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Replay

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Reply to Comments on Who Wanted What and Why at the Second Vatican Council?

by Melissa Wilde

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It is gratifying to receive such thorough and challenging comments on my paper. As the commentators have noted, the key point of it is to examine and explain the patterns that emerge from the bishops' votes at the Second Vatican Council. In doing so, I bring together two different theoretical bodies of literature: the literature in the sociology of religion known as Supply-Side theory and that in organizational theory known as neo-institutionalism or economic sociology.

Three of the four commentators, [Luigi Berzano](#), [Massimiliano Monaci](#), and [Roberto Marchisio](#), focused on theoretical aspects of the paper. I will thus reply to their central concerns first, though many of these are relevant to Melloni's more specific concerns about Vatican II. This structure is a natural one for this reply, because, though generally friendly to the theoretical approach I develop in the paper, and clearly varied in their approach to it, Berzano, Monaci and Marchisio agree on one capital point: what is lacking in this paper is a sense of culture, how, as Monaci put it, the "norms, values, beliefs, taken-for-granted routines and categorizations constituted the essential cognitive moral frames of reference out of which choices are made and decisions arise." This is a more than fair criticism, because, as Monaci points out, the organizational theory I am engaging is, at its most basic level, an attempt to bring culture into the study of economics, markets and organizations in a causal way.

Though I am not explicit about it, and I do not delve into how the bishops' symbolic environment determined their priorities in-depth in this paper,¹ my emphasis

¹ Furthermore, culture plays a much more central story in Chapter Three of my book [Wilde 2007b], and a related article which appeared in the *American Sociological Review*, both of which, not

on the importance of legitimacy concerns (and thus the ecumenical movement) for the bishops from stable environments is the central way in which culture is implicitly used in a causal way in the explanation presented in this paper. This is because the fact that these concerns arose and became central to bishops from stable fields cannot be understood without reference to how their worldviews were shaped by the cultural environment in which they were imbedded. As I emphasize in the conclusion, in order to understand why they prioritized addressing legitimacy concerns raised by the ecumenical movement, we must understand that the bishops in stable fields “began to see Protestants not as competitors, who might take their members away, but as colleagues who had similar goals and interests” [Wilde 2007a]. Thus, in contrast to Melloni’s reading of my paper, I do not argue that the bishops in stable fields saw Protestants as competitors (and this is precisely where my research poses a problem for Supply-Side theory), but rather that they wanted to, exactly as Melloni put it, “emulate” them “in the desire for unity.”

Ecumenically-friendly bishops’ desire for rapprochement with Protestants arose from the cultural environment, or organizational field, in which these bishops lived and worked, which were, at the time, dominated by the ecumenical movement. Of course, in a paper of this length, there are many aspects of those organizational fields that I could not touch on. It is in reference to those that I see as Melloni’s most substantial criticism.

In his first point, Melloni argues that many other factors were relevant to the development of the bishops’ priorities beyond the national characteristics I examined here. The two factors that he points to are the colonial legacies of the missionary countries and the geographic location and type of education the bishops received. I completely agree with him on both accounts, and in fact have conducted a very thorough quantitative analysis of the effect of moving on the bishops’ votes at the Council elsewhere [Wilde *et al.* 2003]. That analysis found that, for those who moved, bishops’ countries of origin were indeed important to predicting their openness to change. For example, bishops who moved from Italy and Spain, the two largest groups of

coincidentally, happen to be titled, *How Culture Mattered at Vatican II*. These pieces focus on the “the informal groups” and “Episcopal Conferences” that Melloni references as the most “interesting element” of the Council in his fifth point (one which I heartily agree with). In this part of my analysis, I demonstrate that a great deal of the Council’s progressive outcome can be explained by a relatively simple sociological fact: Because of their cultural views, progressives built a far more extensive and flexible organization than their conservative counterparts, and were thus more successful at developing compromise positions the vast majority of bishops could support. I believe it is the actions of these conservative “anti-council” fundamentalists to whom Melloni is referring in his third point, and I suspect that his desire for more on them and how they were unsuccessful in preventing the “formation of a majority” is met by these pieces of research.

bishops serving outside of their countries of origin, were generally more progressive than their counterparts who never left their country of origin, but were generally less progressive than bishops who were native to their countries of service, usually countries in Latin America or Africa or Asia.

In relation to Melloni's point about education, no sociologist would dismiss the importance of education to the development of an individual's worldview – and I am the first to lament the fact that, despite a concerted effort on my part, systematic data on the vast majority of the voting bishops' educations was unfortunately simply not available. There is no doubt that including it might shed further light on the questions being examined in this paper, and indeed in my book. This being said, however, the point of the paper was not to present an exhaustive account of every factor that explains the bishop's support for various proposals, but rather to investigate the patterns that were present in the bishops' votes at the national-level and to see what factors of their national environments might help to explain those patterns. I believe this paper has achieved that, despite its neglect of other, admittedly important, sociological factors.

Returning for a moment to theory, Berzano is right to point out that the high level of engagement among bishops from monopolistic fields both during and after the Council cannot really be explained within Supply-Side theory, which argues that such religious leaders tend to be "lazy." I believe it would be far more accurate to describe these bishops' organizational strategies as policies put in place to maintain their monopolistic status. Doing so more explicitly would perhaps help to clarify that while they were not open to change, leaders from monopolistic environments were certainly far from lazy!

Finally, I believe I should respond to Monaci's quite legitimate questioning of the subtitle of the paper, *Toward a General Theory of Religious Change*. While I am the first to admit that this case study of Vatican II is not enough to develop a comprehensive theory of religious change, I do think the factors that I've identified will be relevant factors in most, if not all, other examples of religious change – whether that change is accommodationist (as was the case with Vatican II) or anti-accommodationist in its orientation. I think this is particularly true in relation to my argument about how, when and why legitimacy concerns become paramount to religious leaders. That being said, I also fully expect that when my argument is applied to other examples of religious change other causal factors and processes will come into focus that are, as of right now, obscured. Thus, it is merely "toward" a general theory that I have moved with my examination of Vatican II, and I look forward to improving and fine tuning the argument I have so far developed with the help of fine scholars such as these.

References

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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: Vatican II, religious change, supply-side theory, religious leaders, legitimacy concerns.
