Emile Perreau-Saussine


According to W. Churchill, some might consider that “Democracy is a bad system, but it is the least bad of all systems”, but Roman Catholic Church took time to be completely convinced by this point of view. How Catholicism accepted the idea of Democracy is the subject of Emile Perreau-Saussine’s book. It traces the evolution of the ideological system of the Roman Catholic Church (that means at least the evolution of the doctrine) from the French revolution to council Vatican II. It also represents an indispensable study to understand how the two most recent councils, Vatican I and II, which are considered as opposite to one another, are actually two faces of the same evolution. Thus, this book merits more than a quick glance for those who try to understand the religious movements in the last two centuries.

Reconciliation between Catholicism and democracy took time, it wasn’t a matter of political opportunity – even later, when the terrifying experience of totalitarianism in the mid 20th century showed that popular support of citizens from democratic countries could be helpful. Perreau-Saussine mobilizes visions presented by influent French authors from Bossuet and Joseph de Maistre, Félicité de Lamennais, Alexis de Tocqueville to Jacques Maritain. He identifies the key turning points of political and religious visions for those Catholic authors who faced the consequences of French revolution. Opponents are not forgiven, as Emile Littré, Auguste Comte, and he explores the step path between Maurras and the intellectual acquaintances of neo-Thomists and postwar Marxist Christians (“And a Catholicism that had made an accommodation with Maurras was no less ready to come to an arrangement with Marx”, p. 110).

The book is divided in two parts. The first one explores the political thinking that leads from Gallicanism to Ultramontanism through the traumatic experiment of the French revolution. Ideas and ideologies collapsed because of the complete reversal of the base of legitimacy that could establish a Catholic position in regard to politic state organization. First of all, the “A New Role for the Papacy: the Origins of Vatican I”, driven by the moving of government legitimacy: the king of France was sacred, he took his authority from God, while remaining personally a loyal subject of the Catholic Church. After the revolution, his legitimacy was based on people, which became source of authority. As believer, he couldn’t anymore pretend to a fidelity to God’s laws in his government (chapter 1, “From Bossuet to Maistre: the Deconfessionalization of the State
as a Political Problem”). Return back to Gallicanism seemed quickly impossible after the Empire experience. So remained the invention of Ultramontanism (chapter 2: The Collapse of Reactionary Ultramontanism), with the papacy re-focused on its spiritual role. Meanwhile, the works of Alexis de Tocqueville appeared ahead of its time, and had thus a small audience with the question of papal infallibility in Vatican I occurs to be, following the curse of intellectual ideas, a strong political response to the emerging nationalisms in Europe.

The development of people’s authority through extended rights to vote lead however to social evolutions, and reinforcement of papal authority ought to set up a new conception of laity role in the Roman Church. The second part of the book shows how the question of laity became more and more a new challenge, strong bended to the way that laicity could be assumed by religious authorities (A new Role for the Laity: The Origins of Vatican II). Chapter 3 examines the confrontation of “Intolerant Secularism and Liberal Secularism”. Actually, the real question was the way politics could be involved in religious guidance by Rome. Between Vatican I and Vatican II, political thinking of Catholics found a medium way to reconsider the place of laity in democratic societies (chapter 4: The Political Virtues of Moderation). In front of the awful wars and totalitarian regimes that destroyed the ancient world, democracy becomes a possible way to establish religious liberty, despite of the new context of laicity; it could then be a mean to influence governments with the help of catholic citizens. So, council Vatican II is shown by Perreau-Saussine as the second “volet” of the adaptation of Catholicism to modernity.

The work of Perreau-Saussine is first of highest interest for those who want to understand any political position of the Roman Catholic Church in international affairs, because it gives keys to evaluate the swinging between supporting authoritarian regimes and choosing democracy, between freedom of consciousness and political freedom for Catholicism. Catholicism tries to deal with democracy without being doctrinally persuaded it to be the best political regime for announcing the gospel. Setting Vatican II in regard to Vatican I is a heuristic perspective that renews interpretation of council Vatican II.

Then, Perreau-Saussine gives new elements to understand internal developments, so as for example the status of priest in a strict laicist society as France. The privatization of religion in democratic countries (in connection with religious pluralism) leads to a profound change of the place of priests. For that point, the analysis of Perreau-Saussine should be involved in researches about the political and social role of liturgy. The reform of Dom Guéranger in the first half of 19th century is a decisive key to see how the ecclesiastical organization involved laity and clerks serving the new project for papacy. Saying that, we note that Perreau-Saussine’s work never refers to the means Roman Catholic