CrossMark

Horizons, 41, pp. 340–343. © College Theology Society, 2014
doi:10.1017/hor.2014.74

REVIEW ESSAY

Aggiornamento? Catholicism from Gregory XVI to Benedict XVI. By Karim Schelkens, John A. Dick, and Jürgen Mettepenningen. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013. x + 237 pages. $149.00.

At the time Pope John XXIII convoked Vatican II, the church projected a sense of well-being, and in calling the council John XXIII appeared, at least on the surface, to want it simply to make improvements in an otherwise good situation. With hindsight, however, we see that things were not as rosy as they seemed. The cultural and political developments since the French Revolution had shaken Catholicism to its depths and challenged ways of thinking and behaving assumed to be eternally valid. The first culprits in destroying the illusion were three "revolutions"—Scientific, Industrial, and, of course, French. The world had never before known anything like them, taken either individually or as a combined force.

To the three revolutions must be added the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment, with its new philosophical systems that for mainstream thinkers consigned Aristotle to the past as little more than a marker along the long road to the brilliance of modernity. Moreover, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, a newly keen sense of history and historical development had emerged that was most pointedly symbolized by the publication in 1859 of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. This sharpened historical consciousness most directly challenged Catholicism when its methods were applied to sacred subjects, beginning with the Bible itself. Then the twentieth century brought its own revolutions—in technology, in the development of media of instantaneous communication, and in the bloody rejection of "the white man's burden," a new and great challenge for a Eurocentric church.

The cumulative effect of these developments constituted for Catholicism a crisis of greater breadth and depth than any it had ever faced before, all the more insidious for being hidden in plain sight. The church had willy-nilly fought a rearguard action against different aspects of the crisis, but it had never been in a situation where it could muster its forces in a concerted way to address the radical *aggiornamento* the situation required. Perhaps the best way to understand Vatican II is to see it as an official and globally organized effort to deal with this multifaceted crisis and to find ways to reconcile the church to the challenges it posed. The council had tools at hand to help it in the task, especially the great nineteenth-century *ressourcements* in the study of the Bible, the liturgy, and the Fathers, and in the piecemeal and often reluctant acceptance of the idea of doctrinal development. The drama

https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2014.74 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the council consisted in the contest between the reconcilers and those determined to stand pat. When the council ended in 1965, the reconcilers claimed victory.

But the compromises the reconcilers had been forced to make during the council came back afterward to bite them. They provided the wedge that would be used to question not simply specific provisions of the council but even its basic orientations. Those wielding the wedge were aided by the fact that the new literary forms of the council documents caught interpreters off guard. Even well-schooled theologians did not grasp how the new forms required new hermeneutics if the deepest meaning of the documents was to be grasped. As the twentieth century faded into the twenty-first, the hermeneutical confusion made room for such a one-sided stress on the council's continuity with past tradition that no room seemed to be left for its having intended any change at all. The basic question no longer seemed to be what happened at the council, but whether anything happened at all.

However, whether or not anything happened at the council, a lot happened in Catholicism in the half century after it ended. That half century brought with it another set of unprecedented and profound challenges for the church, some of which were undeniably due to the council, whether as the council was correctly or, as some would insist, as it was incorrectly interpreted and received. The challenge on the ground level was how the council affected "ordinary Catholics" in their ethical choices and fundamental attitudes toward the church. Related to the challenge, therefore, were the Catholic forms of the culture wars that erupted in the industrialized world in the late 1960s and that, somewhat transmogrified, are with us still. Just as the wars erupted, Paul VI published *Humanae Vitae,* thrusting the papal magisterium into the center of the uproar.

Other challenges arose from the new world order brought about by the collapse of Communism and the almost simultaneous rise of politically aggressive Islam. Genocides and massive migrations due to hunger, war, and persecution reached new and ghastly proportions. Striking closer to home was the radical reorientation of bioethical and biopolitical issues related to sexuality, gender, reproduction, new medical technologies, population, and other environmental concerns. Meanwhile, in the 1990s the sexual-abuse scandal broke in Boston and soon became church-wide. It was joined just a little later by the scandal of the Vatican bank. The scandals severely compromised the moral authority of an institution seemingly incapable of keeping its own hands clean.

Until now we have lacked a study that provides a historical and theological overview of these past two centuries, but one has now appeared in the book under review. All three authors are graduates of the Katholieke Universiteit in

https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2014.74 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Leuven (KUL). John A. Dick, senior member of the team, is an American academic who has made his home in Belgium for the past several decades, during which time he has held several administrative and faculty positions at KUL as well as elsewhere in Belgium. The other members of the team are much more junior. Karim Schelkens received his doctorate in theology from KUL in 2007, and Jürgen Mettepenningen received his in 2008.

The authors set themselves a daunting task: a book with a chronological scope from Gregory XVI to Benedict XVI that aims to "integrate both institutional church history and historical theology" (4). The authors therefore designed the book to move "along two axes, which continually interact." The first is "the classic problem of the tension between faith and reason"; the second, "the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the (religious or non-religious) other" (3).

The authors are well prepared for the task, and the scope of the book gives free range to their erudition. They cite a stunning array of titles, which are assembled into an extensive and helpful bibliography. They deserve credit for seeing how badly such a compendious survey is needed and for rising to the challenge. The very insight that the past two centuries need to be treated as a unit that is more or less cohesive is one of the book's most obvious merits.

The book is uneven. There is much in it to commend. Among its highlights is the five-point analysis of Ultramontanism (4). Another is the twenty pages devoted to Vatican I (39–60). Although the council is certainly one of the most defining events of modern Catholicism, it rarely receives such extended treatment in historical accounts. It would be difficult, moreover, to improve on the summary statement concluding the section on Vatican II: "Clearly, as those at Vatican II discovered, a plurality of continuities and discontinuities can be detected when retracing the evolution of contemporary Catholicism" (161).

Yet, there is much that is problematic. In an effort to be comprehensive, the authors seem to feel constrained not to let any detail escape notice, no matter how fleetingly. The text sometimes devolves almost into a chronicle —that is, into listings of authors and happenings. Thus the force and significance of events are lost, sometimes to the point of distortion. To say, for instance, of the abbey of Solesmes only that it "would remain influential in Roman Catholic liturgical developments" hardly indicates the impact Dom Prosper Guéranger had in jump-starting those developments (33–34). To say that in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair "Catholics too were considered suspicious" of anti-Semitic attacks on Jews whitewashes the fact that it was precisely Catholics who led the attacks (62). To say of Piux X's encyclical *Pascendi* only that it "urged Catholic scholars to stick with the neo-scholastic paradigm," and not to mention that it enjoined the extraordinarily harsh

https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2014.74 Published online by Cambridge University Press

provisions that traumatized so many Catholic academics, destroyed their careers, and cast a pall over Catholic intellectual life for decades amounts, wittingly or unwittingly, to a badly misleading euphemism (86). The book has many such lapses.

Although *Aggiornamento?* is therefore sometimes curious in what it mentions, in what it omits, in what it emphasizes, and, more often, in what it fails to emphasize, it does provide us with the basic ground plan that we have lacked up to this point. For that, as well as for many of its other qualities, we must be grateful. In the final analysis, my criticisms must be understood in the context of the formidable obstacles the authors faced in dealing with this long and unprecedentedly complex period in the history of Catholicism.

JOHN W. O'MALLEY
Georgetown University

https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2014.74 Published online by Cambridge University Press