Interpretations of Catholic History

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Professor Courvoisier draws attention to an ecclesiological tradition in the Calvinist world — a tradition reaching, as he argues, from Zwingli and Calvin to the eighteenth century. The object of this tradition was to establish a visible, universal ecclesiastical polity to replace the polity and teachings of the Church of Rome. In effect this entailed an obligation on the part of Catholics to dismantle their eucharistic and ecclesiastical beliefs. His book is a plea for a resumption of this programme.

It is not the place of this review to remark upon Courvoisier’s theology. It is for historians of the Calvinist tradition to decide upon the accuracy of the internal theological analysis he makes of writers who range from Zwingli to Jurieu and François Turrettini. What strikes this reviewer is Courvoisier’s indifference to the historical milieux of the theologies he summarises. His account of Trent is innocent of reference to Jedin. His verdict on Vatican II rests on a quotation from a secondary source. Yet his thesis is that from Trent to Vatican II the Church of Rome has compounded its historical responsibility for a false development in Christian doctrine by four fresh centuries of refusing to accept the tradition he delineates as the very Word of God. A salient weakness of this approach is its willingness to impute historical guilt while remaining indifferent to the history in question. Courvoisier’s essay can be appreciated for its
contribution to the study of Calvinist historical theology. Unfortunately, it is impoverished by a refusal to inspect the theological or historical reality of what, if his thesis is correct, constitutes the very subject of the Calvinist Reformation: namely the Catholic Church.

It is an omission which does point the need for a book on the Catholic Church between the Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council. What we have for the moment is a study by Jean Delumeau which promises to take us to half time, from Luther to Voltaire. How well does it succeed?

Delumeau’s reputation as a historian of the city of Rome is well known among specialists of the early modern world. He now emerges as an historian of the Church of Rome, writing in the tradition of religious sociology which derives from the late Gabriel Le Bras. His objective, he tells us, is to introduce us to the average Christian of the past. He brings a slide rule to the job. He measures congregations and their social oddities. He is a magician of religious statistics. He writes with high seriousness and with dazzling verve. He has written a history which attacks nobody – not Luther, least of all Voltaire. It is as friendly a book as you could wish for. But that does not make it contentious. Delumeau’s book is an argument from first to last.

His major premise is that Christianity in the Middle Ages was a minority religion, a religion of the towns. It never took root among the overwhelmingly rural populace. The Christian Middle Ages never happened. His minor premise is that the two Reformations of early modern Europe, Protestant and Catholic, are best understood as belonging to a single, complementary process: the evangelisation of Europe. True, their history was one of mutual recrimination. But, Delumeau insists, their animosity can be considered in retrospect as less important than their collective historical achievement: the establishment of Christianity as Europe’s majority religion.

Thus, as far as the Catholic Church was concerned, Delumeau concludes, hostility towards the Protestant Reformation was only one, but not the most important, aspect, of her transformation from the medieval to the modern world.

How, then, according to this view, are we to approach the history of the Catholic Church? Principally, it would seem, in the light of her effectiveness as a missionary presence in a world which, if Delumeau is correct, is today neither more nor less Christian than it was either in the Middle Ages or in the centuries which followed. This is the real thrust of Delumeau’s argument. There is no Christian history, he seems to say, other than the history of a missionary presence in a non-Christian world.

How successfully does he deploy this conviction to illustrate the past? Only, I think, to the extent that he liberates himself from the constrictions of his thesis. Delumeau’s book is divided into two parts. Part One is straight history, for those who like their history neat. Part Two is controversy. Part One is the better part.

Part One of Delumeau’s book is a tour de force sweeping the reader
through those changes which ensured the recovery of the Catholic Church from the shock waves of the Reformation, a recovery which was made manifest at the Council of Trent. The Council of Trent closed in 1563. The Catholic Church emerged from it as the promoter of a revival the essential feature of which was the adoption of a missionary strategy inside Europe as well as overseas: in the traditional homelands of the faith, in the territories recaptured from the Protestants, in the new worlds of Asia, Africa and the Americas. There is no more incisive account than that which Delumeau gives of the alterations wrought within the Catholic Church by the reforms of the Council of Trent, of the implementation of these reforms, of the resistance to them from within the Catholic world, of the rise of a spirituality directed towards the relief of poverty and sickness, and finally, of the expansion of Catholicism overseas.¹

In his analysis of Catholicism outside Europe, Delumeau seeks to explore the balance between the missionary and the established aspects of religious conduct. He traces with sensibility the survival of unchristian religious customs and traditions among congregations and peoples whose inherited cultures were not those of the missionaries. The new worlds were in reality old worlds, their beliefs often older than the faith of those who brought them baptism. In China, the missionaries of the seventeenth century worried about Confucianism among their converts. In Latin America they worried about voodooism among the Christian slaves imported to the continent. Their debates concerning the pastoral implications of these discoveries are analysed in the conclusion to Part One. They provide the opening notes of a theme which is to dominate Part Two: the survival of what is unchristian in the midst of an officially Christian culture. This is the major theme of Delumeau’s work. It develops from an overture which has announced the apparently triumphant recovery and expansion of Catholic Christianity in the centuries after the Council of Trent, only to reveal the countervailing forces working for its downfall. Among these, the most powerful are the enemies within: not merely voodooism among the Christian slaves but slave ownership among the Christians. Were the missionaries of the New World adequately sensitive to the maltreatment of the Latin American peoples by Christian slave owners and conquerors? Yes, answers Delumeau, but they fought a losing battle. The Dominicans and the Franciscans insisted on the rights of the Indians. The Jesuits built villages to protect the natives against white slave hunters. But in the end the slave hunters invaded. The villages were destroyed. Real Christianity was therefore undermined by its nominal promoters. Part One of Delumeau’s book closes upon a survey of Christianity whose principal enemy has been identified as one within the

¹ He considers the Council of Trent ‘should’ have been a council of reunion. Why it could not have been so became abundantly clear when the Lutheran delegates invited to attend its sessions refused to recognise a council summoned under papal auspices. Delumeau’s observation takes no account of Jedin’s discussion of the subject.

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walls. The way is open for Part Two: the application of a similar analysis to a Catholic Europe transformed and apparently fully Christian in the wake of Tridentine Reformation. Here was a religious revival which established, for the first time, a resident, educated clergy in the countryside.

The provision of a clergy which brought Christianity to rural Europe was, according to Delumeau, the achievement of the Catholic Reformation. His major premise now emerges explicitly. Christianity in the Middle Ages was, he contends, a minority religion.

The priests of the Tridentine revival, he seems to say, were engaged in a battle against the Middle Ages. They were out to disestablish the traditional parish clergy: non-resident, non-celibate and frequently illiterate. Their object was to establish a resident corps of seminary-trained pastors in the countryside. The new priests in turn were to establish a new laity: a laity conversant with the catechism and detached from that blend of rural paganism, magic and superstition which, according to Delumeau, was the majority religion of the Middle Ages. This was the strategy of the Catholic reformers. But is it a sufficient description of the Middle Ages? This reviewer is inclined to doubt it.

Delumeau’s complaint against the Christian life of medieval Europe seems to be that it lacked seminaries for the parish clergy and a catechism for the faithful. This amounts to saying that the Church was not Tridentine before Trent. His profile of a largely illiterate medieval clergy seems to underrate the importance of the universities and the reality of the friars, who have been justly described as the ‘alternative clergy’ of the Middle Ages. His profile of the rural laity is drawn almost exclusively from the reports of seventeenth-century missioners in France. Medievalists may decide on the value of these reports as evidence about the Middle Ages. What do they tell us about early modern France?

In 1697, one French priest compared the experience of the Brittany mission with the experience of the first apostles. ‘In many places’, he wrote, ‘it was a question of establishing the faith rather than of teaching Christian doctrine.’ Now, before we conclude, with Delumeau, that medieval Brittany was a stranger to Christianity, it might be well to reflect on a similar observation made by the curé of Ars about his nineteenth-century village congregation: ‘Leave them without a priest for twenty years’, he said, ‘and they will end up worshipping the blessed cattle.’ The point of this observation bears, to be sure, on the problem of clerical non-residence. But it also bears on the transmission of Christianity from one generation to the next. It also says something about the difference between a rural and an urban congregation.

The missionaries of seventeenth-century France were city-trained Renaissance humanists. They brought the printed catechism to the countryside. The village congregations they worked among inhabited a world which cannot have been very different materially from the world in which Christianity first came to birth. Culturally, psychologically,
spiritually, it was a world which for something like a thousand years had lived under the influence of a dominantly Christian civilisation. Pilgrimages, shrines, processions were as intimate a part of it as the rhythm of the harvest. It was a culture only remotely touched by the printing press. It was not yet transformed by the scientific revolution. Delumeau seems strangely unsympathetic to it. One incident which he relates may serve as an example. He tells of a woman of Lorraine who came to the shrine of a local saint. She brought with her five eggs and three handfuls of dung as a sacrifice, to secure his intercession. Perhaps we may infer that somebody she loved had fallen ill. Delumeau seems to find in this an example of a reprehensibly pre-Christian outlook. But would his Tridentine clergy have found it so? No doubt they would have discouraged her from sacrificing her material belongings at a shrine. They would, in all probability, have insisted on the sufficiency of uniting a life of sacrifice with the sacrifice of the Mass. But they would also have remembered that the Council of Trent reaffirmed the intercession of the saints, and they would certainly have been aware that five eggs and three handfuls of dung were a precious commodity in an economy bounded by the hazards of the seasons and the infertility of an often hostile soil. This was a woman who wanted to leave no doubt about the measure of her faith, hope and love. The gospels abound in incidents which reveal Christ’s tenderness to those who showed such love; and the gospels themselves belong, as does this woman, to a pre-industrial, pre-scientific era, whose Christianity was unfamiliar with the printing press, the seminary and the catechism. Remarking on the standards of Christianity among the people of eighteenth-century France, Delumeau finds them significantly under par. How could it be otherwise, he asks, when half the population was illiterate? Even as a rhetorical question, this is surely quite extraordinary. Is Christianity reserved for those who can read and write? Were the Apostles literate? Such judgements amply warrant John Bossy’s observation in the Introduction to this book: there is a Christianity of the illiterate. What else was preached in Palestine and the Roman Empire, in the Europe of the Middle Ages and of the cathedrals?

If Delumeau’s major premise seems insensitive to more than fifteen hundred years of Christianity among the pre-literate, pre-scientific poor, what of his minor premise? Is the history of the division between the Protestant and Catholic Churches less important than the story of their campaigns to evangelise the people of Europe? The common features of these campaigns – those features which most impress Delumeau – seem to be an insistence upon literate Christianity: the Bible for Protestants, the Catechism for Catholics, religious schools for everybody. In addition, he tells us, more people were burnt for witchcraft than for heresy. A history of witchburning and schools seems like a disappointing legacy for anybody wanting to map out the shared ground in the Catholic and Protestant traditions of Christian living.

Why is Delumeau anxious to write down the religious tradition of the
Middle Ages, together with the conflict of Protestant and Catholic in modern history? Protestants will scarcely be moved by his observation that the Reformation would never have happened if the medieval church had undergone the Tridentine Reformation. But Delumeau's polemic is not directed against the Protestant tradition. It is directed against the Catholic tradition which finds in the Christianity of the Middle Ages and the Tridentine centuries a legacy rich in example and religious literature. The strategy of Delumeau's book seems designed to detach Catholicism from its historical character as an established religion of the past, and to direct the minds of his readers to another aspect of its history: its character as a missionary and, as he seems to imply, a minority religion. Under the guise of Christian conformism, Delumeau seems to say, Christianity was always a minority religion.

His evidence for this proposition does not strike this reviewer as convincing. His concern with the missionary aspect of Catholicism is, however, highly revealing both in itself and, possibly, as an index to the present-day preoccupations informing Delumeau's historical enquiries. Can it be that he wants to come to terms with the present-day minority status of the practising Catholic in France? If so, he wants to give the present-day experience an historical pedigree which perhaps it lacks. Delumeau's history is at its most illuminating when he escapes from his preoccupation with the present.

At the same time, his work does raise important questions about the transmission of belief from one generation to the next. His achievement in this volume is probably best appreciated as a first step in the direction of a history of Christianity which will take due account of the non-christian element at work within the history of the Church. As such it deserves a certain critical welcome. Delumeau's earlier volume, *Naissance et affirmation de la Réforme*, was a masterly analysis of Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the light of the positive and negative aspects of both movements. It is a pity that his English publishers have neglected to make it clear that *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire* is the second volume of this two-volume study. In French the work is a diptych and makes sense as such. In English one wing is missing, and the whole is thrown out of shape. The design is lost, the balance altered and the argument truncated.²

A history of the Catholic Church in the centuries between the council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council should take account of the developing Catholic response throughout those centuries to the essential charge of the Protestant Reformers: the charge that the Catholic Church had departed from its apostolic origins in consequence of the doctrinal developments of the post-patristic and medieval period. It was to meet this accusation that the historical work of Cardinal Baronius was launched upon the world in the years between 1588 and 1607. The work of Baronius was the counterpart in historical scholarship to the work of the Council

² The original French edition of *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire* was reviewed by H. G. Judge in this Journal, xxiv (1973), 93.
of Trent in doctrine. Trent dealt with the doctrinal and pastoral questions: what was the teaching of the Church concerning justification, the Bible, the sacraments, the mass; what abuses were to be found hindering the Church's pastoral life; what was to be done about reforming the Church in head and members? That still left the unanswered question put by Protestants. Did not the historical records illustrate a massive discontinuity between the apostolic Church and the Church of Tridentine Rome? Did not history prove that the Protestants were right – the root question was false historical development? These were the questions which Baronius in his Annales set himself to meet.

In recent years, there have appeared two studies about Baronius. The late Hubert Jedin's essay, which is the more recent one, briefly relates the biography of the man and places his work in the perspective of Catholic historiography. The loss of the volume promised here on Catholic historiography since Baronius is especially to be regretted, for it is exactly what is needed. His present essay is well put together and concise, as one would expect. But it does not replace the earlier and more substantial study by Cyriac K. Pullapilly. Indeed, it is difficult to see what it adds to Pullapilly.

Both writers correctly emphasise the influence of St Philip Neri in directing Baronius (much against his inclination) to take up the history of the Church and to make it his life's work. Both correctly stress the late-Renaissance milieu of Catholic humanism as a shaping influence on the outlook of St Philip and his circle. We shall not fully understand the preoccupation of this circle in the years 1550–90 with the catacombs, with the early martyrs of the Church, with the archaeology of Christian inscriptions, unless we recognise in it a late fruit of the Italian Renaissance; a fruit which, in religious minds, grew perhaps naturally from the earlier, Quattrocento awareness of a secular correspondence linking the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire with Renaissance Florence and Renaissance Rome. St Philip and his associates seem to have been genuinely impressed by the religious continuities linking the Church of the Roman Empire with the Church of Tridentine Rome. They looked around them and they saw the ancient Church – much as Pier Paolo Vergerio and his contemporaries had seen the Roman Republic in the ruins of Quattrocento Rome. St Philip was a Florentine. Si monumentum requiris circumspice. He found the faith of his own age in the catacombs. And he found a re-enactment of the martyrdom of the early Church in the present-day experience of the Church in northern Europe. History came alive and echoed in his ears.

That is why he urged Baronius to write the history of the Church. Both Jedin and Pullapilly argue against a controversial purpose in the inception of Baronius's labours. The controversial form eventually taken by the work with the appearance of its first volume in 1588 was, they contend, a consequence of what happened in between the inception of the work in 1558 and its first printed volume thirty years later. How, they enquire,
could St Philip have known in 1558 that the *Magdeburg Centuries* would appear the following year, with its vast assemblage of documents designed to illustrate the historical perfidy, chicanery and doctrinal infidelity of the Church of Rome? St Philip, in this view, can scarcely have been thinking, in 1558, of refuting the Protestant interpretation of history?

But St Philip could have been aware that the work was in progress. He could have read the preparatory manifestos. On Pullapilly’s own showing, the Protestant argument concerning the false historical development of the Church of Rome was already mature in Luther’s preface of 1536 to the *Vitae Romanorum Pontificum* by the ex-Augustinian, Robert Barnes. John Bale’s *Acta Romanorum Pontificum* was published in 1548. It must have been a commonplace in Rome that somebody was going to have to provide a reply, a Catholic understanding of the Christian past, to establish from the documents of the Church herself the evidence of her continuity in faith with the Church of the first centuries. St Philip chose Baronius. This explanation would seem better to account for the urgency and deliberation with which St Philip directed Baronius to set himself to accomplish the work which reached its twelfth and final volume in 1607. It does not invalidate the view that the inauguration of the Oratorian historical tradition was indeed a fruit of the Roman Renaissance, coincidental with the rise of northern Protestantism. There arose in the mid-century city of Rome a strong sense of the continuities linking the Church of St Peter and St Paul with the Church of the city where they still lay buried; and this sense of continuity arose at the very moment that saw, in northern Europe, the emergence of a doctrine of history which traced the fall of Christianity to the establishment of a doctrinal discontinuity between the Church of Paul and the Church which recognised in its popes the successors of St Peter.

Pullapilly magnificently traces the effects of the work of Baronius on the learned world – the eagerness with which his volumes were greeted in the Catholic world, translated, abbreviated and condensed as an armoury of evidence confuting the Protestant interpretation of history. He enables us to understand the confidence which these volumes helped to establish in the spiritual identity of the Tridentine Church with the Church of the early and medieval centuries, a confidence which wrought conversions and established a new climate of assurance and a lasting conviction that the Church had nothing to fear from the historical evidence. Baronius was not slow to seize upon the findings of Christian archaeology to impress his readers with the falsity of the Protestant charge concerning alteration in doctrine. Protestants denied the intercession of the saints; purgatory for them was a ‘new’ and disreputable doctrine. But the evidence of the newly discovered catacombs showed the early Christian community praying for the dead and venerating saints; they also showed that images of the saints were not an invention of the medieval Church.

In a balanced final chapter, Pullapilly assesses the strengths and limitations of Baronius as a scholar. The annalistic method favoured by
Baronius was a regression from the achievements of Renaissance historiography. His critical judgement surrendered too easily to what he believed should have been true, especially where the ecclesiastical or temporal interests of the Church were concerned. One of the worst instances was his advocacy of the Donation of Constantine, in the face of already established scholarship, and against the counsel of wiser heads. Yet withal, and despite the limitations of Baronius's historical achievement, what emerges from Pullapilly's work is a portrait of a man who was a dedicated scholar and a truly great priest - a man who sacrificed himself heroically in the service of the Church he loved; who painfully surrendered his own desire to be a simple pastor for the sake of the task entrusted to him by the Church; a man whose lack of ecclesiastical ambition was repeatedly illustrated by his genuine horror at the prospects of what the world regarded as promotion. Pullapilly's book makes it abundantly clear why Baronius was promoted; why his influence in the Vatican was so considerable and his prospects of papal election so real. In the light of this book it is clear that to the names of the second generation of Tridentine Reformers we must add that of Baronius alongside those of Bellarmine and Federico Borromeo. His labours in the reform commissions of the curia, in matters affecting liturgy and education (not least his ensuring the victory of Aquinas in the curriculum of the Jesuits for centuries to come), and his highly interesting and deeply conscientious approach to the pastoral problems of non-residence - these, and related aspects of his work are brought to prominence by Pullapilly in a book which deserves more widespread recognition than it seems to have received. It is one of the very few good books written about the Roman Church in the generation after Trent. This reviewer finds it regrettable that Pullapilly occasionally allows himself to intrude his own incredulity in relating some of the more deeply felt aspects of the spirituality of his subject; such moments are failings in the sphere of what David Knowles once called meta-history. But with Pullapilly such moments are rare, and his work is an admirable contribution to our knowledge of a man who died in 1607 of stomach ulcers and overwork, and with a justified reputation for sanctity. Pullapilly deserves to be roundly congratulated for helping so vividly to make him stand before us.

Baronius believed that if Protestants would recognise how the Church's doctrine unfolded in the course of history, they would return to the Church which was the custodian of that same doctrine. Scholarship itself attested that the Church was one, holy, catholic and apostolic. This was what Baronius set out to demonstrate. His confidence in the apostolic power of scholarship helped in turn to inspire a tradition of historical scholarship within the Catholic Church which has borne fruit down the centuries in the work of the Maurists and the Bollandists, and in the labours of men like Pallavicini, Muratori, Innes, Lingard, Pastor, Knowles and Jedin. It was left to Newman to demonstrate that development in doctrine, far from being a mark of infidelity, was in reality a sign of the Church - development being precisely the Church meditating collectively on what she already
believed and thus expounding ever more completely the meaning and bearing of revelation on the course of history. Newman accomplished an understanding of the question which entitles him to be ranked among the great theologians of all time. His *Essay on Development* alone makes it not ridiculous to speak of him in the company of Augustine and Aquinas; it is perhaps the greatest work of theological genius since the *Summa Theologica*. Among its many merits it gave the definitive reply to the argument that the Catholic Church was historically responsible for a false development of Christian doctrine. It demolished the theology of history which lies behind the Whig interpretation. Perhaps it may yet inspire a similar undertaking with respect to the secularised consequences of that outlook.