

Book Review

The Congar legacy

Yves Congar's Vision of the Church in a World of Unbelief, by Gabriel Flynn, 2004, Aldershot, Hampshire and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 280 pp. casebound, £49.95

Yves Congar (1904-1995) was one of the theological giants of the twentieth century, a key architect of several of the documents of the Second Vatican Council and one of the main driving forces of the modern ecumenical movement. This most recent work on his ecclesiology is the result of a doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Oxford in 1999. It shows how Congar's enormous energy and output contributed to a renewal and transformation of ecclesiology which culminated in the conciliar decrees but which continued to develop for another thirty years.

In his Introduction Flynn provides an outline of the forces and sources that led Congar to focus principally on the Church as his main area of study. The French journal *La Vie intellectuelle* in the early 1930s had explored the question of unbelief and Congar himself contributed a concluding article to the series. He became convinced that certain ideas of God and faith, as well as an excessively juridical conception of the Church were factors contributing to the condition of unbelief in Europe and in France in particular. He was also convinced that if the problem was to be addressed realistically then the way in which the Church understood itself and presented itself to the world would need to be changed. His views were shared by his colleagues M.-D. Chenu and H.-M. Féret and with whom he founded the new ecclesiological series *Unam Sanctam* with a view to eliminating the 'baroque theology' of the Counter-Reformation. Thus at an early stage in his theological career the agenda had been set.

His initial formation at the Institute Catholique introduced him to St Thomas, and his Dominican mentor at Le Saulchoir, Ambroise Gardeil, introduced him to Blondel. Both of these provided the philosophical basis for his theology. But perhaps the most significant influence on his methodology was Chenu, who introduced him to the historical dimen-

sion of reality and in particular to the work of Johann Adam Möhler. The Christological and Pneumatological dimensions of Möhler's ecclesiology were to exercise an influence over Congar's own work for the rest of his theological career. Another formative influence on his thought was Bernard Allo's *Saint Jean: L'Apocalypse*, which he claims was important in sensitising him to the importance of eschatology. His ecumenical interests were kindled by his early experience of growing up in the company of Protestants and Jews. Also his ordination retreat, which was a lengthy meditation on John 17, moved him deeply and stiffened

his resolve to work for unity among Christians.

Finally, his experiences of both physical and spiritual suffering at various periods in his life added other dimensions to his work. His imprisonment during the Second World War alerted him to the complexity of the issue of unbelief. His dismissal from Le

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Saulchoir in the 1950s and his exile in Jerusalem and Cambridge deepened his own sense of participation in the Paschal Mystery but also his loyalty to the Church. His fortitude and patience through this episode won him the admiration of those who would later rely on his work during the Council. And of course the latter part of his life was marked by serious physical suffering that did not impede his theological output. His profound love for the Church was as much a part of his ecclesiology as was his dedication to the pursuit of truth.

While Congar did not write a systematic treatise on the Church, Flynn shows that he developed a 'total ecclesiology', a comprehensive treatment that was inspired by his desire to address the unbelief that afflicted twentieth century Europe. According to Flynn (p. 18) the key elements of Congar's theology were:

the restoration of the genuine value of ecclesiology; ecumenism; a fresh consideration of the person and mission of the Holy Spirit; reform; the laity; a return to the sources; and the application of the fecund resources of tradition to the current problems of the Church.

Flynn treats his subject under three major headings: the vision of the Church in Congar's theology; the shape of the Church in Congar's theology; reform and tradition in Congar's ecclesiology. These three substantial chapters are followed by a short Epilogue and an Afterword. He also facilitates future scholars by providing a previously unpublished bibliography of works by Congar in the period 1987-1995, as well as an addendum containing reissues of previously published works. These complement the earlier compilations of Quattrocchi and Nichols.

In the first chapter Flynn provides a very helpful outline of Congar's main ecclesiological concerns. Congar was at once concerned with the Church in relation to the world but was adamant that its renewal had to be interior in imitation of Christ, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, he acknowledged that there had to be a recognition of its human dimension. These two dimensions, the divine and the human, have to be held in proper relationship without succumbing to a Mono-physics or a Nestorianism in ecclesiology.

Therefore an authentic ecclesiology needed to be grounded in a balanced Christology. This was made possible by a return to the sources of the Christian tradition (*ressourcement*) – a fresh reading of the Scriptures, the Fathers and the liturgical tradition of the Church. A serious engagement with these sources fuelled Congar's enterprise throughout his life and enabled him to formulate a balanced statement of the relationship between the Church and the world.

While Flynn claims that Congar's work is a response to unbelief in Europe as he experienced it in the first half of the twentieth century, he does not provide the reader with a very detailed analysis of this situation. He notes that the experience of the World Wars and of disunity among Christians contributed to the problem but he does not elaborate. He acknowledges that Congar's understanding of faith is very comprehensive and like unbelief 'affects a person's life in its entirety, touching his whole being, his environment and his history. According to Congar, faith gives meaning, and therefore unity, to the totality of a person's life be-

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cause faith is a total principle' (p. 38). This then provides the rationale for a comprehensive response to the problem of unbelief. Ecclesiology in turn is the most comprehensive theological framework within which to respond to the issues of unbelief.

This is certainly a plausible argument but it does not expose the roots of the problem of unbelief with sufficient clarity in order to appraise the adequacy of the response. While the Church and Christianity generally may have contributed to the problem of unbelief, philosophical and sociological factors have also played their part. We get no sense of their contribution to the emergence of unbelief nor of how the Church interacted with these. In so far as Congar's analysis of the problem was deficient, Flynn does not highlight this nor offer a comment on it. The result is that what we have in Congar is an analysis of the Church's own shortcomings and a very thoughtful response to how these can be ad-

ressed in the light of the Church's own unique resources. The wider picture is not filled in for us.

In his second chapter Flynn deals in more depth with Congar's understanding of the Church and how its self-understanding might better respond to the reality of unbelief. In the first instance the Church must 'look at herself in the Gospel' (p. 94) and see her-

self as a witness to the Gospel and the Kingdom of God. He certainly wanted the Church to move away from the clericalism that had haunted it since the time of Gregory VII (1073-85) and to effect a radical conversion in human relationships within the Church. These were to be patterned on Christ in his own human relationships and, above all, on the Trinity.

Thus Congar viewed the Church more as a person than as an institution; and to support this position he appealed to biblical images, especially the Church as the People of God, complemented by that of the Body of Christ. Ultimately he sees the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation, thus 'making an important statement regarding human salvation - namely, that the intimate, personal nature of the human rela-

tionship with God has an indispensable ecclesial dimension' (p. 112).

The elements which Congar put in place also contribute to the understanding of the Church as a communion, thus opening up the basis for themes such as conciliarity, collegiality and reception, again drawing attention to the fact that union with God issues in wholesome human relations and structures. This chapter also reviews Congar's understanding of the place of Mary in the Church, the liturgy, ecumenism, ministry and his extensive reflections on the place of the laity in the Church.

Flynn does not gloss over the tensions that remain in Congar's theology of the priesthood of the baptised and that of the ordained. Indeed it is a tension which has not been satisfactorily resolved by extensive subsequent theological reflection.

The final chapter is an excellent review of Congar's work in the area of reform and tradition in the Church.

Here Flynn takes themes already addressed and situates them within Congar's agenda for ecclesial reform. The necessity for reform in the Church was a central plank for his response to unbelief. This reform was not something to be generated according to the Church's own norms, it has to be done according to 'a norm that precedes and transcends the Church.. This can only be found in the Word of God ...' (p. 151). Here, however, he introduces an important qualifier that the Word of God is not independent of the Church. It must be taken in the context of other elements which also come from God, namely, 'Tradition' and 'teaching office'.

Thus any reform of the Church must be careful to avoid schism and division. This can be done by attending to four principles: '1. the primacy of charity and of the pastoral; 2. remaining within the communion of all; 3. patience; respect for delays; 4. a true renewal by a return to the principle of the Tradition' (p. 152).

Congar was insistent that self-critique was indispensable in the Church, which is not a sign of disloyalty but a necessity if the Church was to address and attract those outside 'the strongly bourgeois French Church' (p. 153). When Congar spoke of reforming Church structures he distinguished between what is essential (dogma, sacraments and hierarchical

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constitution) and what is changeable (the organisation of parishes, catechesis, preaching and other such matters). He speaks of the structure of the Church and ecclesial structures – the former are unreformable the latter reformable.

This leads Flynn into a discussion of how Congar dealt with the question of the Church's holiness and sinfulness. He shows very carefully the inherent weaknesses in his position and contrasts these with the positions of Rahner and Dulles. Therefore, while it is obvious that Flynn has a profound regard for the work of Congar, he maintains a scholarly objectivity and balance in his assessments.

This is a work that will be indispensable to anyone who wants an introduction to the work of Congar. It is comprehensive in its breadth, thorough in its analysis and even-handed in its assessments. The layout of the book is also to be commended, not least the fact that it uses footnotes rather than endnotes, making it easier for the reader to check references or see the clarifications that the author is adding to the main text as he progresses his argument.

Overall, this is a book that can be highly recommended to anybody wishing to deepen her or his knowledge of twentieth century ecclesiology or who may wish to find a template for a respectful critique of contemporary ecclesial problems.

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