debates on *Pastor Aeternus* that took place in the late spring of 1870. With brevity and clarity that omit nothing of the particularity of the positions expressed, O’Malley presents the principal points raised by figures like Louis-Édouard-François-Desiré Pie, François Victor Rivet, Karl Johann Greith, Karl Josef von Hefele, Emmanuel García Gil, Friedrich von Schwarzenberg, Paul Cardinal Cullen, Georges Darboy, Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler, William Clifford, and Henri Louis Charles Maret (intransigent opponent of the definition), among others. The net effect of O’Malley’s recapitulation of these discussions of *Pastor Aeternus* is the strong impression that even at this late date, a matter of months before the decree’s promulgation, the questions surrounding what would soon become the dogma of papal infallibility were alive, real, and many.

In the end, apologists for *Pastor Aeternus* “tried to dispel objections to it by insisting that it changed nothing and was simply a solemn affirmation of long-held beliefs” (225). While there is, indeed, precedent in ecclesial history for both some version of papal primacy (deemed the vicar of Christ and heir to Peter, the pope had for centuries enjoyed a preeminence among his episcopal peers) and papal infallibility (which grew out of the centuries-old notion of the inerrancy of the church in Rome), O’Malley is quite clear on whether the decree confirmed tradition or overturned it. *Pastor Aeternus*, admits O’Malley, lends itself both to broad interpretations that clearly exceed tradition and to narrow ones that hew more closely to it. Nonetheless, he argues, “even with a restricted interpretation, the decree amplified papal authority” (226) by the sheer fact of its having defined infallibility at all. “Traditional though the doctrines might have been,” he concedes, “their definition changed something and changed it to a considerable degree. It made the church more ultramontane” (226). There is an irony here. Even as the council defended *Pastor Aeternus* as but an affirmation of long-standing tradition, it broke with that tradition to create a novel status quo. Over and against the minority, who advocated emergent historical-critical methods that emphasized doctrinal change over time, the majority at Vatican I had insisted on the fixity of church doctrine, a theoretical position belied by the substantive changes to the structure of ecclesial authority by the definition of infallibility.

This is not the only irony of Vatican I as O'Malley renders it. Another is that the impetus for the definition of papal primacy and infallibility came not from the pope himself but from the laity and the bishops—ironically, because it was (arguably) at the expense of episcopal authority that papal authority asserted itself. The “initiative and orchestration” for the ultramontane movement that ended in the concentration of ecclesial power in the highest reaches of the church hierarchy “came from below” (76). In addition, there was an irony to the fact that the definition of papal infallibility in *Pastor Aeternus* by conciliar fiat rendered councils themselves irrelevant and outmoded (theoretically, anyway). Vatican II would turn out, of course, to soften the edges of the decree and prove the longevity of the conciliar institution, but in 1870 it was reasonable to assume that the age of church councils was over.

Perhaps the biggest irony of all, however, is this one: Conceived from the beginning as “a negative response to the modern world” (226) and “a solemn reaffirmation” of the *Syllabus of Errors* (which had condemned the idea that “the Roman Pontiff can reconcile himself and come to terms with progress, Liberalism, and modern civilization” [105]), Vatican I was nonetheless “a remarkably modern happening” (227). The character of the council as a profoundly global event was and could only have been a consequence of modern technologies of communication and transportation. O'Malley's sensitive treatment of the remarkable role played by the press in keeping the issue of papal infallibility alive and in courting public opinion in favor of the definition deserves particular attention here. Periodicals like *L'Univers*, *La Correspondence de Rome*, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, and the *Dublin Review* functioned like so many artificial limbs enabling and enhancing the work of the council well before it even opened in 1869. Modern forms of transportation, moreover, facilitated the attendance of bishops from as far away as North America, Africa, and Asia, making Vatican I the first genuinely worldwide ecumenical council. Even as it positioned itself as “a solemn and defiant statement against” nineteenth-century liberal modernity, Vatican I proved heavily dependent on it (2).

There is, however, a deeper sense in which the Vatican I that emerges from O'Malley's compelling history appears strikingly, almost quintessentially, modern. The queer meeting place of what Robert Orsi calls the “normative modern” and its orthogonal irritants, Vatican I was a modern happening, not in spite of its invocation of and fidelity to tradition but because of it.¹ Within the cavernous and poorly insulated space of Saint Peter's Basilica, “heterogenous temporalities of modernity” comingled and confronted each other in ways that seem so peculiarly to the modern period.² Arguments rooted in nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft* “based on the discovery and dispassionate analysis of new historical evidence and driven by the experimental testing of hypotheses” met counterarguments shaped

¹ Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016) 3.

² Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 21.

by a medieval scholastic philosophy and theology “based on authority and driven by logic and dialectics” (160); speeches delivered in Latin (long since dead as a spoken language) addressed the live issues of the place of the transcendent in a secularizing world; fidelity to tradition underwrote ultramontane innovations that ended in unprecedented innovations of papal authority. Read against the background of recent scholarship in the study of religion that, from various angles, contests the self-presentation of modernity as rational, disenchanted, material, naturalistic, and linear, Vatican I comes into focus as a site of radical and putatively impossible incongruities and, for that reason perhaps, the most modern of church councils in spite of itself.³

I would be remiss if I were to omit from this review essay any discussion of *Dei Filius*, “the forgotten decree of the council” and, in O’Malley’s own words, the “key to understanding” Vatican I (176). The first of the two constitutions approved by the council, *Dei Filius* took a stand on faith and reason in the modern world, making the basic but profound points that God exists, that God can be known, and that faith and reason are not incompatible. *Dei Filius*, writes O’Malley, “made a statement badly needed in a world that many religious people believed was in danger of going spiritually barren, of denying by word and deed the existence of anything beyond the material and the visible” (178). To be sure, there was something decidedly backward-looking about *Dei Filius*, particularly given its explicit rejection of *Wissenschaft* and adoption of “a style of thinking that rests upon abstract, ahistorical arguments” (177). But there was something almost prophetically forward-looking about the decree at the same time. In its insistence on the reality of things unseen, *Dei Filius* anticipates where at least some of us in the field of religious studies find ourselves today, face-to-face with religious experiences and histories that overflow the analytical capacities of the tools bequeathed to us by the natural and social sciences.⁴ In harmony with William James, John Dewey, Richard Rorty, Hannah Arendt, and others, each of whom in different ways challenges the sufficiency of naturalistic epistemologies, *Dei Filius* reminds us—not just faithful and practicing

³ See, for example, Orsi, *History and Presence*; Isaac Weiner, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams that Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscape*; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁴ Recent work that challenges the sufficiency of natural and social scientific methods as means of addressing the data of religion includes Tyler Roberts, “Between the Lines: Exceeding Historicism in the Study of Religion,” *JAAR* 74 (2006) 697–719; Robert A. Orsi, “2+2=5, or the Quest for an Abundant Empiricism,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 6 (2006) 113–21; idem, “The Problem of the Holy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (ed. Robert A. Orsi; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 84–105; idem, *History and Presence*; and Michael Jackson, *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Relatedness, Religiosity, and the Real* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). Jackson, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, 100.

Catholics but scholars invested in the secular study of religion, too—that there is more to human experience than what we can measure and explain.⁵ As the saying goes, everything old is new again.

⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); John Dewey, *Essays in Experimental Logic* (New York: Dover, 1953); idem, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, 1938); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); idem, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, Viking, 1968) 265–80.