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VATICAN II: THE HISTORY AND THE NARRATIVES

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The author discusses the relationship between historical studies and the hermeneutics of the Second Vatican Council. He seeks to develop a critical understanding of the two-sided debate about how to understand and assess the event of the council by showing how one side argues not on the basis of historical understanding of the council but on the basis of "narratives," which are constructs governed more by ideologies than by historical research and analysis.

> Who controls the past controls the future;
> who controls the present controls the past.
> —George Orwell[1]

FROM A HISTORICAL POINT OF VIEW, Vatican II is a complex event, given its global dimension, duration, agenda, and long-term consequences for the church and our world.[2] But the council is complex also in terms of "institutional memory": memory of an event that has changed the church. It is indeed clear that "institutional memory" is often not the contrary, but the companion or the other side, of "institutional amnesia"—the need for institutions to forget some aspects of their past in order to maintain integrity and cohesion. On the other hand, memory is not always helped by

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[1] The "Party slogan," in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Cutchogue, NY: Buccaneer, 1949).

[2] Vatican II is not merely the 16 final *documents*, and not merely the *experience* of the council between its announcement on January 25, 1959, and its conclusion in 1965; it is also an *event*, because the evaluation of its consequences has elevated it to the level of an epochal change in the history of Christianity. Vatican II, as an ongoing phenomenon in the church, has assumed the character of "event": see Joseph A. Komonchak, "Riflessioni storiografiche sul Vaticano II come evento," in *L'Evento e le decisioni: Studi sulle dinamiche del concilio Vaticano II*, ed. Maria Teresa Fattori and Alberto Melloni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997) 417–49, and Joseph A. Komonchak, "Vatican II as an Event," in *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?*, ed. David G. Schultenover (New York: Continuum, 2007) 24–51.

the process of "memorialization," that is, the culture of constructing festivities, rituals, monuments, and memorials supposed to help us not just remember but also shape our national and political identities around a given interpretation of major events of our recent history.[3]

But after Vatican II, the Catholic Church took unambiguous steps to help Catholics remember the council. Paul VI's decision to create the "Archive of Vatican II" immediately after the conclusion of the council and to make it available to scholars was an act of trust in the ability and the will of theologians and historians to build an "institutional memory."[4] The pope trusted Msgr. Vincenzo Carbone (former aide to the powerful secretary general of Vatican II, Bishop Pericle Felici) to collect and publish the proceedings of the plenary congregations celebrated in the Basilica of St. Peter, the different *schemas* in the redaction history of each final conciliar document, and the minutes of the conciliar and preconciliar commissions.

After the completion of the publication of the *Acta synodalia*,[5] the recent (2002) decision to move that archive within the Secret Vatican Archives in order to make it even more available to scholars signaled the institution's continuing trust in the community of scholars of Vatican II.[6] This fact is often taken for granted, but it is indeed remarkable, because Vatican II is still changing the church, and a particular "institutional interpretation" of the council is still able to influence the council's effect on the church. Vatican II was not only a religious event but also an institutional event. The "political" implications of the historiography of that event are not quite like those of other religious events that are less monopolized by the organizational dominance of one center of power that announces the event, manages it, and after its ending determines the process of the event's evaluation and concretization of its resolutions.[7]

[3] For a very different kind of event, see Harold Marcuse, "Holocaust Memorials: The Emergence of a Genre," *American Historical Review* 115/1 (2010) 53–89.

[4] See Vincenzo Carbone, "L'archivio del Concilio Vaticano II," *Archiva Ecclesiae* 34–35 (1991) 57–68.

[5] *Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando: Series I—Antepraeparatoria* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1960–1961); *Series II—Praeparatoria* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1964–1994); *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–1999).

[6] See Sergio Pagano, "Riflessioni sulle fonti archivistiche del concilio Vaticano II: In margine ad una recente pubblicazione," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 24 (2002) 775–812. For the availability of the archive of Vatican II in the Secret Vatican Archives, see the index carefully edited by Piero Doria, http://www.archiviosegretovaticano.va/en/patrimonio/ (all URLs cited herein were accessed on July 21, 2012).

[7] See John O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University, 2008) 311.

Usually the starting point for this discussion is Vatican II as an event of church history that has both a textual dimension and a culture surrounding it—that is, both a "letter" and a "spirit" that, along with their relationship, have been defined by the Extraordinary Synod of 1985.[8] Both of these elements must be part of every hermeneutical effort regarding the council, and the history of the council's interpretations 50 years on has been marked by this complex relationship between text and context of the council.

Far less explored so far has been the issue of the role of Vatican II as a historical event in the "memory building" effort in the church. In other words, it is now clear that for the church the issue arises of finding in Vatican II a "usable past" in a rapidly changing world and in an even more rapidly changing global Catholicism.[9] The imagery, symbols, and data that the public discourse in the church associates with Vatican II are very powerful markers of the council itself, especially for future generations of Catholics, who will not be able to connect directly with the generation of those who lived through the council: in the church there are two generations of Catholics who have no direct, personal memory of the council.

What today's church makes of Vatican II depends on what the transmitters of the council's memory are able and willing to communicate. In the process of reception, the perception of the council as such—the "whole thing"—is not less but in fact more important than the reception of a single document (e.g., the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*) or of a single passage in a document (e.g., "*subsistit in*" in *LG* no. 8).

What we have seen emerge in the last few decades is a new prominence for narratives about Vatican II and the shape of contemporary Catholicism that take no account of the historical research on the council produced

[8] See *The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod* (Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986); Avery Dulles, "The Reception of Vatican II at the Extraordinary Synod of 1985," in *The Reception of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua, and Joseph A. Komonchak (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1987) 349–63; Jean-Marie Tillard, "Final Report of the Last Synod," in *Synod 1985: An Evaluation*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and James Provost (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) 64–77.

[9] See William J. Bouwsma, *A Usable Past: Essays in European Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990) esp. 421–30 ("The History Teacher as Mediator"). The title of Bouwsma's book is derived from Nietzsche's essay, "*Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*" (1874) (translated as "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daneil Breaseale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale [New York: Cambridge University, 1997] 57–124). About the consequences of the "usable past" for contemporary church history, see Joseph P. Chinnici, "An Historian's Creed and the Emergence of Postconciliar Culture Wars," *Catholic Historical Review* 94 (2008) 219–44.

during this same period. We are left with narratives innocent of historical studies and even inimical to them.

NARRATIVE AND NARRATIVES OF VATICAN II

The concept of "narrative" is relatively new; it comes from linguistics and literary science. Between the 1960s and 1970s the works by Tzvetan Todorov and Émile Benveniste, among others, have stressed the distinction between "story" and "discourse" or "narrative," and between the "narrator" and the "recipient of the narration."

"Narratologie" was born as a development of structuralism, whose first principle is that "meaning-making is a rule-governed activity."[10] Narrative is a formal system, but it can also be an ideological instrument. It is a way to decode the rules of social communication, but it is also a way to read the text not in the context that produced it, but in the context of the consequences supposedly created by the text.

Lately the relevance of the narrative has gone beyond the academic study of narrative. In recent times the pervasiveness of the concept of "narrative" has changed the way major historical events are offered to the public:

> We are living in the age of the Narrative Turn, an era when narrative is widely celebrated and studied for its ubiquity and importance. Doctors, lawyers, psychologists, business men and women, politicians, and political pundits of all stripes are just a few of the groups who now regard narrative as the Queen of Discourses and an essential component of their work. These groups acknowledge narrative's power to capture certain truths and experiences in ways that other modes of explanation and analysis such as statistics, descriptions, summaries, and reasoning via conceptual abstractions cannot.[11]

Theology has adopted the narrative theory, and in these last few years "narratologie" has become, especially in the French-speaking world, an important way for theology to understand and transmit the revelation in Scripture.[12] But outside the field of theological narratology, the idea of a "narrative" has imposed itself also on understanding and explaining what happened at Vatican II and after it. One of the phenomena typical of these last few decades in the church has been not only the growing separation and mistrust between theologians and the magisterium, but also the gap between Catholic church historians on one side (and historians of the councils in

[10] Robert Scholes, Robert Kellogg, and James Phelan, *The Nature of Narrative*, rev., exp. ed., ed., James Phelan (1966; New York: Oxford University, 2006) 287.

[11] See ibid. 285.

[12] See Jean-Noël Aletti, *L'Art de raconter Jésus Christ: L'Écriture narrative de l'Évangile de Luc* (Paris: Seuil, 1989); and Daniel Marguerat, ed., *La Bible en récits: L'Exégèse biblique à l'heure du lecteur* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2003).

particular) and theologians, magisterium, and "secular historians" on the other side.[13] But for the understanding of Vatican II, the problem is even more acute due to the separation between historians and "narrators."

Usually the macronarratives are identified as the "conservative" and the "liberal" interpretations of Vatican II: the first one embodying the skeptical view of the new openness of the council vis-à-vis modernity and the modern world, the second one advocating a more positive view of the council as a necessary step to unlock Catholic theology from the reaction against modernity that was typical of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and a third narrative that might be called "neoconservative" or "neoliberal." But behind these macronarratives are other subnarratives that have marked these years of reception of the council. Others have already tried to catalogue them, and I will just begin here the work of decoding the "public discourse" of and on the Catholicism of Vatican II that will be a task for the church's future historians.[14]

A first narrative trying to undermine the legitimacy of the council, which emerged during Vatican II itself and is becoming more and more influential in the church, is the traditionalist narrative of the Lefebvrites, the Society of St. Pius X founded in 1970 by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (1905–1991), who denounced Vatican II as heretical. This narrative sees Vatican II as a product of early 20th-century theological "Modernism" condemned by Pius X in 1907. This "Modernist" theology allegedly took over Catholic theology and rehabilitated the worst enemies of modern Catholicism: Protestantism, Liberalism, Communism, and Freemasonry, among others. The definition of Vatican II as the ultimate and final moment of early 20th-century Modernism has almost become, at the beginning of the 21st century, common language in the neotraditionalist

[13] About the relationship between church historians and Catholic theology in the decades before Vatican II and during the council see Daniele Menozzi and Marina Montacutelli, eds., *Storici e religione nel novecento italiano* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2011); Giuseppe Alberigo, "Hubert Jedin storiografo (1900–1980)," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 22 (2001) 315–38, and "Concili," in *Dizionario del sapere storico-religioso del Novecento*, ed. Alberto Melloni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010) 540–56; Heribert Müller, "Konzilien des 15. Jahrhunderts und Zweites Vatikanisches Konzil: Historiker und Theologen als Wissenschaftler und Zeitgenossen," in *Historie und Leben: Der Historiker als Wissenschaftler und Zeitgenosse; Festschrift für Lothar Gall zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Dieter Hein, Klaus Hildebrand, and Andreas Schulz (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2006) 117–35.

[14] Peter Steinfels described a few years ago these tendencies active in American Catholicism: Vatican II as a tragic mistake (ultraconservative narrative); Vatican II misinterpreted and distorted (conservative); Vatican II as the needed change and reconciliation with the world (liberal); Vatican II as a false revolution (ultraliberal). See Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003) 32–39.

movement within contemporary Catholicism.[15] The view of Vatican II as "the French revolution in the church"[16] was fundamental in shaping Lefebvre's historical perception of the council, especially for a French bishop such as Lefebvre, who espoused the idea of a chain of "modern errors": the 16th-century Reformation followed by the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, Liberalism and socialism, and culminating in 20th-century Communism. In the 1940s Lefebvre had expressed support for the "Catholic order" of the authoritarian French Vichy régime (which collaborated with Nazi Germany); in the 1970s he commended authoritarian governments and military dictatorships in Spain, Portugal, Chile, and Argentina; and in the 1980s he supported the French far-right party "Front National" and added Vatican II as the final link in his chain of "modern errors." In his *Open Letter to Confused Catholics* (1986), Lefebvre described this chain of events: "The parallel I have drawn between the crisis in the church and the French Revolution is not simply a metaphorical one. The influence of the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century, and of the upheaval that they produced in the world, has continued down to our times. Those who injected that poison admit it themselves."[17]

Lefebvre's assessment of the state of the church after Vatican II was inextricably connected with his firm attachment to a very narrow idea of pontifical magisterium that developed after the French Revolution and to the Ultramontanist mindset typical of 19th-century Catholicism. He identified the idea of church teaching with the contents and forms of 19th-century papal magisterium, culminating in Pius X's encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907), which had condemned Modernism and brought about the most dramatic purge of theologians in the modern history of the Catholic Church. For Lefebvre, Vatican II represented the decisive point in the development of Catholicism in the modern world, a path that went from "Christian democracy" to "Christian socialism" and concluded with "Christian atheism" in which "dialogue" had become the

[15] For an example of such a mindset, see Dominique Bourmaud, *Cent ans de modernisme: Généalogie du concile Vatican II* (Etampes: Clovis, 2003); ET, *One Hundred Years of Modernism: A History of Modernism, Aristotle to the Second Vatican Council*, trans. Brian Sudlow and Anne Marie Temple (Kansas City, MO: Angelus, 2006).

[16] Marcel Lefebvre, *An Open Letter to Confused Catholics* (Herefordshire, UK: Fowler Wright Books for the Society of St. Pius X, 1986) 105; French edition: *Lettre ouverte aux catholiques perplexes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1985). Lefebvre referred to Vatican II also as "the peace of Yalta of the Church with its worst enemies" (Marcel Lefebvre, *J'Accuse le Concile* [Martigny: Saint-Gabriel, 1976] 8).

[17] Lefebvre, *An Open Letter to Confused Catholics* 105; French ed.: *Lettre ouverte* 8.

most dangerous element: "The adulterous union of the Church and the Revolution is cemented by 'dialogue.' Truth and error are incompatible; to dialogue with error is to put God and the devil on the same footing."[18] According to Lefebvre, Vatican II had become the work of the devil against the church: "There is no more any Magisterium, no dogma, nor hierarchy; not Holy Scripture even, in the sense of an inspired and historically certain text. Christians are inspired directly by the Holy Spirit. The Church then collapses."[19]

In today's public discourse of Catholicism, this ultratraditionalist narrative is all but dead. Recent publications by self-appointed apologists very close to some Vatican circles are typical of the spirit of *revanche* against Vatican II. They also propagate a view of Vatican II in its texts as clearly discontinuous from the tradition. Such publications have gone far beyond the usual boundaries of the debate over "texts vs. the spirit of Vatican II." Among such apologists is Roberto de Mattei, a renowned proponent of ultratraditionalist Catholicism and a biographer of the Brazilian revanchist Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira. De Mattei sees in Vatican II the triumph of Modernism and the result of the infiltration of Communism and free masonry in Catholic theology at work at Vatican II. His hermeneutical effort provides interesting results in terms of archival discoveries from the ultratraditionalist Lefebvrians, but it is most interesting (and disconcerting) in its attempt to present itself as the historiographical translation of the call of Benedict XVI for a renewed interpretation of Vatican II. In de Mattei's work, the rejection is not only of the "spirit" of Vatican II, but also of the very texts of the council, thus retrieving the conspiracy-driven Lefebvrian interpretation of Vatican II and proving essentially useless for developing a hermeneutical approach to Vatican II.[20]

A second narrative that has become more vigorous in the last few years sees in Vatican II a council whose major accomplishments were fatally weakened from the very beginning by excessive compromises between the reformers and the conservative forces in the Roman Curia and the church's leadership. This narrative maintains that Vatican II was despoiled of its major results even before it ended. What happened after the council is only the logical consequence of what had happened already at the council.

The most important promoter of this narrative is Hans Küng, whose disappointment with Vatican II began already during the council, when he refused the invitation to become involved as a *peritus* in the work of a conciliar commission. He recently disparaged the council's achievements over against "what Vatican II should have said" but did not due to an

[18] Lefebvre, *Open Letter* 117. [19] Ibid. 118.

[20] See Roberto de Mattei, *Il Concilio Vaticano II: Una storia mai raccontata* (Torino: Lindau, 2010); translations in other languages are forthcoming.

alleged disconnect between the wishes of the Council Fathers and the texts of the approved documents:

> There is absolutely no decree that completely satisfies me and certainly even most of the bishops. Much of what the Council Fathers had wanted was not included in the decrees. And much of what was accepted in the decrees the Council Fathers did not want. What is lacking almost everywhere in the doctrinal decrees is a solid exegetical and historical foundation—I have often lamented as a fundamental defect the almost total absence of historical-critical exegesis in the council. Often very difficult issues such as Scripture/tradition or primacy/collegiality have been plastered over by diplomatic compromise.[21]

A few years after Vatican II (and the publication of his book on papal infallibility),[22] Küng had already expressed his views about the "betrayal" of Vatican II by pope Paul VI:

> The bishops present there—advised and prompted by theologians—spoke a lot at that time about the breathing of the Holy Spirit; but under another Pope [Paul VI] they returned to their old surroundings and the papal curia tried to correct the mistakes of the new Pope's predecessor and to consolidate afresh its tottering rule over the Roman Empire.[23]

In the 1980s Küng's criticism of Vatican II as a betrayal continued. On the Extraordinary Synod of 1985 he commented: "Has the Second Vatican Council been forgotten, superceded, betrayed? . . . The ecclesiastical bureaucracy is fostering a restoration movement such as has taken hold of other churches, religions, and nations."[24] More recently, he substantially rejected the historians of Vatican II, accusing them not only of failing to take into account his own contribution to the formation of the council agenda (his books *Konzil und Wiedervereinigung* [1959] and *Strukturen*

[21] "Es gibt überhaupt kein Dekret, das mich und doch wohl auch die meisten Bischöfe ganz befriedigte. Vieles, was die Konzilsväter wollten, ist nicht in die Dekrete aufgenommen worden. Und vieles, was aufgenommen wurde, wollten die Konzilsväter nicht. Fast überall felht mir gerade in den Lehrdekreten—die fast totale Abwesenheit der historisch-kritischen Exegese im Konzil habe ich oft als grundlegenden Mangel beklagt—ein solides exegetisches und historisches Fundament. Öfters sind gerade schwierigste Punkten wie Schrift/Tradition oder Primat/Kollegialität durch diplomatische Kompromisse überkleistert worden" (my translation from Hans Küng, *Erkämpfte Freiheit: Erinnerungen* [Munich: Piper, 2002] 577); for Küng's assessment of the council see 230–580.

[22] See Hans Küng, *Unfehlbar? Eine Anfrage* (Zürich, Einsiedeln, Köln: Benziger, 1970); ET, *Infallible? An Inquiry*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983).

[23] Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1976) 36.

[24] Hans Küng, "On the State of the Catholic Church—or Why a Book like This Is Necessary," in *The Church in Anguish: Has the Vatican Betrayed Vatican II?*, ed. Hans Küng and Leonard Swindler (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) 1.

der Kirche [1962]), but also of being complicit with the Vatican and the papacy and thus unable to perceive the real Vatican II.[25]

A third narrative, that of the neoconservatives and neoliberals, emerged in the 1980s, but only recently, after the death of John Paul II and the election of Benedict XVI, has it entered into the discourse of Catholics on Vatican II. This narrative of Vatican II merges elements of the two master narratives—the ultratraditionalist and the ultraliberal. The ultratraditionalist elements come from a very narrow view of the tradition that allows neoconservatives to propagate an interpretation of Catholicism according to the theological and cultural markers of the "long nineteenth century,"[26] and, accordingly, of Vatican II as some kind of pacifist-Communist takeover of Catholicism. The ultraliberal elements come from a Jacobin-Leninist conception (typical of the neoconservative mindset) of the role of theologians and intellectuals in the church: an *avant garde* that is entitled to move the state of the debate in the church according to a specific and idiosyncratic agenda, championing the rule of an elite over a Catholic population that will never be able to understand their intellectual masters.

The neoconservative narrative of Vatican II is embodied in the writings of Michael Novak, Richard John Neuhaus, and George Weigel, who take their philosophical inspiration from Irving Kristol, particularly his engagement with the philosopher Leo Strauss.[27] This narrative surfaced in the 1980s, coincident with the emergence of a "new breed" of neo-Catholics in the United States. For at least two decades it did not manage to infiltrate the leadership of the Catholic Church, thanks to the personal-biographical contribution of John Paul II to the church's interpretation of Vatican II, especially on the issues *ad extra* (ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, and global justice). But during John Paul's pontificate, a staunch defense of the council in the name of the personal experience of the pontiff as a Council Father did not exclude a sometimes casual labeling of phenomena, movements, and theological insights as the direct "fruit of Vatican II," thus endorsing a kind of Vatican II nominalism coming from the pope. On the

[25] Küng, *Erkämpfte Freiheit* 501, 541.

[26] See John O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University, 2008) 53–92.

[27] On the intellectual roots of neoconservatives, see Irving Kristol, *The Neoconservative Persuasion: Selected Essays, 1942–2009* (New York: Basic, 2011), especially "Taking Religious Conservatives Seriously" [1994] 292–95), where Kristol defined "the three pillars of modern conservatism" as "religion, nationalism, and economic growth." For the personal experience with Vatican II of one of the leaders of neoconservative discourse in America, see William F. Buckley Jr., *Nearer, My God: An Autobiography of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) chap. 6, "Disruptions and Achievements of Vatican II."

other side, the doctrinal policy of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger never disavowed a clearly conservative reading of Vatican II in the name of literalism: an interpretation of the literal texts of Vatican II aimed at countering the liberal interpretation allegedly based on the "pure spirit" of the council.

For many years the Vatican's doctrinal position on the council was characterized by two partially conflicting visions: John Paul II's fundamentally positive view of the council and Ratzinger's decidedly pessimistic reading of the post-Vatican II period. This "dialogue" of interpretations—at the beginning under some control of the pope—gradually ceded place to Ratzinger's views. The conclave of 2005 put an end to the dialogue between the two most important interpreters of Vatican II in the first 50 years of its reception and opened a new phase in which the church could no longer count on Ratzinger's interpretation being offset by John Paul's.

In 2005, Ratzinger's accession to the papacy as Benedict XVI helped implant the neoconservative narrative in the vocabulary of the governing elites of Western Catholicism (European and North American especially). This transatlantic migration of the neoconservative narrative (opposite the direction of the migrations of Catholics in North America) has multiple consequences, most of which are still invisible and so far underappreciated. But the starting point of this approach to the issue of the presence of Catholicism in the modern world finds in the attack against Vatican II one of its favorite markers. This new breed of "public theologians" (in some cases, recent converts to Catholicism as their home of choice suited to their social and political conservatism) made the case for the fundamental need to promote the neoconservative interpretation of the First Vatican Council by fashioning a narrative against what Neuhaus called "the councils called Vatican II." In his *The Catholic Moment* (1987), Neuhaus took off from *The Ratzinger Report* (1985) to attack the interpretation of Vatican II coming from "the party of discontinuity." The need to attack these "councils in conflict" comes largely, for Neuhaus, from the fact that

> the cultural, intellectual, and political leadership of the country [the United States] is interested in American Catholicism because it has a stake in American Catholicism. The Catholic wars are surrounded by, and indeed are part of, the larger cultural warfare within American society. Those who view with anxiety the resurgence of fundamentalist and evangelical religion in the public arena view with undisguised alarm the possibility that that resurgence may converge with similar directions in American Catholicism. For such people "Vatican II," however vaguely understood, has become a totem, the last remaining and institutionally most formidable redoubt of a liberalism under conservative assault. . . . In all the changing definitions of sides and alignments, the contest over the interpretation of Vatican II constitutes a critical battlefront in our society's continuing cultural wars.[28]

[28] Richard John Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 61.

Weigel inaugurated the political anti-Paul VI narrative of Vatican II, finding the positive content only in the council's teaching on religious freedom and portraying John Paul II's offensive against liberation theology as the much-needed correction against the social teaching of Paul VI and against the narrative connection between the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* and the encyclical *Populorum progressio* (1967).[29] This effort needed to be accompanied by the push against "revisionist" Catholic historiography.[30] In the name of an *aggiornamento* carried by *ressourcement*, Weigel advocated a new "Americanist" reading of Vatican II that was able to push back the social and intellectual agenda of theologians and bishops in the United States in the two decades between 1965 and 1985.[31]

A similar identification of Vatican II with the neoconservative gospel of economic freedom is to be found in Michael Novak, once an enthusiast of Vatican II and a student of Bernard Lonergan at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome in the late 1950s.[32] The assessment of Vatican II by this former enthusiast of it could not be starker: "The very meaning of Catholicism as a coherent people with a coherent vision has been threatened. What the barbarian invasions, centuries of primitive village life, medieval plagues and diseases, wars, revolutions, heresies and schisms had failed to do, the Second Vatican Council succeeded in doing."[33]

THE NARRATIVES AND THE HISTORY OF VATICAN II

These narratives about Vatican II were all created in the first 20 years after the council, but also prior to the publication of the most significant contributions of theologians and historians to the scholarship on Vatican II. While the ultratraditionalist narrative kept going as if nothing had happened between 1965 and the beginning of the 21st century (and ultratraditionalists

[29] For Weigel's comparison between the "glumness" of Paul VI and John Paul II and their interpretations of the social message of Vatican II, see George Weigel, *Catholicism and the Renewal of American Democracy* (New York: Paulist, 1989) 27–44.

[30] See George Weigel, *Freedom and Its Discontents: Catholicism Confronts Modernity* (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1991) esp. 43, 57, 87, 134–49.

[31] See also George Weigel, *The Courage To Be Catholic: Crisis, Reform, and the Future of the Church* (New York: Basic, 2002) esp. 44–47, 220.

[32] For a comparison with Novak's early positions, see his *The Open Church: Vatican II, Act II* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), a journalistic account of the events of the second session of the council. Of particular interest is the apologetic "Introduction to the Transaction Edition" (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002), where Novak impugns "the spirit of Vatican II," but also—quite inconsequently—says that "for the history of Vatican II, there is no more thorough and scholarly source than *History of Vatican II*, whose general editor is Giuseppe Alberigo, and whose American editor is Joseph Komonchak" (xxxvii).

[33] Michael Novak, *Confessions of a Catholic* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) 8.

now present themselves—misleadingly—as the "silent majority" of Catholics), both the ultraliberal and neoconservative narratives were fueled by the pivotal moment of the Extraordinary Synod of 1985 and the debate surrounding the synod and its conclusions on one side and the changing role of Catholics in increasingly secularized societies in Europe and North America on the other.

But the synod of 1985 was also the chronological starting point for the major scholarly work on Vatican II, *History of Vatican II*, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo.[34] It is remarkable to see how little these narratives have been touched and modified by the new information made available by Alberigo's international team of historians and theologians.[35] In the mid-1980s, the project for a *History of Vatican II* began at the Institute of Bologna as an attempt of "historicization" (not memorialization) of Vatican II. Leading the project was the consideration that the epochal change taking place in contemporary Catholicism was "the cause and purpose of Vatican II"; the council was "an experience of communion in search of action in the human story that not only affects a few privileged members, but involves the church as such."[36]

The first step of the project concerned the types of sources for the history of Vatican II. The need to resort to historical sources along with the official ones became clear, in order to develop a reconstruction that was as complete and comprehensive as possible. Vatican II was a complex event, as evidenced not only by the monumental official documentation published by the Holy See (*Acta et documenta* and *Acta synodalia*), but also by the unofficial documentation, political and diplomatic sources, and private records of bishops and theologians (projects, draft plans, diaries, correspondence). Such sources were used for publishing the acts of the Council of Trent, the 13-volume *Concilium Tridentinum*: "acta, epistulae, diarii" (proceedings, letters, diaries).[37] In the early stages of this research, the historians on Alberigo's team uncovered, researched, and made available more than

[34] Giuseppe Alberigo, ed., *Storia del concilio Vaticano II*, 5 vols. (Bologna: Il Mulino 1995–2001); ET, *History of Vatican II*, ed. Joseph Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996–2006); also translated into French, German, Spanish, Portoguese, and Russian.

[35] About Giuseppe Alberigo (1926–2007), see *Giuseppe Alberigo (1927–2007): La figura e l'opera storiografica*, a special issue of *Cristianesimo nella storia* 29.3 (September 2008); and Giuseppe Ruggieri, "Lo storico Giuseppe Alberigo (1926–2007)," in *Storici e religione nel novecento italiano*, ed. Daniele Menozzi and Marina Montacutelli (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2011) 33–52.

[36] Giuseppe Alberigo, "Il Vaticano II nella storia della chiesa," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 6 (1985) 441–44, at 443 (all translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated).

[37] See *Concilium Tridentinum: Diariorum, actorum, epistularum, tractatuum*, 18 tomes in 13 vols., ed. Görres–Gesellschaft (Freiburg im Breisgau: Societas Gorresiana, 1901–2001).

100 unofficial archives, after having inquired about the existence of papers kept by more than 700 persons and institutions connected with the council.[38]

The intention of Alberigo and his team was to assume the Vatican II project as a multiyear research effort with no underlying apologetic or polemical purposes. They aimed to write a critically rigorous history of the council, based on archival sources and treating it as a historical event. This work aimed to document a multidimensional history of the council, which would require an interdenominational and intercontinental collaboration to achieve a perception of the "internal" aspects of Vatican II in their relationship with the "external" factors: "It is time to produce a historicization of Vatican II, not to relegate it to a distant past, but to facilitate the overcoming of the apologetical phase of its reception."[39] Alberigo's training under Hubert Jedin in Bonn in the early 1950s and his hands-on experience with the production and reception of Jedin's 4-volume *History of the Council of Trent* superbly qualified Alberigo to attempt a history of Vatican II just three decades after its completion.[40]

Alberigo had developed a reflection on the "hermeneutical criteria for the history of Vatican II" that would inform his work as a conciliar historian under the aspects of scholar, teacher, and Christian:

(1) *The council-event as a canon of interpretation*: Vatican II is much more than the sum of its decisions, since the nature of the assembly and the council have an important role for understanding and for the reception of the council itself. Vatican II is an "event" also because the council was a celebration in the liturgical sense, and trying to understand it without taking into account the nature of the gathering completely misses the point.

(2) *The intention of John XXIII*: Pope John XXIII was planning to convene a council that could set the church again in a position to speak to modern men and women. He wanted to do this not by sacrificing the essentials of his message and his tradition, but by revising older forms to proclaim more effectively the gospel to the modern world.

(3) *The "pastoral" nature of the council*: The role of Vatican II was not to assuage guilt or to proclaim new dogmas, but at its center was pastoral teaching. The council did also teach, but its pastoral nature made *salus animarum* (the salvation of the souls)—and not the conservation of the old ways—the ultimate goal of theology.

[38] See Massimo Faggioli and Giovanni Turbanti, *Il concilio inedito: Fonti del Vaticano II* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001).

[39] See Giuseppe Alberigo, "Per la storicizzazione del Vaticano II," in *Per la storicizzazione del Vaticano II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Alberto Melloni, special issue of *Cristianesimo nella storia* 13 (1992) 473–74, at 473.

[40] See Hubert Jedin, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient*, 4 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1949–1975).

(4) Aggiornamento *as the key goal of the council*: "update" is the effort to know, renew, and reform the cultural, theological, and spiritual patrimony of the church the more effectively to advance the gospel in our time.

(5) *The importance of compromise for interpreting the documents of Vatican II*: No decision of the council is a unique source to produce a "mind," school, or doctrine. The effort of the Council Fathers and conciliar committees to compromise in order to achieve as much consensus as possible (at least a moral consensus) on the texts under discussion greatly influenced the formulation of the final documents.[41]

The five-volume *History of Vatican II* (and the many other volumes of a series published as its corollary) changed much of what the church knows about specific and very important issues regarding, for example, the "continuity/discontinuity" issue of Vatican II with respect to the tradition, especially thanks to the following new discoveries (among others):[42]

(1) The history of the preparation of the council (1960–1962) and the debate on the rejection of the preparatory schemas drafted by the Roman Curia;[43]
(2) the history of the individual documents of Vatican II (constitutions, decrees, declarations) from their first drafts to the final versions, through the work in the conciliar commission and the debates on the floor of the aula of St. Peter;[44]
(3) the fundamental contribution provided by the commissions to the documents of the intersession periods (January to August 1963; January to

[41] Giuseppe Alberigo, "Critères herméneutiques pour une histoire de Vatican II," in *À la veille du Concile Vatican II: Vota et réactions en Europe et dans le Catholicisme oriental* (Leuven: Peeters, 1992) 12–23; now republished in Italian in Giuseppe Alberigo, *Transizione epocale: Studi sul concilio Vaticano II* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009) 29–45.

[42] See also Giuseppe Alberigo, "*L'Histoire du Concile Vatican II: Problèmes et perspectives*," in *Vatican II sous le regard des historiens*, ed. Christoph Theobald (Paris: Médiasèvres, 2006) 25–48.

[43] See especially Antonino Indelicato, *Difendere la dottrina o annunciare l'Evangelo: Il dibattito nella Commissione centrale preparatoria del Vaticano II* (Genova: Marietti, 1992); Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Struggle for the Council during the Preparation of Vatican II (1960–1962)," in *History of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, vol. 1, *Announcing and Preparing Vatican Council II: Toward a New Era in Catholicism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995) 167–356.

[44] See Massimo Faggioli, "Concilio Vaticano II: Bollettino bibliografico (2000–2002)," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 24 (2003) 335–60; "Concilio Vaticano II: Bollettino bibliografico (2002–2005)," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 26 (2005) 743–67; Faggioli, "Council Vatican II: Bibliographical Overview 2005–2007," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 29 (2008) 567–610; "Council Vatican II: Bibliographical Overview 2007–2010," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 32 (2011) 755–91.

August 1964; January to August 1965) that until the 1990s had been underestimated, if not neglected, by the scholarship on Vatican II;[45]

(4) the influence of non-Roman and nontheological factors in the decision-making process regarding major documents of Vatican II.[46]

CHURCH HISTORY AND THE CHURCH OF VATICAN II

Understanding the importance of the councils in Catholic theology requires much more than historical studies: *traditio* is not just *historia*. But if the *traditio* of the teachings of a council in the church goes beyond the passing down of the historical memory of the council as an event, this *traditio* is surely not detached from the kind of historical studies dedicated to the councils and cultivated by the church that celebrated them. In the last 30 years the historiography on Vatican II has offered the global church a valuable patrimony of studies necessary to know and understand what happened at Vatican II. But the narratives—especially the above-mentioned three master narratives: the ultratraditionalist, the ultraliberal, and the neoconservative—have not changed a bit. Their "spin" on the council has been untouched by what we now know about Vatican II—things we did not know before and when those narratives were developed.

On the contrary, these narratives have only become louder in the last few years because of the struggle to control the recent past of the church beginning already in the years following the First Vatican Council. It is worth recalling what Francis Oakley wrote recently about his attempt to access the "repressed memory" of conciliarism—the theological foundations of the councils of the 14th to 15th centuries that saved the church from a papacy gone astray with the Great Western Schism—against the "papalist narrative" dominant until the 1950s:

> But in so doing I am acutely conscious of the fact that I will be arguing in the teeth of the high papalist constitutive narrative successfully installed, in the wake of Vatican I, not only in Catholic historiography but also in our general histories at large. Only in the past forty to fifty years at most has the revisionist process begun finally to gain traction and to succeed in calling into question that established narrative.[47]

[45] See Jan Grootaers, "The Drama Continues between the Acts: The 'Second Preparation' and Its Opponents," in *History of Vatican II* 2:359–514; Evangelista Vilanova, "The Intersession," in *History of Vatican II* 3:347–490; Riccardo Burigana and Giovanni Turbanti, "The Intersession: Preparing the Conclusion of the Council," in *History of Vatican II* 4:453–615.

[46] See especially Alberto Melloni, *L'Altra Roma: Politica e S. Sede durante il Concilio Vaticano II, 1959–1965* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000); Stephen Schloesser, "Against Forgetting: Memory, History, Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 275–319.

[47] Francis Oakley, "The Conciliar Heritage and the Politics of Oblivion," in *The Church, the Councils, and Reform: The Legacy of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Gerald Christianson, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Christopher M. Bellitto (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2008) 82–97, at 85.

All that has become evident in today's theological debate, as well as in the public posture of the Holy See toward the topic of Vatican II from the end of John Paul II's pontificate and the beginning of Benedict XVI's. Already in 1997 members of the entourage of the Roman Curia, feeling more secure in the decline of John Paul II's pontificate, began expressing more vocally their prior criticism of the volumes of *History of Vatican II* edited by Giuseppe Alberigo, because *History of Vatican II* challenged the favored narrative.[48]

This initially quiet reaction against the international, multiauthored, and respected historiographical work on Vatican II (polemically labeled "the Bologna School") became gradually more visible over time and especially after 2005, but it never acquired a real scholarly standing as an alternative to the international research on Vatican II. The absence of Roman Curia theologians from the debate has been replaced by the political interpretation of Vatican II by curial officials—high-ranking members and cardinals included. Only a few historians and theologians active at the Vatican in Rome have taken part in serious debate.

A growing radicalization of positions around the council is perceivable during the pontificate of Benedict XVI: both the anti-Vatican II sentiment typical of traditionalism, closer and closer to the Lefebvrian narrative about the council as a total "rupture,"[49] and the ultraliberals' disappointment with Vatican II as a failed promise[50] have become typical of these times. The indirect, silent, and benevolent approval by some cardinals and bishops of the Lefebvrites' narrative on Vatican II has been undoubtedly a side effect (much wished by some in Rome and in Catholic traditionalist quarters) of the reconciliation talks with the Society of St. Pius X, especially since 2009.[51] Quite recently, Catholic ultratraditionalist intellectuals,

[48] See Agostino Marchetto's review of *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2, in *Osservatore Romano*, November 13, 1997, and in *Apollinaris* 70 (1997) 331–51 (republished in Agostino Marchetto, *Il Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II: Contrappunto per la sua storia* [Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005] 102–19). All the other historians and theologians had reviewed *History of Vatican II* favorably: from the same "Roman milieu," see, e.g., Giacomo Martina, in *La Civiltà Cattolica* 147, pt. 2 (1996) 153–60, and in *Archivum historiae pontificiae* 35 (1997) 356–59. On the reception of *History of Vatican II*, see Alberto Melloni, "Il Vaticano II e la sua storia: Introduzione alla nuova edizione, 2012–2014," in *Storia del Concilio Vaticano II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012) ix–lvi.

[49] See *Penser Vatican II quarante ans après*. Actes du VIe congrès théologique de "Sì Sì No No" (Versailles: Courrier de Rome, 2004) and Dominic Bourmaud, *Cent ans de modernisme: Généalogie du concile Vatican II* (Étampes: Clovis, 2003).

[50] Typical of this sentiment are some passages of Hans Küng's memoirs, *My Struggle for Freedom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

[51] See Peter Hünermann, ed., *Exkommunikation oder Kommunikation?: Der Weg der Kirche nach dem II. Vatikanum und die Pius-Brüder* (Freiburg: Herder, 2009).

ideologically much closer to the Lefebvrites than to the Roman "official" interpretation of Vatican II as an event of "continuity and reform," have been given honors and venues by prelates of the Roman Curia.[52]

The rise of the narratives in today's church has intellectually weakened the awareness of Vatican II as a historical event. Even worse, "politically," that is, from the church government standpoint, the rise of the narratives is weakening the idea of Vatican II as a "reform council"[53]: for the ultratraditionalist narrative, Vatican II was a council of complete and illegitimate rupture from the past; for the ultraliberal narrative it was a totally failed promise; for the neoconservative narrative it was merely the ushering in of an agenda of economic freedom. This crisis of the consensus around Vatican II is a crisis for the authority of the council that has spilled over into the credibility of the church as such.[54]

What is happening to the role of Vatican II in today's church and to the appreciation of the council as a decisive moment to engage the challenges facing Catholicism today has many roots; here it is possible only to offer a few hypotheses.

One possible cause is the backlog of post-Vatican II reforms that have been piling up between the pontificates of Paul VI and John Paul II: for example, the stop-and-go about the reform of the Roman Curia and the role of the papacy in the church (especially after John Paul II's encyclical *Ut unum sint*, 1995) in the direction of a decentralization in an increasingly globalized Catholicism. So many expectations regarding the power of Vatican II to reform the church have been disappointed, such that it has become easy for the ones who never believed in Vatican II as a real reform council to blame it for what happened *after* Vatican II.

A second probable reason is that the end of the first "global pontificate," John Paul II's, has given way to a surge in the new Westernization of the Catholic Church. This development and the crisis of the theory of secularization have left Catholicism with no defense against the outbreak of a theologically worded "culture war": the so-called "revanche de Dieu" has taken the form of a "revanche contre Vatican II" in Western Catholicism, especially among the younger generations of seminarians and priests.

Third, one difference between the force of the narratives on Vatican II and the previous councils is that Vatican II and contemporary theological

[52] See Giovanni Miccoli, *La chiesa dell'anticoncilio: I tradizionalisti alla riconquista di Roma* (Rome: Laterza, 2011) 234–334.

[53] O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* 300.

[54] See Andreas Battlogg, "Ist das Zweite Vatikanum Verhandlungsmasse?," *Stimmen der Zeit* 227 (2009) 649–50; Wolfgang Beinert, "Nur pastoral oder dogmatisch verpflichtend?: Zur Verbindlichkeit des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils," *Stimmen der Zeit* 228 (2010) 3–15.

discourse in Catholicism operate in a completely new environment: we live in a "mass society" and a "mass culture" that make historical scholarship more exposed to ideological manipulation. This also meets an idea of the church that was recast by Vatican II in a more embracing and participative fashion. In this new self-understanding of the church, the power of the old elites (Catholic bishops, theologians, and historians included) is weaker than before. This makes the history of Vatican II a more debated project, not a shared enterprise as it was for previous councils.

Finally, the crisis of the historical awareness of Catholics about Vatican II is a symptom of the crisis of church history as an academic discipline cultivated in pontifical universities, theological seminaries, departments of Catholic theology and religious studies, and also in history departments of non-Catholic academic institutions of higher education and research. The debate between Alberigo and Jedin about the status of church history as a "theological discipline" has now, at the beginning of the 21st century, very few descendants still dealing professionally with church history.[55] The crisis of church history in Catholic culture, compared to the golden age of church historians between Vatican I and Vatican II, means the escalating risk of leaving recent church history, and especially Vatican II, in the hands of "theological pundits" (journalists in the best of cases; bloggers in the worst) whose agenda is far more influenced by nontheological factors. The fact that church history has its own specificity but is part of global history is now rejected by many—as if it were intellectually possible to go back to the apologetics of *historia ecclesiastica*—on the grounds of a neo-Augustinian ecclesiology that sees the church not *in the modern world*, but opposed to it.

In these last 50 years after Vatican II, there have not been conflicting *histories* but conflicting *narratives* at work on the interpretation of the council.[56] All the experts know that there is no trustworthy alternative, at least so far, to the history of Vatican II written in the last 20 years and represented by Alberigo, Komonchak, and O'Malley. In this cultural and theological environment, church historians have been accused of "discontinuism," of being uninterested in the tradition, that is, in Catholicism's past. But it is clear now, at 50 years from the opening of Vatican II, that those not interested in recovering the past—as well as tradition in its entirety—are

[55] See Hubert Jedin, *Chiesa della fede: Chiesa della storia* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1972), especially "Storia della chiesa come storia della salvezza" and "La storia della chiesa è teologia e storia" 35–40 and 51–65. Contra Jedin's view of church history as a theological discipline, see Giuseppe Alberigo, "Conoscenza storica e teologia," *Römische Quartalschrift* 80 (1985) 207–22; and "Méthodologie de l'histoire de l'Église en Europe," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 81 (1986) 401–20.

[56] About the development of the debate, see Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York: Paulist, 2012).

actually the ideologues of the "narratives" on Vatican II, and certainly not church historians.[57]

Church history as a "public utility"—an intellectual discipline providing a "public service" to the world of knowledge—is far from being without problems, but it certainly does not have more problems than the apparently more neutral "religious history." The intention of serving the church by discovering and publishing what happened at Vatican II was and is part of the intention of church historians researching Vatican II.[58] In this moment of passage between the *memory* of Vatican II and a dangerously sterilized *memorialization* of it,[59] church historians try, with their own scientific method, to remind the church "how much purposeful forgetting—repression or amnesia—is required to make a case for continuity."[60] The main difference between the history and the narratives of Vatican II is that the former keeps track also of the forgotten things.

[57] "Some modern intellectuals believe, like many social historians, that, as Alan Megill put it, we are now 'under the reign of discontinuity': that, in short, to be 'modern' means, among other things, to recognize the irrelevance of the past. This sense of a break with the past, particularly on the part of alienated intellectuals, is not, however, to be confused with discontinuity itself; indeed, as a repetition of similar attitudes, for example among Renaissance humanists, it reflects, in a radical form, one possible attitude to the past perhaps unique to Western culture" (Bouwsma, *A Usable Past* 6).

[58] See Hervé Legrand, "Relecture et évaluation de l'*Histoire du Concile Vatican II* d'un point de vue ecclésiologique," in *Vatican II sous le regard des historiens* 49–82; John W. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?," in *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* 52–91, esp. 52–59.

[59] See Enrico Galavotti, "Le beatificazioni di Benedetto XVI e il mausoleo del Vaticano II," *Il margine* 30.2 (2010) 22–33.

[60] Schloesser, "Against Forgetting" 277.