

Alberto Melloni

## Comment on Melissa Wilde/3

(doi: 10.2383/24192)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, maggio-giugno 2007

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.  
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

### **Licenza d'uso**

L'articolo è messo a disposizione dell'utente in licenza per uso esclusivamente privato e personale, senza scopo di lucro e senza fini direttamente o indirettamente commerciali. Salvo quanto espressamente previsto dalla licenza d'uso Rivisteweb, è fatto divieto di riprodurre, trasmettere, distribuire o altrimenti utilizzare l'articolo, per qualsiasi scopo o fine. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

## Comment on Melissa Wilde/3

by Alberto Melloni

doi: 10.2383/24192

This essay follows a very well established disciplinary approach, powerfully seeking an analogy between sociological models developed for the interpretation of industrial and financial behaviour, and other domains of work and meaning. Melissa Wilde therefore builds on the hypothesis that the development of Vatican II may be explained as an answer to the crisis of the monopolistic paradigm that had allegedly formerly dominated Catholicism. I will not question the hypothesis, or the methodology from a sociological point of view, as this goes beyond my usual field of analysis and my particular competence. I shall just note that the historical data, on which the hypothesis is based, deserves in-depth consideration and that, in my opinion, this reduces the results achieved and limits their reach.

1. This essay uses an extrinsic cultural geography and therefore assumes that bishops holding a diocese in a country or continent are “from” that country or continent. On the contrary, a detailed analysis of careers shows that the conciliar assembly was fed by different paths, the chaotic variety of which is the product of less evident belongings. The nationality of bishops, in fact, derives not so much from the dioceses, but rather from the history of missions and of colonialism (which explains why many Indonesian bishops are in fact Dutch, some German bishops are recorded as African in the lists of dioceses, and the missionary clergy of French congregations covers a vast homogeneous area of citizenship). Other types of bonds are even more relevant, such as the ones deriving from religious orders (White Fathers or Salesians are fully fledged *nationes*), or from training (making the former pupils of the Collegio Capranica a more cohesive team than many national episcopates, or turning the former students of the Angelicum into a family, culturally tied together by common

mentors and similar studies). These more subtle and intangible facts give way to linguistic communicability and cultural kinships that have a greater relevance than the essay apparently grasps.

2. The “Protestantism” to which Melissa Wilde somewhat generically attributes the role of competitor on the religious market is not “the problem of Catholicism: other issues were relevant for the genesis and preparation of Vatican II, both at the ecclesiological level and at the political-religious one. On the one hand, in fact, after the attempts at differentiation put forward in 1928 with the encyclical *Mortalium animos* and later in the condemnation of the *Nouvelle théologie* in the aftermath of the war, the ecumenical utopia becomes a sting at the very heart of faith. The origins of the “difficult transition”, so well described in the works of Mauro Velati, therefore lie not in a competitive and market-type reaction, but in an emulation in the desire for unity. On the other hand, with the Cold War as a backdrop, the Church acquires a new dynamism, one that is not satisfied with condemnation but looks for an appropriate expression, consistent with the statute of Christian truth (or “pastoral” truth, in the theological lexicon of Pope Roncalli). The double background of the World War and the Cold War thus stirs positive energies and not just vexed reactions to the quantitative and qualitative involution of Catholic militancy.

3. Wilde uses votes to measure the distribution of conservatives and progressives: however in two cases from October 1963 she utilises as a parameter two votes that are not relative to a text, but orientations. Both the idea to inspect the mind of the assembly on five crucial ecclesiological issues and the one of freely disputing the incorporation or exclusion of the *De Beata* from the Church’s scheme, have an explicit and conscious maieutic aim. The vote originated from these sorts of aims as much as from the cardinals that had been acting as chairs of the congregation for just a few weeks. The latter needed to overcome the continuous opposition between favourable and contrary views, allowing the doctrine that bishops knew was true to emerge, as a premise to any explicit final formulation. The numbers can be conceived as revealing not the solidity of a majority that was in fact doomed to fray, but a shared intention.

4. The real divide in Vatican II, in fact, is not the one between minority and majority, or between tradition and innovation: this was the representation – as Nicola Buonassorte has shown – that was unsuccessfully promoted both by Lefebvreians and by anti-council fundamentalist reactions. Instead, what is specific and enlightening about Vatican II is the transient formation of a majority in which, as Joseph Komonchak has shown, drives doomed to separate, as well as loyalties destined to differentiate, frames of mind ready to “repent” of the decisions just taken, came together. In that moment, the final and major subject of the Council – the Church in all its

vastness – stopped being a passive recipient of decisions to become the turbulent protagonist of reception.

5. As a result, the most interesting element of Wilde's analysis of votes does not lie in the bipartition, nor in the small and anonymous group of unstable voters, but in how the "who", "what", and "why" are affected by those informal groups that are the object of Gomez Arteché y Catalina's monumental research, by the leaderships of Episcopal conferences, by the proven authoritativeness of those leaders of counciliar opinion, as they intercept hopes that had been circulating for decades and that were spread by theology and the Church.

## **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: Council, nations, education, missionary bishops, religious orders.*

---