

Resurgent Rome

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A generation ago, mainstream Christianity was widely dismissed as *démodé*. This verdict itself looks old-fashioned today. Whether you view recent developments with relief or unease, it is clear that the Catholic Church, in particular, remains remarkably robust. There are now almost as many Catholics as citizens of China. Secularists might be surprised to learn that the Church is the largest single supplier of health care and education on the planet, the principal glue of civil society in Africa, the strongest bulwark of opposition to the caste system in India, and a leading player in global campaigns for sustainable living. It provides almost the only charitable presence in Chechnya, and other blackspots often forgotten by the rest of the world. Yet these marks of health contrast sharply with the often poor standard of the Church's leadership. The anomaly is crystallized by the position of Catholic women. If access to education forms one of the most important strands in a girl's advancement, then the Church gets a major part of the equation wholly right. At the same time, it makes a catastrophic mistake in continuing to teach that all artificial contraception is sinful. When the Pope spells out what he holds to be a corollary of this teaching – that the provision of condoms makes the spread of HIV more likely – then wrong-headedness shades into chronic irresponsibility.

Ian Linden begins his admirable new book with a Chinese proverb: when a tree falls it makes a big noise, when a forest grows nobody hears anything. Media interest in ecclesiastical affairs tends to focus on the falling trees reflected in sex scandals, "unholy rows" and popes who demonstrate their fallibility. Global Catholicism does not evade these topics, but the book's starting point lies a long way from the marble halls of the Vatican and its sheltered inhabitants. The main task Linden sets himself is to chart how a Eurocentric body which had largely spread in the wake of empire has evolved over the past half-century into the world's most diverse and far-flung organization.

To clear the ground, he traces the process by which the Church, once notorious for the slogan "error has no rights", began a rapprochement with the contemporary world in the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), and recovered long-buried strands of its own tradition in the process. Linden gives us a dialectical tour d'horizon, in which apparently contradictory notions are shown to reflect significant portions of the truth. Do liberal democracy and science itself owe far more to theology than many secularists realize? Yes. But was nineteenth-century secularism a necessary corrective to ecclesiastical and other forms of unaccountable authority? Certainly. Did Vatican intransigence greatly intensify because of the aggressively anti-Catholic policies seen in Bismarck's Kulturkampf, for example, and under France's Third Republic? Yes. Was Pius XII right to judge that Hitler's anti-Stalinist credentials constituted a virtue that outweighed his vices? No, but that judgement is easier to make in hindsight. Similar kinds of consideration apply to internal debate between Christians. A Protestant view of the papacy is likely to concentrate on the damaging effects of Vatican authoritarianism. As is often pointed out, the absolute power enjoyed by popes over the past 150 years was only made possible by the railways. Before the spread of modern communications, ideas about the universal reach of papal jurisdiction could be more a matter of theory than of practice. On the other hand, Catholics might reply with some justice that a major part of papal history in recent centuries has consisted in a necessary and reasonably effective bid to protect the Church from secular interference. The example of Russia and other Orthodox countries, where religion has long been locked in a suffocating embrace with nationalist forces, goes some way to vindicating Vatican policy.

In short, Linden subverts easy answers to the big questions he poses. His discussion is consistently fair-minded. Typically, a reasoned, pro-Vatican thesis will lead within a few pages to an equally compelling antithesis – in this case that Benedict XVI and his twentieth-century predecessors have been unduly reluctant to delegate power. In any case, whether the Pope likes it or not, Africans and Asians are not just converts to or opponents of Catholicism. They have long been critical agents in missionary work, given the small number of expatriate missionaries in relation to the size of these continents and their populations. Who are the nurses and other staff in church-run hospitals? Who are the teachers in the mission schools and colleges? Who are the indigenous evangelists and "Bible women" who tour villages across huge parts of the globe? Linden understands that such people are not only physical intermediaries with vastly varied local societies, but also "translators" in a deep sense, as they interpret Christianity in local languages and cultures.

All this and much else is charted in *Global Catholicism*, which demonstrates strong familiarity with church life across much of the world, especially Latin America. The author was formerly director of the Catholic Institute for International Relations, a respected think-tank, and has a fund of knowledge to put the concerns of Europeans and North Americans in perspective. As he remarks tartly at one point:

The bioethics that matter [in the developing world] are not stem-cell research but whether governments will find enough money to put in their health budgets for mothers to survive childbirth and their children to reach the age of five years old. Preoccupations are more mundane: clinics too far away with no drugs, police and officials who are crooks, land reform, drought, dirty water and crop failure.

Despite his focus on the grass roots, Linden's assessment of the Pope is especially germane, because Joseph Ratzinger is a chameleon who embodies many of the contradictions that in turn map on to other disputes about church government, the limits of diversity, and the terms on

which the Church should operate in an often hostile public forum. At a deeper level lie abstract but crucial questions about what is known as theological anthropology. The Church teaches that all people are created in God's image, and therefore that all contain a spark of divinity. But how brightly does the spark shine? Christians with a sunnier estimate of human nature will tend to take a more positive view of non-Christian cultures. Those who insist that the divine spark is all but obliterated by sin will be far less optimistic.

Ratzinger is often thought to stand in the latter camp. On his election in 2005, he was widely portrayed as the hardline architect of a return to more centralized forms of church government seen during the 1980s and 90s. Critics charged him with high-handedness; even many observers without an axe to grind saw the former Cardinal as a contemporary Grand Inquisitor. He is no stranger to severe misjudgements, but his record overall has long been hard to summarize simply. In the first place, Ratzinger was a poacher-turned-gamekeeper. As an independent-minded young priest, he had often remarked sotto voce on the sterile intellectual atmosphere in the Church, and even put his name to a statement complaining that the hierarchy had "reins that are far too tight, too many laws, many of which have helped to leave the century of unbelief in the lurch, instead of helping it to redemption". He served as a peritus, or theological expert, at Vatican II, and, despite his youth, helped draft some of the most effective interventions made by a leading reformer, Cardinal Josef Frings. The Council led to the greatest shake-up in church life for four centuries. *Gaudium et Spes* (Joy and Hope), one of its most important documents, displays a notably open-handed attitude towards secular culture: "The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts".

Shortly afterwards, however, Ratzinger experienced a vertiginous dialectical moment of his own. Along with the future John Paul II, he began to wonder whether the Church hadn't embraced the world just as secular society was moving in another direction. He judged *Gaudium et Spes* to be spiritually flabby, grafting Christian vocabulary on to what was essentially sociological analysis, and reflecting a neglect of the gospel's status as Good News, not merely good advice. His fears were boosted by what struck him as the gross excesses of the student sit-ins of 1968, which he witnessed as a newly appointed professor at Tübingen University in Swabia. While some of his colleagues viewed the tide of rebellion as nugatory, Ratzinger saw a far more sinister force at work. He became convinced that Marxist influences were deeply rooted across Europe and Latin America, and were poisoning the Church in consequence. (With the eclipse of Marxism, he now views postmodern relativism as the most insidious contemporary threat to Christian and civilized values.)

His outlook on church affairs, and on human nature generally, grew ever more pessimistic during the 1970s, a trend constantly reflected in his work. His books – especially the bestselling *Introduction to Christianity* – were greatly admired by Pope Paul VI, who plucked him from what might have been a life of academic obscurity and appointed him Archbishop of Munich in 1977. Even greater honours were to follow. The newly elected John Paul II saw Ratzinger as an important ally, and wanted him on the inside track in Rome. He became Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1981. Having been placed in a quasi-judicial role, he ought to have kept his own highly partisan opinions under wraps. Critics of Ratzinger's tenure as the Vatican's doctrinal overseer tend to base their arguments on reservations about his combined status as referee and player.

That he sometimes displayed excessive zeal is evidenced by the stream of fiercely worded documents flowing from the Cardinal's pen during the period. Among the most contentious of these was *The Ratzinger Report* (1984), which originated as an extended interview with Vittorio Messori, an Italian journalist. The book gives an almost unremittingly downbeat verdict on church life during the previous two decades, and implies that a genie was let out of the bottle in the aftermath of Vatican II:

A new Catholic unity had been hoped for. Instead, a dissent has divided us which, in the words of [Pope Paul VI], has gone from self-criticism to self-destruction . . . I have the impression that the misfortunes that the Church has encountered in the last twenty years are to be ascribed less to the "true" Council than . . . to the fact that latently present polemical and centrifugal forces have [generated] a cultural crisis in the West, where the affluent middle class . . . with its liberal-radical ideology of individualistic, rationalistic, hedonistic character, is placing Christian values fundamentally in question.

Liberal Catholics were repeatedly accused of selling the pass. The preface to *Introduction to Christianity* illustrates Ratzinger's point with a parable called "Honest Jack". A man carrying a burdensome lump of gold exchanged it successively for a horse, a cow, a goose and a whetstone, "which he finally threw into the water without losing much; on the contrary, what he now gained in exchange, so he thought, was the precious gift of complete freedom". For Ratzinger, this tale was a warning to theologians drawing ever closer to secular norms, and offering the rest of society less and less in which to disbelieve in consequence. Add together beliefs about the truth of Christianity and the concealment of this truth by sin, and it is not hard to see the inference many might draw: that discipleship is more about duties than rights, and a global Church must be subject to strong central controls.

Some of Ratzinger's cavils are reasonable. More liberal Christian bodies tend to be a good deal more divided than the Roman Catholics, and in Britain, Anglican congregations have declined as steeply as anywhere else in the world. Yet many of his jeremiads are not only exaggerated but offensive. He effectively insulted other Christians in documents such as *Ad Tuendam Fidem* (For the Defence of the Faith, 1998) and *Dominus Iesus* (2000) – released with John Paul's blessing, but produced under Ratzinger's supervision – which assert that non-Christians and even non-Catholics are in grave spiritual peril. In 2001, a hardline Vatican condemnation of homosexual partnerships mentioned neither the love gay partners bear for one another, nor the Church's love for them.

Behind these and other episodes lies an awkward reality: that Vatican II was a half-revolution which has left the Church abidingly uncertain about its relationship with the world. Traditionalists of a philosophical bent (including eminent thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre) rebut

liberalism in serious terms. They hold that the ethic of self-sacrificial love on which Christianity is based implies a certain kind of community based not on liberal principles of contract and non-interference, but on shared meanings and projects. Liberals, of course, feel vindicated by the same data. Their argument hinges on the undeniable reality of pluralism, and the allied belief that shallower social bonds are both more realistic and more desirable than the chimerical goal of “thick” unity.

As a conservative liberal, Linden points out the problems with Ratzinger’s arguments (including his oddly un-Catholic resistance to the notion that tradition evolves and doctrine develops) with a combination of forthrightness and tact. He reminds us, for example, that the Church has regularly sought to bind the consciences of the faithful in areas where its teaching has been erroneous. Many of the features making modern life tolerant – and, indeed, tolerable – derive from secular thought. In important respects, Western society now casts the net of compassion more broadly than does the Catholic Church: one could cite, for example, a more grown-up attitude towards divorcees, single parents and other former pariahs. Nor is criticism of the Bishop of Rome necessarily a mark of disrespect. On the contrary, many Catholics argue that since he has unrivalled influence, and is the pre-eminent advocate of values without which the world will perish, it is vital to pitch the message credibly.

Two further points add texture to Linden’s discussion. The first concerns the ongoing contradictions within Joseph Ratzinger himself. He did not simply mutate from warm liberal to chilly conservative. Even as the “German Shepherd” of popular mythology, he sometimes displayed a wholly different private face. One of his sillier statements, issued in 1989, warned Catholics against yoga and Eastern meditation practices. But it is still little known outside academic circles that in 1992, the then Cardinal donated a large sum from his personal resources to finance a German translation of the Lotus Sutra. The sentiment behind this initiative was underlined when he told an interviewer that Hermann Hesse’s great Buddhist-inspired novella Siddhartha was one of his three most treasured books alongside the Bible and Augustine’s Confessions, and that there are as many paths to God as there are human beings. As Pope, operating as pastor rather than policeman, he has made some positive moves. The cult of personality associated with his predecessor has been jettisoned, he has avoided witch-hunts, and revived a more traditional papal style. This has caused sufficient consternation among hardliners for one American pundit to have complained that the cardinals “voted for Ronald Reagan, but ended up with Jimmy Carter”.

The shrill source of this comment could not see that Jimmy Carter has been more effective as a man of God than as a politician. Popes do not need to be absolute monarchs, and a more modest style of church government is now overdue. Benedict is too old to instigate any far-reaching reforms. He was the brains behind John Paul II’s reign, and his ambition is to consolidate what he sees as the gains of the past quarter-century. In future, those who support greater democracy in the Church are therefore likely to conclude that Benedict was a caretaker Pope who put off the day of reckoning for the papacy as currently constituted. Linden recognizes the formidable strength of Benedict’s supporters. But his undogmatic hunch is that the ecclesiastical wind will eventually blow in a different direction. His typically judicious conclusion is that

Rome, the flawed but wise teacher for an age that justifies torture and makes war a first resort, remains the indispensable unifying centre of Catholicism Whether this antinomy, lived out daily as a dilemma by committed Catholics around the world, is a creative tension or a crushing burden will determine the future of global Catholicism. One thing is sure, the distribution of Catholics world wide means that the days of the old Eurocentric Church directed by Europeans are numbered. The future conversation about Catholicism in the twenty-first century will be conducted increasingly by Latin Americans, Africans and Asians.

Ian Linden

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