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Comment on Melissa Wilde/1

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Comment on Melissa Wilde/1

by Luigi Berzano

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Until a few years ago, sociological research concerns like the ones Melissa Wilde deals with in her paper [*Who Wanted What and Why at the Second Vatican Council? Toward a Theory of Religious Change*](#) were addressed within research on mass-media communication. According to Harold D. Lasswell, the study of mass-media tended to analyse the communication process following the four key questions: Who, What, to Whom, with What effect. The issue was to analyse “the source of the message, the message itself, its target and its effects”. Underlying these questions there were utilitarian concerns, such as being able to improve the product offered to the readers, on the one hand, and understanding readers’ choices and preferences in order to optimise sales, on the other.

These kinds of concerns have currently strongly involved sociological theories of religion thanks to patterns of *rational action* (*rational choice*). The most innovative feature of recent sociology of religion, in fact, is represented by a shift from phenomenological patterns to patterns of rational choice. The latter, moreover, help to forecast which segment of people is more exposed to the sacred in an active and lively market. Furthermore, they describe the conditions favouring the birth both of individual and mass religious experience.

Established during the 1990s as a section within the American Sociological Association, rational action theory aimed at integrating different disciplines such as economy, sociology, cognitive psychology, political sciences, moral philosophy and law. The first signals of these theoretical concerns were already to be seen in the 19th century, when European visitors found an explanation of the United States’ religious liveliness in the deregulation of religious markets and in the competition

among Churches. Issues such as the ones proposed by Melissa Wilde's paper thus recall the conclusions formulated by scholars and religious leaders upon their return from visits to the States. The interpretation of the Protestantism revival was founded on the development of radical changes in the religious supply, more than in the increase of the religious demand.

In 1835, Andrew Reed wrote: "Deliberately, but without hesitation, I say the result is in everything and everywhere more favourable to the voluntary and against the compulsory principle (...) Fact is universally in its favour" [Reed 1853, 137 and 141]. Reed himself and other observers could not help noticing that such principle had the effect of changing the peaceful Kingdom of God in a battlefield.

The issue in the paper that we are discussing falls within this theoretical context and, more precisely, in the context of Supply-Side theory, except for a few innovative theoretical elements. It must be made clear from the start that Supply-Side Theory does not wish to be labelled as "rational choice", but as "religious economy". In fact there are other theories (like Olson's), which apply rational choice in the analysis of religion without using economic metaphors, thus not falling in the category of religious economy. Next, I wish to add some meaningful elements and notes for debate.

Elements of innovation

The primary concern in Melissa Wilde's [*Who wanted what and why at the Second Vatican Council? Toward a general Theory of Religious Change*](#) is the analysis of the Second Vatican Council, as regards Supply-Side theory. Primarily within the Roman Catholic Church and among sociologists of secularisation, the reasons for religious change have been mostly identified in changes in the demand for religious goods. Less attention has been paid to the effects following variations that the religious supply can also cause on religious systems.

This paper moves substantially beyond Supply-Side theory, which cannot go further than an explanation of how different bishops could be more or less open to mobilisation. It fails to explain, for example, why bishops coming from more competitive fields were the least interested in Marketing and were, on the contrary, the most involved in bettering the connections with leaders of other religions. It still remains to be explained what and why the bishops wanted at the Second Vatican Council.

To overcome this weakness of Supply-Side theory, Melissa Wilde writes: "Sociologists need stop referring to the goals and decisions of religious leaders strictly as marketing strategies, and instead think about them as *organizational strategies*."

I will introduce here the contribution of the Institutional Legitimacy theory and Organisational Change.

To understand the changes carried out by the bishops at the Council, sociologists have to take into account, besides the presence of other religions, the concerns peculiar to the religious leaders as well as their relations with other organisations. For instance, the bishops whom the paper places among the three progressive groups, with the exception of bishops coming from missions, were the least interested in competition and the most open to dialogue with other established organisations. However they were at the same time the least open to religious organisations having no legitimacy.

The bishops' organisational strategies, therefore, cannot be understood merely on an efficiency basis, but also on the basis of the different forms of legitimacy they recognise to the various religious organisations. During the Second Vatican Council, bishops coming from contexts where the various religious organisations were connected to each other by relations, communication and reciprocal exchanges considered the other leaders as colleagues and not as rivals. As a consequence, those bishops were less interested in problems of marketing than the other progressive bishops coming, for example, from Latin America.

Besides analysing the organisational structure and the politics that the leaders adopted as regards other religious organisations, the paper points out a meaningful distinction among incumbent and legitimated organisations and organisations that Max Weber defined "in statu nascenti" and not yet legitimated. This distinction is necessary to understand the contrast between the bishops from Latin America, those from Northern Europe and from the USA. As for the latter, the Protestants were by then considered legitimate players, whereas for the other bishops the sects invading Latin America were perceived as "pesky challengers".

Critical remarks

Moving now to an examination of the problems open to discussion from Melissa Wilde's paper, the first problem is again related to the inadequacy of Supply-Side theory for the analysis of religious phenomena. According to critics, the patterns for the analysis of organisational strategies and, more generally, of religious economy, tend to be inadequate for the understanding of religious facts, as these are constituted by divine experiences, by illuminations and inspirations coming from the Holy Spirit. According to the same critics, religious facts are constituted by causes and effects which are not rationally verifiable.

Firstly, it must be said that the general pattern of religious economy does not take into account religious experience as the unique constitutive pattern of religion, but presumes that even religious experience should be compatible with the social mechanisms observable in all and any experience. It could be said that even though the Holy Spirit inspired the convocation of the Second Vatican Council, it did so through observable social mechanisms.

Secondly, I believe that the patterns applied by Melissa Wilde are useful to analyse the phases of religious mobilisation, in both the changing and the saving of the status quo. Instead, her patterns face some limits in the explanation of the contents and reasons why the organisations mobilise or confront transformation. Mobilisation, in fact, is not always aimed towards innovation. Shortly after the Second Vatican Council, the bishops of the Italian Roman Catholic Church enacted a very significant conservative mobilisation against the civil acknowledgement of some civil rights such as divorce and abortion. Nowadays, the strongest mobilisation on behalf of Italian bishops is against minorities claiming rights for sexual diversity, for the use of stem (embryo) cells and other issues involving bioethics.

The patterns of Supply-Side theory, however, still remain inadequate to explain the competitive mobilisation of a conservative kind even when applied with the originality of this paper. In other words, it seems clear that Wilde's pattern, even in its complexity, does not succeed in explaining, without the help of other sciences, the political direction of the various mobilisations considered.

Coming back to the case of the Italian bishops, it can be said that pluralism has nearly always given way to mobilisation towards the maintenance of the *status quo*.

It is necessary to pose the problem of the analysis of religious doctrines. Religious economy, in fact, describes the religious market as a world of firms selling products (i.e. religious doctrines) in competition with one another. Just as it would not be possible to do without cars in a sociology of the car industry when describing managers' strategies, thus religious economy cannot avoid analysing religious doctrines. I make reference to the most significant volume about religious economy by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith, Explaining the Human Side of Religion* [Stark and Finke 200, 257 ff.]. Claiming back their goal not to reduce religion to mere marketing, the two scholars conclude asserting that many progressive religious groups failed in "selling themselves" on the market owing to the religious doctrines of such groups. According to the two scholars only lively views of an active and provident supernatural can generate a vigorous religious atmosphere.

A last observation concerns the language used in the paper. It is widely accepted that a frequent reservation raised about the theory of religious economy was related to the use it makes of economic metaphors to explain social life and, specifically, re-

ligious life. Similarly, in this paper the metaphors are many and effective in capturing the reader's mind. However they carry with them the risk associated with all "rhetoric": every rhetorical structure is founded on very persuasive reasoning, as it is made up of a very large range of factors that can lead to the acceptance of any theoretical proposition. "But the very fact that seems commonsensical makes me suspect that what we have here is a grand metaphor that uses one major cultural symbol system to explain other cultural symbol systems. Its strength as a metaphor may give rational choice theory a good deal of explanatory power, but not necessarily the theoretical predictive power it claims" [Ammerman 1997, 120]. The categories used by Melissa Wilde are expressed in an economic language that does not choose "vague" formulations. It keeps the analysis malleable and formally accurate. This kind of language formulation, as already noticed in other research, will undoubtedly surprise religious leaders and churchmen.

The most meaningful contribution of this paper, however, besides the theoretical pattern in itself, lies in its application to such a typical event in the Roman Catholic Church as an Ecumenical Council.

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Who Wanted What and Why at the Second Vatican Council?

Toward a General Theory of Religious Change

Abstract: This paper explores the differences among the four groups of bishops who participated at the Second Vatican Council, with the goal of answering a simple, but key, sociological question about the Council: who wanted what, and why? In brief, I argue that in order to understand, explain and ideally even predict, the perspectives, interests and goals, or what I call organizational strategies, of religious leaders, sociologists of religion must broaden their understandings of the factors that affect them. Though Supply-Side theory recognises that the presence of other religious institutions (i.e. religious pluralism) has powerful effects on religious leaders, I argue that in order to predict not only whether religious leaders will be open to reform, but also what reforms they will prioritise, we must consider not only the presence of other institutions in a society, but the relationship between those organisations, especially whether those relationships are stable. This is the case because in stable fields, legitimacy concerns trump concerns about efficiency and growth.

Keywords: religion, secularization, rational choice theory, Second Vatican Council, religious rhetoric.
