

Marks of Modernity: The Counter-Reformation as a Response to the Emerging Modern Age

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The perceived narrative that the Counter-Reformation was an equal and opposite reaction to the Protestant Reformation proves to be a misunderstanding of the history and impetus of the Catholic Church of the time. This article offers corrections to this sometimes misguided understanding and provides insights into the more nuanced complexities of the overall motivation of the Catholic Church. This motivation was not so much an attempt to maintain rigid adherence to its internal *status quo*, along with its hold on the population of Europe, but more of a conscious evolution to meet and adapt to the catalysts for the calls to reform, namely here, the printing press and accompanying literacy along with a changing ontological view of existence initiated by scientific discoveries of the time.

Although the medieval trials of plague, famine, and war continued into the Renaissance, the increase of wealth, knowledge, and culture of the time gave people more confidence and security. Naturally, the situation as it unfolded is much more complex than a few short pages can convey. Suffice it to say, however, that the predominant impression that we have of the time is that the rise in wealth, power, and resources also corrupted many, most certainly including those in charge of Rome and the Catholic Church. This is the reason given for the rise of the Protestant Revolution: the endangered Church had a fight

on its hands and fight it did. With momentum given to the Catholic Counter-Reformation by the Jesuits, the Church held its ground and sought to keep its flock in the fold. Yet the real history of the Christian religion in Western Europe is more nuanced and complex than that.

Modern scholarship has altered the perspective that corruption alone led to Reformation. Instead, 'Now, all would agree that "the age was one of astonishing religious creativity" (Rice, 1970) and current historians judge the church's condition to have been "reasonably healthy" (Chaunu, 1989) ... Further, most accept that the Reformation was a rebellion over theology, not abuses. Reform was high on the agenda throughout the fifteenth century and was under way well before Luther ...'.¹ Jones further cautions that 'We must be careful. Doctrine, not abuses, was the real issue between Protestants and Catholics'.² There was a need and desire for Reform at the time, but it was not the all-or-nothing situation we commonly perceive. 'While there had been heresies and schisms before the Reformation, the sheer range of doctrines disputed represented an unprecedented threat'.³ This is not to say that there was no corruption and abuse. Jones is careful to point out that the received narrative of corruption and immorality in the power structure of the Church did play a part in the call for Reform, but that they were symptoms of a larger problem: 'The root cause (of the call for Reformation) was a lack of vocation for the priestly office; commitment to the spiritual and moral welfare of a congregation was rare'.⁴ He confirms that 'Traditional explanations of papal worldliness and corruption, indifference and inertia, are all valid'.⁵ In centuries past, people would remain relatively oblivious to issues and concerns that affected other congregations and much of those that affected the Church as a whole. However, the end of the Middle Ages is marked by an end to this lack of awareness and, more importantly, lack of direct familiarity

1 Martin D.W. Jones, *The Counter-Reformation: Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe*. (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1995), 28.

2 Ibid., 4.

3 Ibid., 69.

4 Ibid., 33.

5 Ibid., 44.

with doctrine and sacred texts. During the time of the Reformation, the range of doctrines and common knowledge of them was more widespread than ever before because of one of the most significant – if not *the* most significant – invention of the late Middle Ages: the printing press.

Outreach / Printing

It is tempting to entertain the thought that the media battle of the Reformation was also the first large-scale print media campaign ever and perhaps, therefore, one of many barometric marks of modernity. Carl F. Kaestle states that:

Print had a bridging, unifying effect in science, but it had a divisive, fragmenting effect in religion, making possible pamphlet wars and doctrinal polarization. Within religion print fostered both modern criticism and resistant fundamentalism.⁶

Print, and the literacy necessary to utilize it, was a revolution in itself that led to others in Europe, most certainly including the Protestant Revolution. A. G. Dickens notes the importance of the proliferation of printing presses ‘gave the Reformers a weapon hitherto unknown in Christian schisms, and one raise to a new potency by the literary genius of Luther.’ This caused Protestant publications to greatly outnumber Catholic defense publications in the 1520s: ‘By the time Catholic publicists recaptured an adequate sector of the press their cause had sustained some incurable wounds’.⁷ Similarly, Kaestle writes that ‘Although the Counter-Reformation had placed Catholics in support of schooling and vernacular Bible reading, the effort lacked the intensity of Protestant concern for lay reading’.⁸ The effects of

6 Carl F. Kaestle, *The History of Literacy and the History of Readers*. In ‘*Review of Research in Education*’ 12 (1985), 11–53, 19.

7 A.G. Dickens, *The Counter-Reformation*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), 35.

8 Kaestle, *The History of Literacy*, 22.

literacy were a major contributing factor to the rise of the demand for reformation in the Catholic Church and they were a powerful factor in leading people to dissent with the Catholic Church to the point of separation. In 1600, the combined urban and rural literacy rate in Western Europe was around 35-40%. From then forward, mass literacy began to develop, significantly raising those percentages ever since.⁹ This had profound effects in Europe as there grew to be a north-south bias, as Kaestle describes it, in which literacy rates tended to be higher in Protestant countries than in Catholic ones.¹⁰ The power of the printing press, combined with the rise of literacy that was supported in the Protestant lay population, put the Catholics at a disadvantage. The power that literacy grants us is unquestionable. As we well know in the modern age, however, that power is not always rightly used, whether intentional or not. The results of such campaigns are almost entirely dependent upon the efficacy with which literature is wielded. Jones mentions that it seemed that ‘consumer demand, it seemed, would determine the outcome (of the schism in the Church)’¹¹—arguably, another indication of modernity. Catholic supporters had a difficult time since ‘They printed, and preached, far too little. Targeted very narrowly at the clergy, princes and councilors, their works were too scholarly, too defensive, and far too rarely tried to show why Protestantism was wrong’.¹² Essentially, the two sides were waging war on two different battlegrounds. The Catholics maintained the thousand-year-old tradition of the Church hierarchy, debating and initiating ecclesiastical changes. It was kept in the esoteric circles of the official Church. The Protestants’ campaign, not having such a rigid structure of hierarchy and command, waged battle in the hearts and minds of the laypeople. The growth of the movement is attributable to a high level of memetic potency paired with this new means of proliferation. It caused the consideration of reformation to become a full-blown crisis for the Church. It seems that

9 Ibid., 20, 21.

10 Ibid., 22.

11 Jones, *The Counter-Reformation*, 53.

12 Ibid., 54.

the urgency was needed, however, if anything was going to happen – another reason for the vivacity of the Protestant movement. Jones identifies the indifference of ecclesiastical leadership for nearly a century in the preceding years: ‘From the death of Pius II in 1464, popes were conspicuous for their lack of commitment to reformation’,¹³ and ‘Only with Julius III (elected 1550) did (popes) begin once again to act as if they possessed the universal spiritual leadership they claimed’.¹⁴ The time in-between was time lost for the prevention of what was to come.

Though the Church was making motions of reform starting as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century,¹⁵ the change did not occur in time to prevent schism. It was the inaction of Catholic leaders, rather than any of their actions, which drove people to initiate reform on their own: ‘Indeed, most people despaired of papal-led reform – hence the patchwork of individual, localized initiatives ...’.¹⁶ These independent, unsanctioned movements – along with the momentum that the printing press gave to the Protestant movement – put pressure on the Church to act faster than it was ready to. The Church found itself still in need of internal reform, but now was pressed by the emergence of Protestantism and the many off-shoots that formed because of it.¹⁷ ‘The shock of Protestant dissent and revolt proved the catalyst which made reform more earnest, more urgent. The rapid spread of Protestantism altered the pace and direction of change’.¹⁸ It was a shocking development, but it would be an error to think that the Catholic Church was cornered. They were still very much a dominant and powerful organization, and they knew it. O’Connell writes:

... that revival of Catholicism which usually goes by the name Counter Reformation cannot be adequately explained

13 Ibid., 44.

14 Ibid., 79.

15 Ibid., 4.

16 Ibid., 44.

17 Ibid., 57.

18 Ibid., 4.

as a frightened response to the Protestant record of success, impressive as that record may have been. ... But, as Professor Evennett has written, 'The Counter Reformation could hardly have occurred had it been no more than the hastily improvised defense of the vested interests of an ecclesiastical corporation bereft of contemporary or future spiritual significance'.¹⁹

The Protestant movement, however, did lend an impetus toward Catholic action: 'The general fear of social and religious chaos helped Catholicism far more than it helped Luther and Calvin'.²⁰ Jones agrees, saying, 'The shock of Protestant dissent and revolt proved the catalyst which made reform more earnest, more urgent'.²¹ O'Connell discusses issues specifically in the Polish-Lithuanian Catholic Church but notes that those internal problems were the same as elsewhere: 'political bishops, ignorant priests, venal monks, pluralism, concubinage, superstition, religious foundations falling into ruin, morale wrecked apparently beyond remedy. It was little wonder that Protestantism should achieve striking gains among a people so badly served'.²² There was believer – or perhaps, consumer – demand. It was only a matter of time before it had to be met one way or another.

Catholicism needed to make an adaptive shift to maintain its high level of memetic fecundity. This is nothing new as belief systems must constantly adapt to the needs of their followers. If they do not, they become irrelevant, stagnate, and are replaced or at least blended with other more viable or relevant practices and beliefs, all of which did happen at the time. Along with the internal press for change, the external world was changing in a way that would force the Church to respond as well. After a thousand-year or more reign over knowledge and information in the Western world and, most importantly, the power to interpret what it meant according to subjective Truth of Christian

19 Marvin R. O'Connell, *The Counter-Reformation, 1559-1610*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 29.

20 Dickens, *The Counter-Reformation*, 33.

21 Jones, *The Counter-Reformation*, 4.

22 O'Connell, *The Counter-Reformation*, 213.

doctrine, the Church was finding new evidence and discoveries harder to weave into its meta-narrative. The first sign of doubt or hesitation after adamant authoritarianism was, to some eyes, a sign of weakness and one uncertainty was enough to topple the entire edifice. The Renaissance and periods after saw the rise of empiricism and the beginnings of what would lead to the Enlightenment, which some claim to be the death-nail in the coffin made of the Reformation of the Catholic Church. For others, it was an opportunity to prove the resilience and adaptability of the Universal Church.

Changing View of the Universe

One major indicator of the advent of the modern world was the role of science in the shift in perspective of popular ontological philosophy. Innovations in observational technology, paired with the recovery of ancient Greek and Moslem manuscripts that had been lost to that point, combined to present alternative and irrefutable knowledge which countered the meta-narrative of reality that had been purported by the Church for centuries. Through history, it had been easier for the Church to suppress and sometimes eradicate outside knowledge that would challenge the way people viewed and interacted with existence. When Galileo, for instance, looked through the lenses of his newly created telescope, it became visibly clear that the planets were entire worlds and that they were very, very far away. Jones quotes Scarre, who speaks of the enormous consequences of this knowledge:²³

The revelations of Galileo (d. 1642) and Newton (d. 1727) on the machine-like working of the universe according to fixed laws elbowed out supernatural answers to mysterious events. While some would eventually apply Descartes and Newton to doubt the

23 It must be acknowledged here that the quote below does not imply that the Church readily and willingly accepted these discoveries and their implications. Of the examples following, Galileo's fate at the hands of the Church is well known and Newton identified as an Anglican.

existence of God, the 'clockwork universe' immediately cut the ground from under demons and, at an intellectual level, destroyed rational belief in witchcraft.²⁴

Along with witchcraft, the negative pole of the spiritual and metaphysical, there came similar questioning of the positive pole, the Church. Though the debate has continued since, the thinkers and theologians of the Baroque era, whether Catholic or not, created and realized ways in which their God could be compatible with these new findings about the universe and its workings. Though knowledge had changed, their God was still behind it and its workings. Jones mentions the revival of Thomism in the 16th century: 'Thomism asserted that the universe operated according to divinely created natural laws, which people could comprehend by reason. Further, it denied any distinction between the natural and the supernatural for everything operated according to divine authority under those universal natural laws'. Philosophies such as Thomism created a compromise between what would seem to be two incompatible theories of existence. This, of course, prompted more evolutions in the Church as a whole and its doctrines and teachings.

One of these major changes was humanity's view of itself and its role in existence. An ancient debate in theology is that over free will and destiny. The natural-divine law compromise, paired with the results of the proceedings of the Council of Trent held from 1545 to 1563, established new orientations by which to see and understand the workings of the world and the increased role of the individual within it. Rather than being casualties in the supernatural war between God and the devil, Man now had some role to play in his own fate.²⁵ This carried forward through the centuries and was brought to the theological forefront when we realized that God was literally further from us than we had originally thought. Historically, this was not always the case as in the ancient and medieval world; knowledge of the spirit and knowledge of the world were not mutually exclusive. Science traditionally did

24 Jones, *The Counter-Reformation*, 124.

25 *Ibid.*, 125.

not seek to discredit religion or the existence of the Christian God but sought to understand God and the world that had been made. Science did not suddenly begin with the Enlightenment. There is a history through the late Middle Ages as alchemy became chemistry and the scientific discoveries and mathematical developments of the Islamic East worked their way into the knowledge base of the scholars of the West. Although the natural scientists of these centuries did not set out to create a division between their scientific work and their assumed spiritual axioms, what their work discovered had that effect. W. T. Stace explains that a good deal of the mental shift of the time is due to astronomical discoveries and realizations. Most important was that of the heliocentric universe. With this discovery, man was no longer at the center of existence. Stace explains that as these astronomical theories were developed, theories that were proposed that kept an active and omnipresent God in the everyday workings of the universe were continually explained through natural causes.²⁶ God was distanced not just in the minds of Western people, but there came to be an actual physical distance as He was pushed to the outer reaches of the solar system spatially and to *in illo tempore*, in the sense of Eliade, temporally.²⁷ We must be careful lest we fall into the popular assumption that these men of observation and exploration (now called ‘scientists’) were working to bring down the Church. Quite the contrary. There is much to support the firm belief and religious nature of many of these men. In fact, the Catholic Church has been and still is a major player in the field of science and discovery. This change in the knowledge of the universe and its operations, however, did have a role in contributing to the momentum behind the calls for reformation and the results thereof.

26 W.T. Stace, *Religion and the Modern Mind*. (Philadelphia: Lippencott, 1960), 91-92.

27 *Ibid.*, 94, 95.

Ordinary People in the Ordinary World

For those people of the time who were not part of the hallowed halls of metaphysical and spiritual thought, having the correct view and approach to existence was the main concern. One impetus for the drive for change in the Church from the laypeople was the impossibility of the achievement of perfection as it was defined by the Church.²⁸ ‘Anxious fears for the soul’s fate, of indeterminate punishment in purgatory and the eternal flames of hell troubled many a mind’.²⁹ Justification – that is, being acceptable to God – was achieved through grace granted by God, but that purifying grace could always be undermined by sin,³⁰ and so people—uneducated and always in fear of the terrors of everyday life—also lived in constant anxiety of their eternal status as well. ‘Whether or not Christianity was a mere veneer, while priests talked of sin and the hope of heaven, people seem to have thought more immediately of survival, looking to safeguard their family and community against the problems and misfortunes of life in an enchanted but dangerous universe: “Popular religion was primarily functional, not devotional” (Monter, 1983)’.³¹ With the example of the Calvinists in Germany: ‘their conversion pointed more toward an assertion of independence of a Catholic king than toward a depth of personal conviction’.³² Regardless of individuals’ reasons for their participation or devotion to the Church, fear and uncertainty surrounded them from all sides.

As we know from basic human psychology, this could be quite mentally and emotionally burdensome, if not traumatizing.³³ It seems that this issue was in the midst of being addressed when the need for reform came to a head: ‘In the 15th century priests increasingly

28 Kathleen Cohen, *Metamorphosis of a Death Symbol: the Transi Tomb in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973), 4, 5.

29 Jones, *The Counter-Reformation*, 7.

30 Ibid., 10.

31 Ibid., 119.

32 O’Connell, *The Counter-Reformation*, 213.

33 It should be noted here that Jones contests the ‘burden thesis,’ claiming that it has little to no scholarly support (19). Further discussion in his text seems to contradict this claim (30, 37, 49).

counselled and guided, examined consciences and used guilt to reform behaviour. The emphasis was shifting more and more to the pastoral rather than the disciplinary'.³⁴ Even so, it was not enough to counter the swell of separatist reform. 'The appeal of primitive Protestantism lay in its simplicity; with a stroke it swept away the tangle of theory and practice which over a thousand years had grown up within the Western church, and so it freed the believer to seek out the one thing necessary. The Protestant movement was a real revolution because it effected a radical change in the view people had of their relationship to God ...'.³⁵ When a believer has a close, personal relationship with God, the uncertainty of approval, as determined by a third-party, the clergy, was alleviated. People could understand the theoretical workings of salvation in its clarified form and could also act personally in order to seek forgiveness if they erred. 'Luther had found a non-medieval solution that assuaged those medieval anxieties and made redundant the church's sacramental system: justification by faith. In that therapeutic power of Protestant theology to liberate people from fear lay the greater threat (to Catholicism)'.³⁶ This is a telling observation as it reinforces that the greater power on human minds lies in fear rather than hope. Hope can be realized and become a catalyst for behavior, but the fear must be confronted and alleviated first.

Ecclesiastical Schism

In 1536, Pope Paul III convoked a council which produced the *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia*. It is:

... a warts and all' report on the state of the church and the means of regeneration. That the *Consilium* confined its eyes to Italy reveals how myopic still was the view from the papal heights. Germany and Protestants did not figure in their thinking. That in itself, however, serves to remind us once again that the agenda of reform was not set and dictated by the Reformation.³⁷

34 Jones, *The Counter-Reformation*, 17.

35 O'Connell, *The Counter-Reformation*, 28-29.

36 Jones, *The Counter-Reformation*, 49.

37 *Ibid.*, 44-45.

Though reform was a salient topic through the decades, the Colloquy of Regensburg in 1541, which was meant to mend the rifts in Christianity, only made it clear that though Catholics and Protestants ‘agreed on all essentials of Christianity and disagreed only on issues that were *adiaphora* (irrelevant to salvation)’ (61), the rift arose from ‘the conflict between two different ways of understanding Catholicism itself’.³⁸ Despite the impasses and lack of reconciliation over the years, this should not be seen as the Catholic Church digging in its heels and refusing to change. Jones argues that ‘Calls for reform could provide evidence that the late medieval church was not only alive but adaptable, busily maintaining its relevance and membership in the fast-shifting sands of an era of unprecedented cultural, social, economic, and political change’.³⁹ The change demanded by the Protestant Reformers, however, was beyond the pale of what would be considered to be ‘adaptability’ by the Church leaders.

Despite the many efforts at reconciliation and shared agreement on a number of doctrines, the differences were enough to cause separation. The final effort at complete reconciliation, the Colloquy of Regensburg, ended in deadlock.⁴⁰ Following, it was shared general opinion that a Council would eventually heal the rift, yet Popes Leo X and Clement VII feared that their power would be curtailed during such a gathering. Pope Paul III and Emperor Charles of Rome both recognized that a Council was needed to resolve the issue, though they differed in their opinions as to what needed to be accomplished in said Council.⁴¹ When the attempt at a Reform Council was made in 1545, the Council of Trent convened. Jones writes that those in attendance were still largely unaware of the true nature of the Protestant movement: ‘Until a significant French contingent arrived in 1562, almost none had any first-hand experience of the Reformation crisis. ... Inadequate in representations and ignorant of Reformation

38 Ibid., 61.

39 Ibid., 28.

40 Ibid., 61.

41 Ibid., 65-66.

realities, (the Council) never tried to comprehend the heretics'.⁴² The Council instead organized its case against the Protestants and secured their own position: 'the Roman church affirmed its teaching authority and declared itself the only infallible judge',⁴³ yet this was not merely a meeting to form an organized attack against Protestantism. The Council had 'a capacity for self-criticism then rare in ecclesiastical assemblies, a passionate desire to reform and to save the Holy Catholic Church'.⁴⁴ The priority became the salvation of the Church itself for those who adhered to it, rather than trying to mend the schism with the Protestant movement. Protestants were offered the opportunity to declare fealty to the Church given the results of the Council, but ultimately still found it to be disagreeable to their ideological convictions. In the end, in the December of 1563, the Council of Trent adjourned, successful in uniting the Catholic Church internally: 'Trent was far more than a declaration of war upon Protestant heresies. It was also a victory of some Catholic tendencies over other tendencies ...'.⁴⁵ The determinations of the Council of Trent created a reformed Catholic Church – one that today we would recognize as 'modern.'

42 Ibid., 68; Dickens, *The Counter-Reformation*, 109.

43 Jones, *The Counter-Reformation*, 69.

44 Dickens, *The Counter-Reformation*, 112.

45 Ibid., 132.