

united in charity in the profession of a common apostolic faith and recognise in the Church of Rome and its bishop a centre and point of reference in this communion and a ministry of unity on behalf of all the member churches.

This view of the authority of the First Vatican Council may be disturbing and indeed appear revolutionary to many people, yet it would seem that it has to be taken seriously in all ecumenical discussion to-day. Father Bermejo includes in his book a critique of the response of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the Final Report of the ARCIC, in which he shows how much the attitude of Rome depends on an adherence to the decisions of the First Vatican Council which other churches are unable to accept. He concludes that 'the solution may well lie, not in the acceptance of the Vatican dogmas by non-Catholics, but rather in a critical reassessment of Vatican I by Catholics'.

- Luis M. Bermejo, *Towards Christian Reunion: obstacles and opportunities*. Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, India. (Available from St Paul Book Centre, 199 Kensington High Street, London W8.)

The Vatican and the Sisters of Mercy: differing views of the Church

Rosemary Radford Ruether

Recent confrontations between the Vatican and the Sisters of Mercy, as well as with other groups of women religious, particularly with Americans, reveal a fundamentally different understanding of the relationship of Church and State, the sacred and the secular, held by the nuns, on the one hand, and the Vatican, on the other. Current Vatican policy assumes a rigid line between Church and State which makes any office-holding, either elected or appointed, in government, by either a priest or a nun, incompatible with the religious vocation. Although the first conflict between the Vatican and Sister Mansour of the Sisters of Mercy appeared to be primarily over differing interpretations of the relationship between personal morality and public policy in the specific case of payments for abortion, subsequent conflicts with the Sisters of Mercy over other nun office-holders went beyond specific differences over Church teachings on moral issues. The holding of any public office was defined as out of bounds for priests or religious: in other words, the Vatican pressed (and continues to press) for a very harsh interpretation of the restriction in the new

Code of Canon Law (canon 285, 3) and for its world-wide observation.

A similar line has been taken in the case of the four priests who hold public office in the Nicaraguan revolutionary government and, most recently, the Italian priest who has been elected as a socialist to the European Parliament. In each case the resolution of the conflict is to force the person involved either to resign the public office or else be removed from their religious order (or, in the case of a diocesan priest, be suspended from priestly duties). This decision has been forced, not only on the individual without due process, but upon the religious order itself. Religious obedience is regarded as obedience to the Pope, mediated through the religious superiors of the order, in which the religious superiors are not allowed to have an independent voice in relation either to the Vatican or the individual concerned. Their sole role is seen by the Vatican as one of passing on orders to the individual. Thus all concepts of subsidiarity are violated in favour of a military concept of the Church as a chain of command.

There are many questions that can be asked both about the appropriateness of such a concept of Church organization and also about such a concept of Church-state relationships. A historical overview of concepts of Church-state relations in various periods of Church history will readily reveal that such a dichotomy between the holding of political office and religious vocation has hardly been typical of Roman Catholicism. One has only to think of the bishops of medieval times who were regarded simultaneously as heads of dioceses and the temporal heads of ecclesiastical states. The Pope himself continues to combine these two roles as bishop of Rome and religious head of the Catholic Church and also political head of the Vatican state as an internationally recognized political entity. Before the unification of Italy in 1870, the territorial holdings of the Vatican extended to much of central Italy.

In the development of European parliaments in the medieval and early modern periods, the bishops and higher clergy were regarded as one of the three estates represented by the parliaments. Such a concept of the three estates made the upper clergy one of the three constituencies represented by parliaments, the other two being the nobility and the bourgeois or "commons". At the time of the French revolution Catholic bishops continued to be regular members of the Estates General, while the lower clergy found their place among revolutionary members of the "third estate". Bishops continue to be members of the House of Lords in England today, which preserves the dual definition of Lords as both Lords Spiritual (bishops) and Lords Temporal (nobility). Cardinals of the Church regularly held top positions of state in pre-revolutionary France; for example, Cardinal Richelieu and Cardinal Mazarin who successively held the post of

Secretary of State and were, effectively, the political rulers of France between 1619 and 1661.

This familiar history, and much more that could be cited in the same vein, make it apparent that no such line between religious vocation and political office was recognised in the catholic Church prior to the French Revolution. Indeed, the opposite was the case. Catholicism presupposed a unity of Church and state in which the ecclesiastical predominated over the political. In this theocratic understanding of Church-state relations, for churchmen to combine ecclesiastical with political office was the norm, not the exception. The present understanding of separation of political office and ecclesiastical office is, in fact, a product of the Church's reaction to the French Revolution and other modern revolutions, which displaced the Church from its earlier role as arbiter of state affairs in a theocratic concept of society. Ecclesiastics expelled from their earlier power, in what now became secularized parliaments, not only forbade their own members to participate in such secular parliaments, but even attempted to prevent lay Catholics from voting for or becoming members of them as well. For example, in the first fifty years of the unified Italian state, the Pope remained a "prisoner in the Vatican" in protest against the confiscation of the papal states that was carried out in order to unify Italy as a state. The Pope ordered Catholics not to participate in political activity, either by voting or by political office, in the new state.

In the twentieth century this attempt by the Vatican to boycott the modern secular state has been modified into a concept of separation of spheres between the Church as an ecclesiastical institution and secular states. This line of demarcation between the spheres of jurisdiction of the two social institutions is interpreted as a distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'secular'. A hierarchical relationship between the two is still maintained. But now the Catholic liberal model of relationship between the two demands that ecclesiastical personnel be employed solely by the ecclesiastical institution. Their job as priests and nuns or brothers is seen as forming the spiritual life of the laity through the sacraments and moral teaching. The laity are, in effect, to submit their personal consciences to the clergy within the sphere of Church authority. Thus, armed with right teachings and spirituality, the laity venture out into the world to shape secular institutions to conform to Church teachings. Secular institutions become the proper sphere of lay activity. The clergy are no longer to participate in that political world defined as 'secular' directly, although they do so indirectly through their control of the personal lives of the laity. The laity are seen as delegates of the Church in the world.

In the 19th century, Catholicism created a variety of catholic

social institutions to shape the laity to do this job of representing the Church in the world properly. Catholic workingmen's associations and Catholic political parties were created to prevent Catholics from becoming secular liberals or communists and to shape vehicles of social influence and control of the Church. Priest chaplains would control such movements from behind the scenes by shaping the private consciences of the workers or party members, who would then be prepared to act on the instructions of such clerical advisors in their social and political activity. The close association between the Italian Catholic hierarchy and the Christian Democratic Party in Italy today is evidence of the continuation of this dual model of collaboration between ecclesiastical and political power. Thus the liberal Catholic doctrine of separation of spheres between Church and state by no means indicates an abdication of the historical claims of the church to exercise influence over the state, but rather is a reshaping of that claim under the new conditions of secular states and churches disestablished from direct relationship to the state.

From this perspective, it becomes evident that the objection of the Vatican to priests and nuns and brothers in political life does not derive from a theory in which the Church is a-political. Rather it derives from a view of how the Church is to exercise political power. The Church is understood as a corporation of clergy and religious under vows, who are seen as the official representatives of the Church as an institution. In a way, this means that the laity are not really members of the Church at all, in this sense of the Church as an official corporation. They are the subjects of the Church who are to be taught by it, but are not official representatives of it. All official representatives of the Church should operate within systems of institutional life directly controlled by the Church. They cannot hold offices in secular government because such secular systems of power are not directly under the control of the Church.

This means that there is no objection at all to ecclesiastics intervening in political affairs, negotiating treaties between states, influencing policies of states through both suasion of public opinion and the exercise of the power wielded by the Church itself as an institution, so long as they do it as part of their ecclesiastical office. What is out of line is for members of the Church corporation (priests and religious) to cross over the line between ecclesiastical and secular state jurisdiction and to exercise political power as a representative of the secular state itself. The objection to such a role is not because the role is political, but because it is political in a way that is not controlled by the ecclesiastical institution directly. This is the real basis of the objection of the Vatican to members of the Sisters of Mercy of the Union exercising political office, either as elected or appointed officials of the state.

The correspondence between the superiors of the Sisters of Mercy and the Vatican officials shows a continued miscommunication on this issue. The Sisters of Mercy operate out of a post-liberal or liberationist concept of the world which regards all creation as the sphere of God's redemptive activity. Although the Church exists as a social organization in society, its mission is to serve this redemptive activity of God through creation. The mission of the Church is to serve God's mission of the redemption of the world. Such a view cannot make a strict separation between sacred and secular, Church and world. Although service within the Church structures may be part of the vocation of the committed Christian, it does not exhaust that vocation. Those who understand their vows in this larger sense, as special dedication to this general mission of redemption of the world, regard themselves as legitimately serving that vocation by serving human needs in a variety of social settings. The key distinction is humanitarian. Is political office primarily the selfish pursuit of power or is it primarily to serve the human and hence the redemptive needs of society? Any social role can be regarded as redemptive if it is exercised in this latter fashion.

Such a view of the mission of the Church in the world breaks down the strict separation between the mission of the clergy and the mission of the laity. Particularly for religious women, who are canonically defined as laity, no such line can be drawn. Religious women see themselves as specially dedicated and committed Christians who devote their lives to this general redemptive mission to the world. This theological perspective on the relationship of Christian vocation to human needs, constantly reiterated in the correspondence of the Sisters with Rome, is simply ignored by the Vatican leaders. The Vatican leaders think in another language and operate out of another world view. But the actual meaning of the Vatican world view is concealed behind a rhetoric about the proper vocation of religious to the Church that baffles and mystifies the sisters.

When the women religious finally try to clarify the situation by declaring that they and the Vatican have different 'ecclesiologies', this evokes the immediate reply from the Vatican that the nuns have no right to hold any other ecclesiology than that held by the papacy. For the Vatican officials, ecclesiologies are not a legitimate area of difference of theological world view. There is only one ecclesiology and that is the one held by the Vatican. To hold any other ecclesiology from this is heresy and rank disobedience. Thus the sisters never quite discern that the real issue is the separation of two mutually exclusive spheres of political power, that of ecclesiastical government and that of secular government, and not a separation of political and 'spiritual' (although everything the ecclesiastical government does is simply

labelled 'spiritual'). Nor is the issue a definition of religious vocation, in a theological sense. It is not exercising political power *per se*, but exercising it in a secular government, not under the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical government, which is the real basis of the Vatican objection.

Logically, these same strictures should be applied to all employment by priests or religious that is not part of the ecclesiastical institution. If one were consistent in this view, it would be no more appropriate for a nun to be a teacher in the public school system or a welfare worker paid by the Public Welfare Department, than it is for a nun to be an elective or appointed official of the state. In fact, one may well ask at what point ecclesiastical institutions themselves are no longer ecclesiastical. When a Catholic College is incorporated under a lay board, and the religious order that founded it no longer has controlling power, is it still a Catholic institution? Similarly, if a hospital is incorporated under a lay board, is it still an ecclesiastical corporation? What about autonomous newspapers, publishing houses or peace and justice centers which are not under ecclesiastical control? Do these similarly become inappropriate jobs for a priest or a nun?

Although there is no consistent policy here, there have already been instances of the ordering of nuns and priests out of jobs in such non-official 'Catholic' organizations, usually when such organizations are seen as promoting positions contrary to the teachings of the hierarchy, such as the ordination of women or the acceptance of homosexuality. But the reality is that the line between the Church as an institution and the secular world is much fuzzier than the Vatican would like, or even realizes, and so a consistent application of the principle that nuns and priests should not serve in 'secular' political life is impossible. The rule, in fact, is applied selectively. It falls heavily on those nuns and priests holding political office with a liberal or left perspective, particularly when there is a conflict over the Church's sexual teachings (the key area of Church control over the life of the laity). It is much less likely to be applied to those holding office who promote conservative teachings of the Church on these matters.

A second important area of conflict between the nuns and the Vatican has to do with different perceptions about the nature and organizational structure of the Church itself. The Vatican view of the Church is centralized and hierarchical. It sees the Church normatively as a top-down chain of command. The Pope passes the orders to the Vatican secretariats, which pass the orders to bishops, who pass the orders to religious superiors, who pass the orders to nuns, who pass the orders to the laity. At no point is independent conscience or decision-making to be exercised. Each level obeys the level above it without question. There can be no negotiation between superiors and

inferiors. Those below have no "rights" before their superiors. This is the clear message of the Vatican correspondence with the nuns. Efforts at appeal of decisions made by one authority to a 'higher court', familiar to American jurisprudence, is simply regarded as impertinence of the nuns by the Vatican officials, further evidence of their lack of 'obedience'.

This concept of the Church is not only not accepted, it is not even fully recognized by the nuns. They have come to accept another view of the Church, that comes from contemporary post-Vatican II theology. Not only is there no rigid line between Church and secular society, when creation itself is seen as the subject of God's liberating action and the arena of God's presence, but the nuns take it for granted that the Church should be a collegiate institution which put human relationships above coercive power. (Following Carol Gilligan's pioneering work, we may have here a key expression of the difference in moral formation and values between women and men as well.) Following the Vatican Council, the nuns define the Church, first of all, as the People of God. The Church finds its primary and foundational reality in the baptized community, not in the apex of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The task of ordained and vowed religious personnel is to be the servants of the Church as the community of the baptized, helping shape a redemptive community that will witness to the truth of the gospel and help heal the wounds of the world.

Although this view of the Church does not necessarily imply congregationalism, it does assume a principle of subsidiarity. Hierarchical levels of organization on the regional, national and international level are appropriate to network communication and resources. But the primary locus of decision-making should be at the level where the service is actually being carried out. Personal conscience is to be respected. And so when there are differences between a person's understanding of their ministry and those with responsibility for larger networks or organization, it should be resolved by full and open discussion whereby the 'superior' listens carefully to the self-understanding of the person whose life is most intimately affected. That person is presumed to be both a responsible adult and also possessed of the best information about her own basis for decisions.

Although the Vatican leaders assume that there can be no legitimate disagreements about what line of ecclesiastical authority one should espouse, in fact, such disagreements have profound historical and theological bases. One needs to ask, in the most basic sense, which view of the Church has the greatest legitimacy? Which has the most legitimacy historically? Which has the most legitimacy theologically? Historically, it is not difficult to establish that the present kind of centralized hierarchical power, taken as normative by

the Vatican, is the product of a long historical struggle of the papacy against contrary traditions of ecclesiastical organization, based on congregational, presbyterial and national church models. These alternative models are not simply options "invented" by different Protestant churches in the Reformation. Each has deep historical roots in the formation of the Church from the beginning.

Historically, it would be more appropriate to see the Church, as an institution, as having been constructed from the bottom up, rather than from a papal apex down. Congregational autonomy was the earliest pattern of the Church, even though this was modified by "letters between churches". Gradually local congregations developed into clusters of congregations based on cities, tied together by the bishop and his presbyters. Bishops, in turn, formed councils, which met on what roughly corresponded to a regional, provincial or national basis. In the fourth century these began to be tied together by an international council of bishops that met for major decisions, called together by the Roman emperor. This world organizational pattern was, in fact, only made possible because of the legitimization of Christianity as the official imperial religion by the Emperor Constantine, which made it possible for bishops to travel by imperial post to world meetings.

In this patristic development, the Bishop of Rome was seen as holding a primacy of honour for Western or Latin Christianity, but hardly a primacy of jurisdiction over the whole church. The Roman church's notion of a world primacy of jurisdiction by the Bishop of Rome was basically modelled after the role played by the Roman emperor and his imperial bureaucracy. It was never accepted by Eastern Christianity and was never more successful against more autonomous patterns in the West during the Middle Ages, although it was increasingly asserted by medieval Popes. In a sense, only when the Roman Catholic Church became disestablished from national state power in the 19th century, was it possible to carry through a thoroughgoing ecclesiastical centralization. Until John XXIII called Vatican II it was widely thought that the First Vatican Council had abolished the need for all further Church Councils, by establishing the Popes as the sole legitimate authority in the Church, from which all other authority derives.

The Second Vatican Council, however, took up ancient and more recent understandings of a more collegiate Church, in which national episcopacies, the diocesan presbyterate and, finally, the local parish each have a certain appropriate autonomy and collegiality. But this revival of collegial concepts of the church remained primarily an ideal. The Council did not succeed in creating a new structure that corresponded to their redefinition of the Church. And so, as soon as the Council was over, the Vatican Curia set about trying to abolish its

effects by reasserting centralized control. But the vision of a new Church radiated out so quickly to the 'provinces' that all sorts of groups embarked on new ways of thinking and patterns of life without permission from those 'above'. They simply assumed that the Council itself had given them permission to carry out its vision in practice.

American nuns were among the most forward in appropriating the new vision of the Church of the Council and translating it into new patterns of thought and organization in their religious orders. It is this development which now finds Vatican officials and American nuns at opposite sides of what have become different world of ecclesiology and Christian self-perception. The Vatican, in attempting to re-establish the Vatican I pattern of ecclesiology, finds these renewed women's orders particularly threatening to its concept of a hierarchical church. To repress such autonomy among nuns is seen as a key element in the re-establishment of hierarchical power over the Church generally.

Thus it is impossible to establish that the Vatican I concept of a monarchical Church has been normative historically. Such a concept of the Church is even less verifiable as the intention of Christ. Since Jesus established a movement, rather than an institution, all patterns of church policy are relative and historically developed, patterned after political and social patterns in the culture. Thus the more relevant question is not whether Jesus explicitly founded a Church with this or that policy, but what pattern of ecclesiastical organization seems most congruent with the theological vision of the Church? If that vision is seen as one of a redemptive community that witnesses to a community of love vis à vis the power systems of the world, the manner of exercising power claimed by the Vatican would be remote from the authentic nature of the Church indeed! Patterns of Church life which model respect for the conscience of each person, within a community of mutual responsibility, would seem the most appropriate to the vision of the Church. It is this pattern which the nuns have been trying to model in their renewed constitutions and redefinitions of religious vocation.

Since Vatican absolutism can be justified neither historically nor theologically, what recourse do Catholics have for changing it to one more suitable to their understanding of the nature and mission of the Church? It is clear that a non-democratic or monarchical institution, with no structures of accountability to the people, cannot be changed by appeal to its own legal processes, since in fact, only in a limited sense is it bound by its own legal processes, and again and again we see the application of these adapted to the arbitrary will-to-power of those in control. Moral appeals and efforts to enter into dialogue on different visions of Christian good-will fall on deaf ears before such will-to-power. Thus it seems that the only real recourse of Catholics is

one of systematic subversion of hierarchical power. I use the word *subversion* here precisely in its sense of 'turning things around from below'. How is this possible? Hierarchical power, although claiming that all power comes from above, is, in fact, dependent on assent to its power and economic support from below. It is precisely at this point of assent and economic support that Catholics need to subvert hierarchical power.

Each organizational level of the Church needs to disassociate its automatic assent and economic support from the level above it. Most particularly, such assent needs to be disassociated from the Vatican in order to begin to construct a more organic sense of local church, diocesan and national churches. Religious orders also need to disassociate themselves from Vatican power by appropriating control over their own property and perhaps by defining themselves as non-canonical communities. This would imply also the forging of a new sense of international networking among themselves as an order. As assent to authority and economic support falls away from the hierarchical apex and is funnelled to the local levels, where the actual ministry of the Church is being carried on, hierarchical power, as ability to coerce, will wither on the vine. The networks that hold the church together on local, diocesan, national and international levels will begin to be redefined in a way that must take into account the integrity of the base. Perhaps, out of this process, arbitrary monarchical authority will be reshaped into constitutional government, elected by and accountable to the people.

Reviews

ALEXANDER GEDDES: PIONEER OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM, by Reginald C. Fuller. *The Almond Press, Sheffield, 1984 176 pp £6.95.*

With this long overdue publication of Reginald Fuller's Cambridge doctoral thesis, the place of Alexander Geddes (1737–1802) in the history of biblical criticism is at last clearly established.

His cousin, John Geddes (1735–1799), after their early years together, followed a very different path. He studied in Rome, became rector of the Scots College at Valladolid, and returned to Scotland in 1781 as a bishop. He soon became a prominent figure in the social and literary world of 'Enlightenment' Edinburgh, attending Lord Monboddo's famous supper parties and developing a close friendship with Robert Burns. He also travelled a great deal, mostly on foot, visiting his far-flung flock. His name is appropriately remembered today by a society which brings Edinburgh's Catholic intellectuals together regularly, over a bottle or two of wine, to discuss matters theological.

The two cousins corresponded amicably over many years, for all the divergence of their lives. Alexander Geddes was the son of a small tenant farmer in the Enzie of Banff.