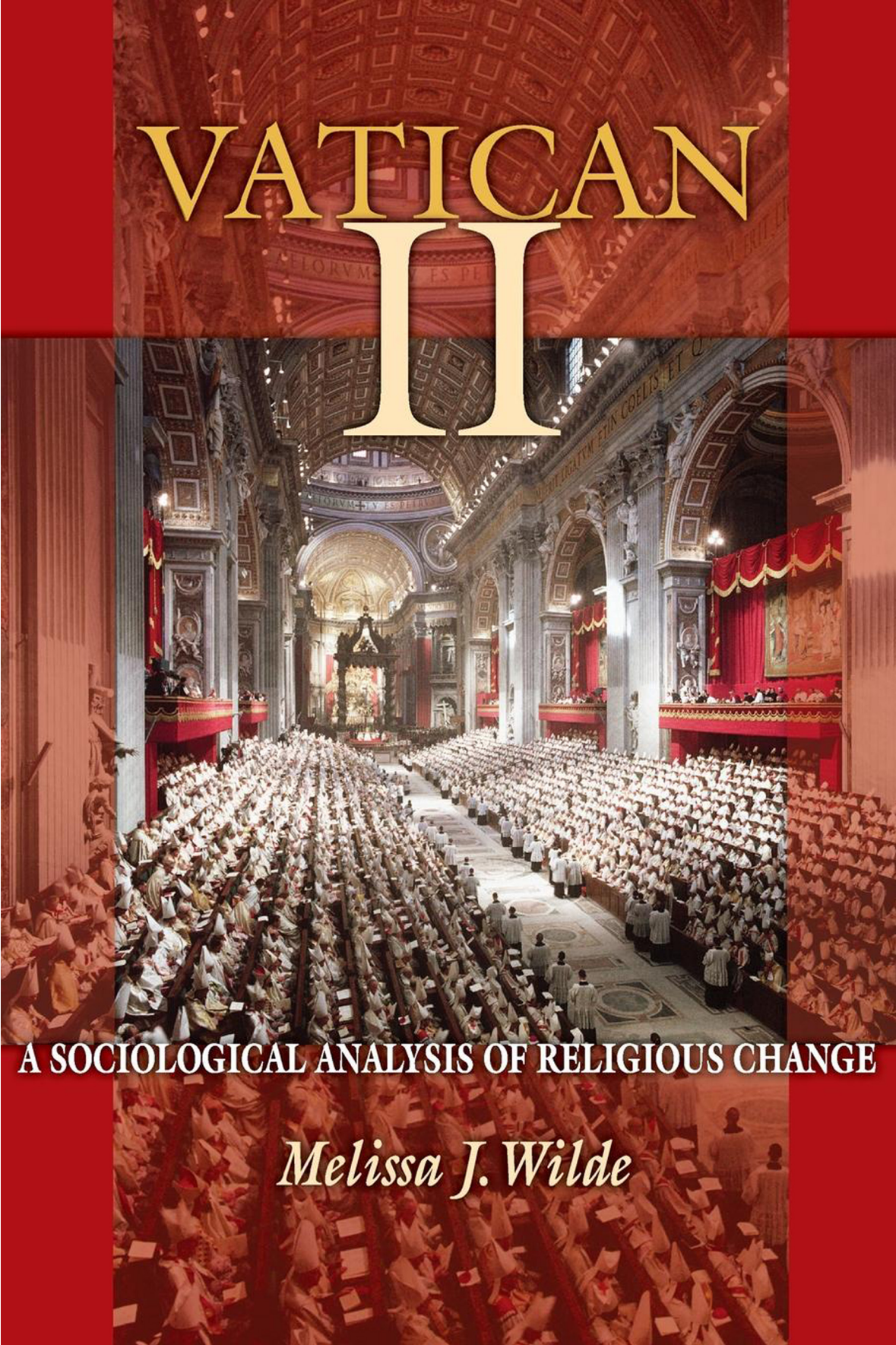


VATICAN II



A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE

Melissa J. Wilde

VATICAN

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To Stephen

CONTENTS

<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
<i>What Does Not Explain the Council</i>	4
<i>Part I: Explaining the Council</i>	5
<i>Part II: The Case Studies</i>	8
<i>The Data</i>	9
 PART I: <i>Explaining the Council</i>	 11
CHAPTER ONE	
Collective Effervescence and the Holy Spirit: The Eventful First Session	13
<i>Eventful Sociology and Vatican II</i>	14
<i>Trying to Ensure a Rubber-Stamp Council: The Curia on the Eve of Vatican II</i>	16
<i>The Chain of Occurrences</i>	17
<i>The Effects: Collective Effervescence and the Holy Spirit</i>	22
<i>Conservatives: Waiting for the Holy Spirit</i>	26
<i>Conclusion: The Transformation of Structures</i>	27
CHAPTER TWO	
Who Wanted What and Why at the Second Vatican Council? Toward a Theory of Religious Change	29
<i>Measuring Organizational Strategies</i>	30
<i>The Four Groups of Bishops and Their Votes</i>	32
<i>Theories of Religious Competition</i>	42
<i>Theories of Institutional Legitimacy and Organizational Change</i>	45
<i>Combining Theories</i>	47
<i>The Ecumenical Movement</i>	51
<i>Conclusion: Competition from the Perspective of the Competitors</i>	55

CHAPTER THREE

How Culture Mattered at Vatican II: Collegiality Trumps Authority in the Council's "Social Movement Organizations"	57
<i>Organizational Effectiveness and Culture at Vatican II</i>	58
<i>Competing Views of Authority in the Roman Catholic Church</i>	59
<i>The DM's Belief in Collegiality</i>	61
<i>The CIP's Suspicions about Collegiality</i>	62
<i>The Domus Mariae</i>	63
<i>The Coetus Internationalis Patrum</i>	68
<i>Tactics in Common: Petitions, Votes, and the Modi</i>	74
<i>Conclusion: Institutional Rules, Models of Authority, Semi-Marginality, and Organizational Effectiveness</i>	77

PART II: *The Case Studies* 83

CHAPTER FOUR

The Declaration on Religious Freedom: Ceding Power, Gaining Legitimacy	85
<i>Critiques of Hypocrisy: Illegitimacy before the Council</i>	86
<i>Roman Catholic Reactions</i>	88
<i>The Story of Reform</i>	91
<i>Conclusion: The Power of Legitimacy</i>	100

CHAPTER FIVE

The Blessed Virgin Mary: The Toughest Fight of the Council	102
<i>Catholic and Protestant Views of Mary</i>	103
<i>The First Session</i>	104
<i>The Second Session: The Closest Vote of the Council</i>	105
<i>The Third Session and More Controversy</i>	110
<i>Conclusion: Mary's Deaccentuation</i>	114

CHAPTER SIX

The Council's Failure to Liberalize Birth Control: Lackluster Progressive Effort Meets a Hesitant Pope	116
<i>Christianity's Varied Stances on Birth Control</i>	117
<i>Pressure to Change</i>	119
<i>Deliberations on Birth Control during the Council</i>	121
<i>Conclusion: The Cost to Religious Authority</i>	124
Rethinking the Council	126

APPENDIX A	
Abbreviations of Primary Sources	129
APPENDIX B	
Methodological Information	131
<i>Votes from the Second Vatican Council</i>	131
<i>Caporale's Sample</i>	132
<i>Members of the Domus Mariae</i>	133
<i>The Dutch Documentation Center (DOC)</i>	136
<i>Analysis of the Ecumenical Review</i>	137
<i>Communism and the Council</i>	137
APPENDIX C	
Timeline of the Second Vatican Council	140
<i>Notes</i>	143
<i>References</i>	175
<i>Index</i>	191

TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLE 2.1. Voting Patterns among Bishops from State-Supported European Monopolies	33
TABLE 2.2. Voting Patterns among Bishops from Non-Monopolistic Countries	35
TABLE 2.3. Voting Patterns among Bishops from Latin American Countries	36
TABLE 2.4. Voting Patterns among Bishops from African Countries	39
TABLE 2.5. Voting Patterns among Bishops from Asian and All Other Missionary Countries	41
TABLE 2.6. Bishops' Organizational Strategies at the Second Vatican Council	48
TABLE 3.1. Support for Collegiality by Organizational Field	61
TABLE 3.2. Support for CIP Communism Petition Compared with Support for Collegiality	73
TABLE 5.1. The First Vote Concerning Mary Compared with Support for the CIP Petition Concerning Mary	109
TABLE 5.2. Inconsistency in Stances on the Blessed Virgin Mary	112
TABLE B.1. Caporale's Sample of Bishops and Cardinals	134
TABLE B.2. Caporale's Other Interviewees	135
TABLE B.3. Members of the Domus Mariae	136
TABLE B.4. DOC Theologians	137
TABLE B.5. Voting Patterns among Bishops from Communist Countries	138
FIGURE 3.1. The Organizational Structure of the Domus Mariae	65

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VATICAN

II



INTRODUCTION

ON NOVEMBER 29, 1964, the first Sunday of Advent, Roman Catholics walked into their parishes around the globe and, for the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire, participated in a mass that was given largely in their native tongue.¹ Not only did parishioners find themselves responding to the priest in words they spoke every day, but they spoke more often than they had at any Catholic service they had ever attended. Many Catholics saw the strange sight of their priest consecrating the Eucharist facing the congregation rather than the crucifix behind the altar, along with other new practices meant to make the mass and liturgy more participatory by incorporating the “people of God.”

These were just the first of many changes that came out of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church.² Indeed, as the Church was busily figuring out how to incorporate the vernacular language into its services, Roman Catholic leaders around the world prepared for the Fourth (and final) Session of the Council. These preparations were intense and often contentious. Though the liturgical reforms had been approved at the end of the Second Session, many other, even more important reforms remained to be decided.

By the time it was finished, on December 8, 1965, the Council had turned the Church on its head. To name but a few examples: as a result of the Council, the Roman Catholic Church relinquished its claim to be the one true church, and with it, abdicated claims to power in relation to nation-states, by declaring that the only just form of government was one under which people were free to worship as they pleased. The Council relaxed dietary restrictions and requirements regarding confession and attire for the laity, eliminated the Latin mass, and forever changed the character and identities of Roman Catholic nuns and brothers—and their orders. Most importantly, Vatican II changed the way the Church understood itself, as its identity went from being a hierarchical authority to a church conceived of as the people of God.

Together, these changes have had far-reaching effects on the doctrine, practices, and identity of Roman Catholicism. Politically, the Council has been cited as a central factor in the development of liberation theology in Latin America; as an important theological resource for progressive Catholics in the United States; and as a reason why the Church began to engage more actively in public debates over war and peace, capitalism and economic redistribution.³ Everyday life was affected too: the Council

liberalized religious practices as varied as dietary restrictions (Catholics are no longer required to abstain from meat on Fridays), clothing requirements (Catholic women no longer have to wear head coverings during mass), and annulment procedures.⁴

Simply put, Vatican II represents the most significant example of institutionalized religious change since the Reformation. Though sociological opinion is unified in attributing great significance to the Council, few systematic attempts have been made to examine the forces that determined the character and extent of the changes it effected.⁵ This is partly because the council was huge. It took four sessions, three years (1962–65), and the leadership of two popes to complete. More than three thousand bishops, cardinals, heads of religious orders, and theologians (for convenience, hereafter all of the Council delegates are referred to as bishops) from all over the world attended. The daily events of the Council could easily fill the pages of this book. However, such a history has been more than adequately told and it is not the intent of this study to tell it again.⁶

My goal is to take the rich and complex history of the Council, and re-examine it through a sociological lens—to discover the factors that explain its outcome and in doing so, identify the factors that determine religious change more generally. Ultimately, the goal of this book is to answer some theoretical questions about cultural change: Why do some religious institutions adapt to cultural change, while others do not? When religious institutions do change, what determines what changes and what remains constant? In essence: When, why, and how do religious institutions, which are arguably the most rigidly structured and codified institutions in the world, adapt as the societies around them march onward?

Though many theories in the sociology of religion make implicit assumptions about institutional change, and though founding sociologists such as Max Weber and Émile Durkheim examined it, there is surprisingly little theory available to explain how, why, or when religious change occurs.⁷ This is mainly because the sociology of religion, with a few notable exceptions,⁸ has not attempted to explain institutional change but has focused instead on individual participation and its effects, or on religious growth or decline. Such studies, though important, do little to help us understand the organizational resources, forces, and mobilization efforts involved in an event like the Second Vatican Council.

Consequently, though this analysis is informed by these and other important research in the sociology of religion, throughout this book I also draw from theories of historical events, organizational and cultural change, social movements, and even from economic sociology.⁹

Vatican II is an ideal case through which to examine questions about religious change. Change, at least of great magnitude, is not common in Roman Catholic history. Councils are rare events, convened only by the

pope, and occur less than once a century on average. Vatican I, the Church's last council before Vatican II, ended prematurely in 1869 as a result of the Franco-Prussian War and did little of note besides declaring the pope to be infallible. Prior to Vatican I, the Church had not held a council since the Council of Trent closed in 1563.¹⁰

Furthermore, the changes that came from the Council were almost completely unexpected. To appreciate just how remarkable Vatican II was, one must understand that even once the Council had been called, change did not seem likely. The Roman Curia, the men in charge of the Church's administration, who did not favor change, seemed to be at the zenith of their power. For four hundred years, the Curia had determined the pronouncements on theology and doctrine that constituted Roman Catholicism. They frequently used their powers of censorship to curb theologians, ban books, and keep the Church "untarnished" by modern thought. Their vocation was protecting the Church from heresy, something which by all accounts they did quite well. Initially, even the bishops who would rise to the greatest prominence once the Council began expected little more from it than a "rubber-stamp" of the Curia's conservative views.

When Pope John XXIII announced that he was calling a council, he had only been in office for three months, was seventy-seven years old, and was expected to be an "interim" pope—a placeholder who mollified progressives but made conservatives feel secure because of his age and "simple" nature. The resources, power, and confidence of the Roman Curia had perhaps never been greater. Though upset by John's announcement, they had almost complete control over the Council's preparations, proceedings, and agenda.

Given this situation at the start of the Council, many saw the unexpected and sweeping changes that came from it as nothing short of miraculous. Popular explanations of the miracle focused on one man: Pope John XXIII. In 1962, before any Council reforms had yet been solidified, but after the First Session had already signaled that Vatican II would not rubber-stamp the policies and views of the Curia, *Time* magazine declared John "Man of the Year," with the following justification:

[1962 saw] the beginning of a revolution in Christianity, the ancient faith whose 900 million adherents make it the world's largest religion. . . . It began on Oct. 11 in Rome and was the work of the man of the year, Pope John XXIII, who, by convening . . . Vatican II, set in motion ideas and forces that will affect not merely Roman Catholics, not only Christians, but the whole world's ever-expanding population.¹¹

In contrast to such explanations of the Council, I do not see the pope as the primary reason why the Council took the turn that it did.

There is no question that Pope John XXIII is an essential part of why Vatican II happened at all; it takes a pope to call a council.¹² Thus, John