

Catholicism: The End of a 'World'?

Anthony M. Abela

Danièle Harvieu-Léger, 2003. *Catholicisme, la fin d'un monde*, Paris: Bayard, 2003, 336 pp.

During one of my most recent visits to Paris, whilst browsing the new acquisitions in a centrally located bookshop, I came across the latest work by Danièle Harvieu-Léger, a French sociologist of religion. Next to this publication stood a revised edition of a renowned book on Catholicism, this time on the social aspects of dogma, written about 60 years ago by the late Cardinal Henri de Lubac. I took an interest in both these works, first because of their subject matter, but also because I remember having entertained exchanges with both authors at different stages of my life-journey. In the mid-eighties, during my studies in Paris, I lived for two years in the same community where Cardinal de Lubac had his residence. My acquaintance with Danièle Harvieu-Léger is more recent. I came to know her at international sociological conferences and from her earlier sociological works. Harvieu-Léger's latest book, which was published for the first time this year, is already in its second reprint. What follows is a review of Harvieu-Léger's latest work for its contribution to a better understanding of an allegedly fading world of Catholicism in the emerging ultramodern culture. Unlike de Lubac's work, Harvieu-Léger's sociological study has no claim to advance any theological or dogmatic beliefs.

Danièle Harvieu-Léger's book comes after many years of intense sociological investigation. Building on her earlier elaboration of sociological models to explain religious change in contemporary society, Danièle Harvieu-Léger arrives at a well-thought out position. In her view, Catholicism has ceased to form part of people's cultural universe. The values of Catholicism, its representations and its personnel have left or are in the course of leaving the social world. Although Harvieu-Léger's position refers to the situation of Catholicism in France, it can nevertheless be extended to other similar European societies. The question arises as to what extent, if at all, this applies to a country like Malta. Of course, there is no easy and clear answer to this question. Any empirically oriented sociologist would be very cautious before arriving at a definite conclusion.

Running thread

The hypothesis, constituting the running thread of Harvieu-Léger's book is that the current radical transformation in culture is likely to drain off Catholicism from within. The author advances her thesis by an extensive review of the sociological literature; an account of historical events, reference to her earlier works on religion, and the secondary analysis of select data from the European Values Study [EVS].

Danièle Harvieu-Léger starts off her argument by a statement and a question. On the one hand, the author attests the historical dominance of the Catholic Church in the political, economical, social and cultural domains. On the other hand, she asks whether the same Church and its members are currently being discredited. She observes how contemporary authors and the media, not least because of reported cases of paedophile priests and their mishandling by church authorities, are disqualifying the institutional Church and devaluing Christianity. Although the Catholic Church is still a powerful presence in the collective memory, it appears to be an aging and increasingly weakened institution. The apparent visibility of Catholicism in the public domain is countered by a demoralisation of its members. In this situation described as "atonie", Catholics avoid making any reference to a world of beliefs, practices and values as these are seen to have definitely slid into cultural insignificance. Paradoxically, this demoralisation is taking place at a time when the leaders of the Catholic Church are undertaking a serious effort to present an image of the Church that conforms to authentic Christian values, adopt greater discretion in its contribution to the public domain and retreat from any direct political intervention.

Sociological literature

A review of the literature gives evidence of how French Catholicism has always been in a permanent state of crisis. Sociologists have observed how after the Second World War, France has turned into a mission country (Godin et Daniel 1943). Yves Lambert (1985) traces the external erosion of Catholicism as exemplified in his study of a remote village. More recently, Simon (1999) has posited France as a pagan country, and Rouet (2001) examined the fragility of Christianity.

Harvieu-Léger finds an internal rapture within Catholicism itself. An example can be found in the changing architecture of cathedral churches. Whereas medieval cathedrals were built at the centre and summit of a town as signs of triumphant dominance, protection, identity and orientation, new cathedrals and churches are

mystifying spaces whose meaning is open to the various expectations and searches of those who enter them on their own free will.

In late modernity or 'ultramodernity', as Harvieu-Léger calls it, the subjective dimension of religion as exemplified by the pilgrim and the convert, takes on a central importance. Religion becomes incorporated into a global culture of the individual, making self-realisation the dominant and universal imperative.

Individualisation

Harvieu-Léger makes use of select data from the European Values Study (Bréchon éd. 2000) to support her theory on the displacement of traditional catholic culture by the primacy of individual self-realisation and the rise of relational family values. The old world of an unhappy pleasure-repressing Catholicism is giving way to a new world of spirituality and an individualised ultramodern culture of total human self-realisation. The sin culture of Catholicism, so much associated with sexuality, no longer holds. In the late nineties people aspired to live well, entertain good social relations and safeguard the independence of their private life. In the process, however, the ultramodern consumerist culture of immediate satisfaction of all desires has displaced the catholic vision of ultimate eschatological and enduring happiness.

The horizontal family

The revolution of the family that has taken place over the past thirty years has left an impact on the Catholic Church. The emergence of the horizontal model of the family with its imposing values and practices from and at the basis of society impinges on traditional catholic familial culture. Harvieu-Léger argues that this process has a three-fold impact on the Church. First, there occurs a widening gap between the Church's teachings on the family, in particular on relationships and sexuality, and lived experience. Second, it affects the application of the model of the family, so much popular after Vatican II, to the ecclesial community. Third, the ultramodern autonomous 'religion of love' between equal partners is at loggerheads with the Church's understanding of the externally-driven 'mystery of love' of the formerly dominant vertical model of the family. In many ways, the horizontal family competes with institutional religion and displaces Catholicism as the main identity-giving institution. As a consequence, the observed departure of religion from the political sphere now extends into the private sphere.

Exculturation

We are told that over the past thirty years, the world of French culture has uprooted its institutional roots, however much formerly modelled by the Church. In the current French situation, the Catholic Church can still participate and even contest the world of culture, but it is no longer in a position to offer a global alternative to the dominant culture. Harvieu-Léger observes that this is nothing short of a reversal of the previous cultural triumph of Catholicism whereby the spiritual and moral inspiration of Christianity had become the common heritage of democratic societies. Catholicism has been ex-cultured, removed from mainline [French] culture.

The former process whereby the Catholic Church was successful to influence society and impinge a catholic institutionalism on French secular culture has now been ruptured and is being reversed. Accordingly, the current process is identified as exculturation.

The author's diagnosis of what she terms 'exculturation', however, does not lead to the end of the world, nor to the end of the Catholic Church, but to 'the end of a world', that is the end of a particular and historical catholic culture, commonly known as 'Catholicism'.

EU Constitution

A case in point is the debate on the place of religion in the Constitution of the European Union. The proposal by predominantly catholic countries for mention of God and the Christian heritage is strongly opposed by representatives from ultramodern cultures like France. On this issue Harvieu-Léger augurs for a middle way solution that would acknowledge the religious heritage without an explicit reference to God. In this way the constitution would recognise the Christian patrimony without associating it to any profession of faith (see pp 269-270).

Pilgrim model

Studies on the current geography of catholic institutions observe how the alarming decline of traditional church organisations is accompanied by continuing catholic sociability. Catholics are present everywhere, but in sma

and sometimes very small numbers. On the one hand, parishes, associations and congregations are being deserted. On the other hand, there is an increasing visible, mobile and dynamic spiritual, communitarian and pilgrim activity. This is what Harvieu-Léger calls the pilgrim model of the church. It is characterised by a plastic religiosity wherein mobile pilgrims seek "strong moments" and "high places". In the process, the church is being radically reshaped from below. At the same time, however, institutional Catholicism becomes irrelevant in mainline ultramodern culture.

Unintelligibility

What gives legitimacy to authority and what the faithful are disposed to do shifts towards what people expect, aspire and experience in the world. They simply participate and socialise in a culture founded on cooperation and the continuous negotiation of what regulates their life together. For example, over the years, the image of the priest has shifted from the person responsible, towards the animator and eventually the one who accompanies. On many issues, not least the unequal treatment of women, the refusal of ordination to women and married men, the official position of the Catholic Church is becoming increasingly intolerable, implausible and unintelligible. This is because, according to Harvieu-Léger, the Church holds on to an identity that is no longer anchored in a common culture.

Shifting institutionalism

In her concluding chapter, Harvieu-Léger reiterates her main thesis on the exculturation of Catholicism from French culture. This process involves the decline of a general identity-giving institutional regime, common to all institutions with a religious matrix, including the Church, and its replacement by fragile service-giving institutionalism.

Although Harvieu-Léger does not offer an equally detailed description of current catholic sociability, she nevertheless suggests that the new catholic service-oriented institutions are a response to the differentiated aspirations, interests and expectations of individuals. It seems that the multiple activities of church communities, ranging from new spiritualities to the opening of church buildings to immigrants without documents, give evidence of how today's fragile catholicism is working out a new enculturation in our ultramodern fragmented world.

Discussion

Harvieu-Léger's study is a good contribution to an understanding of the cultural secularisation of Catholicism or what she terms the Church's exculturation from contemporary ultramodern society. Her work rests on an extensive literature review supported by quotations from her earlier empirical studies and the secondary analysis of select data from the European Values study on French society.

In this respect, Harvieu-Léger's thesis would have achieved greater validity by reference to more relevant results from comparative EVS data on religion in France and other European societies, than the ones employed. Thus, for example, untapped EVS results show how very few in France (11.4%), similar to the European average (19.3%), and in contrast to a high percentage in Malta (49.6%), report having great confidence in the Church. Similarly, very few in France (27.8%) compared to a higher European average (42.7%), but in contrast to a very high percentage in Malta (75%) think that the Church is giving adequate answers to problems of family life. The majority of the French (55.4%), however, similar to the European average (67.6%) even if much lower than the percentage in Malta (85.5%), find adequate the Church's response to people's spiritual needs. Accordingly, more detailed comparative statistical analyses of EVS (2001) data on similar issues can contribute to a better appraisal of Harvieu-Léger's thesis on Catholicism. Although the publication has well documented footnotes, an inclusion of a list of references and an index of main terms and authors, would improve its scientific value.

In a nutshell, Harvieu-Léger's is neither advocating the end of Catholicism nor the end of the Catholic Church, but the end of an institutional identity-giving regime or a traditional world, historically rooted in a catholic culture but which has since assumed a world of its own. The end of this regime, however, contributes to the observed diminishing relevance of Catholicism and the Catholic Church in contemporary society.

The reader cannot fail to observe how contrary to the situation in France, Catholicism has still a hold over Maltese culture. For example, active members of the Church, and priests in particular, still occupy key positions in identity-giving institutions, such as governmental and non-governmental commissions, educational bodies and the media. Local bishops have come to hold formal and informal consultation meetings with leaders of political parties. Moreover, the expansion of

parish feasts and the relative success of Church authorities to regulate the participation of band clubs, now to be extended to fireworks' organisations, is an example of the impact of Maltese Catholicism and the Catholic Church on popular culture. In line with world Catholicism, however, the most recent local synod has displaced the traditional top-bottom representation of the church by a horizontal 'sister and service' model. It would take much longer, however, for whole generations who have been socialised in an identity-giving institutional regime to leave behind their authoritarian personality, relinquish their privileged positions and join ranks in a service-oriented society.

On a final note, although Harvieu-Léger's study adopts neither a comparative approach, nor does it claim universality, the findings can easily be extended to a general theory of global Catholicism and serve as a starting point for comparative studies. Having convincingly traced the decline of the impact of traditional Catholicism in current French society, the task ahead is to examine the workings of an emerging post-traditional catholicism, however much fragile and multi-dimensional, in contemporary pluralist non-confessional, global and ultramodern society.

Department of Sociology
University of Malta
Msida

References

- Bréchon P. éd. 2000. *Les Valeurs des Français. Évolutions de 1980 à 2000*. Paris: Armand Collins.
- Godin H. et Y. Daniel. 1943. *La France pays de missions?* Paris: Éditions de l'Abeille.
- Lambert Y. 1985. *Dieu change en Bretagne. Le Catholicisme a Limerzel de 1900 à nos jours*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf.
- Rouet A. 2001. *La chance d'un christianisme fragile*. Paris: Bayard.
- Simon H. 1999. *Vers une France païenne?* Paris: Cana.
- The European Values Study [EVS]: A Third Wave. Source Book of the 1999/2000 European Values Study Surveys*. 2001. [compiled by] L. Halman [in collaboration with A. M. Abela, H. Anheier and S. Harding and 53 others]. Tilburg: European Values Study. WORC.