

Modernism in the Catholic Church

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In the Catholic Church, modernism refers to theological opinions expressed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but with influence reaching into the 21st century, which are characterized by a break with the past. Modernist Catholics form an amorphous group. The term appears in the 1907 encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis*, in which Pope Pius X condemns modernism as embracing of every heresy.^{[1][2]} Modernists, and what are now termed "neo-modernists", generally do not openly use this label in describing themselves, although traditionalist Catholics continue to use the term.

Modernists came to prominence in French and British intellectual circles and, to a lesser extent, in Italy.^[3] The modernist movement was influenced by Protestant theologians and clergy, starting with the Tübingen School in the mid-19th century. Some modernists, however, such as George Tyrrell, S.J., would disagree with this; Tyrrell saw himself as loyal to the unity of the Church, and disliked liberal Protestantism.^[4]

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Forms of modernism

Modernism in the Catholic Church was the subject of the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* of Pope St. Pius X.^[2] Modernism may be described under the following broad headings:

- A rationalistic approach to the Bible. The rationalism that was characteristic of the Enlightenment took a protomaterialistic view of miracles and of the historicity of biblical narratives. This approach sought to interpret the Bible by focusing on the text itself as a prelude to considering what the Church Fathers had traditionally taught about it. This method was readily accepted by Protestants and Anglicans. It was the natural consequence of Martin Luther's *sola scriptura* doctrine, which asserts that Scripture is the highest authority, and that it can be relied on *alone* in all things pertaining to salvation and the Christian life.
- Secularism and other Enlightenment ideals. The ideal of secularism can be briefly stated as follows: the best course of action in politics and other civic fields is that which flows from a common understanding of the Good by various groups and religions. By implication, Church and State should be separated and the laws of the latter, for example that forbidding murder, should cover only the common ground of thought systems held by various religious groups. From the secularists' point of view it was possible to distinguish between political ideas and structures that were religious and those that were not, but Catholic theologians in the mainstream argued, following St. Thomas Aquinas, that such a distinction was not possible: All aspects of society were to be organized with the final goal of Heaven in mind. However, the humanist model which had been in the forefront of intellectual thought since the Renaissance and the scientific revolution was directly opposed to the Thomist view.
- Modern philosophical systems. Philosophers such as Kant and Bergson inspired the mainstream of modernist thought. One of the latter's main currents attempted to synthesize the vocabularies, epistemologies, metaphysics and other features of certain modern systems of philosophy with

Catholicism in much the same way as the Scholastic order had earlier attempted to synthesize Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy with the Church's teaching.

- Theological rebellion in contradistinction or opposition to the Church's official policies.

As more naturalistic and scientific studies of history appeared, a way of thinking called historicism arose which suggested that ideas are conditioned by the age in which they are expressed; thus modernists generally believed that most dogma or teachings of the Church were novelties which arose because of specific circumstances obtaining at given points in its history. At the same time rationalism and literary criticism reduced the possible role of the miraculous, so that the philosophical systems in vogue at the time taught among other things that the existence of God could never be known (see Agnosticism). Theology, formerly “queen of the sciences”, was dethroned,^[5] and it was argued that religion must primarily be caused by, and thus be centered on, the feelings of believers. This argument bolsters the impact of secularism by weakening any position supporting the favouring of one religion over another in a given state, on the principle that if no scientific and reasonable assumption of its truth can be made, society should not be so organised as to privilege any particular religion.

Evolution of dogma

The final overall teaching of modernism is that dogmata (the teachings of the Church, which its members are required to believe) can evolve over time – not only in their expression but also in their substance – rather than remaining the same in substance for all time. This postulate was what made modernism unique in the history of heresies in the Church. Previously, a heretic (someone who believed and taught something different from what the rest of the church believed) would either claim that he was right and the rest of the Church was wrong because he had received a new revelation from God, or that he had understood the true teaching of God which had previously been understood but was later lost. Both of these scenarios almost inevitably led to an organisational separation from the Church (schism) or the offender's being ejected from it (excommunication). Using the new idea that doctrines evolve, it was possible for the modernist to believe that both the old teachings of the Church **and** his new, seemingly contradictory teachings were correct — each group had its time and place.^[6] This system allows almost any type of new belief which the modernist in question might wish to introduce, and for this reason modernism was labelled by Pope Pius X as "the synthesis of all heresies".^[6]

The "evolution of dogma" theory (see Development of doctrine), much in the manner of Luther's theory of salvation *sola fide* ('by faith alone') allows for a constant updating of standards of morality. The phrase *sola fide* derives from *Pange Lingua Gloriosi Corporis Mysterium*, a Eucharistic hymn by St. Thomas Aquinas: *et si sensus deficit, | ad firmandum cor sincerum | sola fides sufficit*. Since majority moral standards shifted heavily during the 20th century, Catholics not accepting the theory were placed in the position of having to abstain from receiving Communion if they wished to engage in some of the actions of some of their fellow-religionists. As for the others, the theory that dogma can change enabled them, as they saw it, to “update” Catholic morality while not being concerned with possible contradictions.

Official response

In 1893, Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* affirmed in principle the legitimacy of Biblical criticism only insofar as it was pursued in a spirit of faith. In 1903 Leo established a Pontifical Biblical Commission to oversee those studies and ensure that they were conducted with respect for the Catholic doctrines on the inspiration and interpretation of scripture.

Pope Pius X, who succeeded Leo, was the first to identify modernism as a movement. He frequently condemned both its aims and ideas, and was deeply concerned by the ability of modernism to allow its adherents to go on believing themselves strict Catholics while having an understanding markedly different from the traditional one as to what that meant (a consequence of the notion of evolution of dogma). In July 1907 the Holy Office published the document *Lamentabili sane exitu*, a sweeping condemnation which distinguished sixty-five propositions as modernist heresies. In September of the same year Pius X promulgated an encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis*, followed in 1910 by the introduction of an anti-modernist oath to be taken by all Catholic bishops, priests and academic teachers of religion.

To ensure enforcement of these decisions, Monsignor Umberto Benigni organized, through his personal contacts with theologians, an unofficial group of censors who would report to him those thought to be teaching condemned doctrine. This group was called the *Sodalitium Pianum*, i.e. Fellowship of Pius (X), which in France was known as *La Sapinière*. Its frequently overzealous and clandestine methods often hindered rather than helped the Church in its combat with modernism.^{[7][8]}

In the period between World War II and the Cold War Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange O.P. was the "torchbearer of orthodox Thomism" against modernism.^[9] Garrigou-Lagrange, who was a professor of philosophy and theology at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, *Angelicum*, is commonly held to have influenced the decision in 1942 to place the privately circulated book *Une école de théologie: le Saulchoir* (Étiolles 1937) by Marie-Dominique Chenu O.P. on the Vatican's "Index of Forbidden Books" as the culmination of a polemic within the Dominican Order between the *Angelicum* supporters of a speculative scholasticism and the French revival Thomists who were more attentive to historical hermeneutics, such as Yves Congar O.P.. Congar's *Chrétiens désunis* was also suspected of modernism because its methodology derived more from religious experience than from syllogistic analysis.^{[9][10][11][12]}

Since Pope Paul VI, most Church authorities have largely dropped the term "modernism", preferring instead in the interest of precision to call beliefs such as secularism, liberalism or relativism by their several names. The older term has however remained current in the usage of many Traditionalist Catholics and conservative critics within the Church.

Notable Catholic modernists

Major figures

- Alfred Loisy (1857–1940), a French priest whose *L'Évangile et L'Église* (1902) sparked the crisis; he was excommunicated *vitandus* in 1908.^[13]
- George Tyrrell (1861–1909), expelled from the Jesuits in 1906 for his views
- Maude Petre (1863–1942), English nun, close friend of Tyrrell, and a participant in the modernist movement as well as one of its first historians and critics
- Ernesto Buonaiuti (1881–1946), who as a scholar of the history of Christianity and of religious philosophy, was a leader in the Italian modernist movement
- Pierre Batiffol (1861–1929), historian of dogma^[2]

Less public modernists

- Louis Duchesne, historian of the Church
- Henri Bremond
- Friedrich von Hügel

See also

- Buddhist modernism
- Fundamentalist–Modernist Controversy
- Integrism
- Islam and modernity
- Liberal Catholicism
- Modern Orthodox Judaism
- Nouvelle Théologie
- Joseph Malègue

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