Polarization in the Catholic Church

Walter Redmond

Origin of the Problem

A few years ago I was making a retreat in a Trappist monastery. There I met a man who, although a Protestant, would spend a few days at the monastery whenever he had to deal with a problem calling for serious prayer and sound advice. On this particular visit, the man's problem was a bitter dispute that was tearing his church apart. Two factions were at odds on abortion and women clergy. He told me the history of the conflict, and I offered him my analysis, which, he said, exactly reflected the situation (in fact, he urged me to write an article about it). Because we have an analogous problem in the Catholic Church, I offer these impressions, which are just that—impressions—and, I fear, rather obvious.

The General Polarization

My chief point is that the conflict in my friend's church is not confined to his church or to religion, but parallels a more general polarization in the U.S.A. Even specifically religious issues like female clergy are related to this "secular" polarization. We cannot fully understand such religious divisions if we see them only as ecclesiastical, and we may expect that when American-style polarization is not as harsh in other countries, religion will not be affected in the same way.

Abortion, euthanasia, experimenting on fetuses, welfare, affirmative action or diversity, immigration, same-sex marriage, teaching "values" or handing out condoms in public schools, the environment, policing the web, gun control, capital punishment, and policy on Cuba are polarizing issues. Religious people are also opposed on women's ordination, inclusive language, womanist theology, the interpretation of Scripture and dogma, and the relation of religion to ethics, politics, and science. Conflict in the Catholic Church also includes birth control, the married clergy, lay power, academic freedom for theologians, liturgy, wearing habits....

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb01595.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Stances

Positions on any one of these and other (but not all) debated questions will pair off at two poles, which I will call fashionable and unfashionable. I use the words of the individuals and groups holding the opinions as well as of the opinions themselves. I make no value judgments at this point; I wish only to characterize the groups in a way with which they themselves may to some extent agree. I choose these terms over more loaded and—for my purposes—misleading ones like liberal/conservative, trendy/outdated, progressive/integralist, liberated/traditional, heterodox/orthodox, moderate/fundamentalist, sophisticated/unsophisticated, enlightened/benighted, respectable/-disreputable, upscale/lowbrow, in the know/out of it, or left/right. Actually "up" (fashionable) and "down" (unfashionable) picture better what I have in mind.

In particular, these terms imply nothing about intelligence and competence, formal education, economic status—or the knack of producing strong arguments—of the individuals nor about the truth and functionality of their opinions. The point is that some people enjoy more prestige in our society for taking certain stances and that both they and those who oppose their stances recognize this fact, often to the chagrin of the latter. Polarizing issues may involve strong ideology.

Some examples will make the distinction clear. In abortion pro-choice is fashionable and pro-life unfashionable. It is fashionable to want to teach children about sex in public elementary schools, to espouse doctor-assisted suicide, same-sex marriage, and inclusive language. It is unfashionable to support prayer in public schools and all-male institutions and to oppose "secular humanism." Family values are unfashionable and "politically correct" opinions are fashionable. In religion, fundamentalists, creationists, and promise keepers are unfashionable and feminist exegetes and liberation theologians are fashionable.

Fashionable Catholics criticize the structure of the Church as patriarchal, want laypeople to help choose bishops and pastors, and are displeased when the hierarchy chides fashionable theologians. Unfashionable Catholics are upset about Catholic-bashing in the movies and on TV (especially by fashionable Catholics), may hanker after lost symbolism like habits and Latin, and sometimes are keen on apparitions.

Opinions tend to cluster around people. Chances are that a Catholic who is against the death penalty and for ordaining women will also be for liberation theology and affirmative action and against using "man" in the sense of human being in the liturgy. How ever there are plenty of straddlers, and this is a very important fact. From this view point, the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb01595.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Pope, who is against both abortion and the death penalty and for both the celibate male priesthood and aid to poor countries, holds for mixed beliefs.

Upward Mobility

A person's opinions often shift. Although movement in either direction, up or down, is possible, the usual case is where an unfashionable person becomes fashionable. This is what I call intellectual upward mobility. I do not suggest that the desire to be fashionable is a prime or even conscious motive for changing one's mind, only that this is what is happening on the ground and that it can be a strong factor influencing the choice of belief. The intellectual upward mobility I am referring to, of course, need not coincide with economic or social upward mobility.

Nor does it mean that the upwardly mobile necessarily think more for themselves—whereas the unfashionable follow leaders. For people also tend to cluster around opinions. We identify with those sharing our belief system and feel more comfortable with them. Changing groups may entail changing opinions and vice versa. Groups, fashionable and unfashionable, obviously net work, organize, campaign, have conventions, create buzz words and follow strong linguistic tabus, hype their cause, gather signatures, publish newspapers and journals, and pass out handbills. National and Public TV and newspaper media tends to be fashionable and AM talk radio unfashionable. Where ideology is strong, there may be deadly hostility, not just tension, between factions.

Polarization is felt to be related to time. Fashionable people think of themselves as the wave of the future and look upon the unfashionable as "turning back the clock" or afflicted with "future shock." Unfashionable people feel they are defending a precious heritage of parental value and see the fashionable as selling their birthright for a mess of pottage.

Surprisingly perhaps, the fashionable/unfashionable distinction does not coincide with that between young and old. In fact, remarks are often made on the greying of some upwardly mobile Protestant churches and Catholic religious communities as well as fashionable Catholic advocacy groups.

Tradition and Fashion

And that brings us to the next point. The historic doctrines and practices of Christian and Jewish bodies tend—and I stress this word—to be unfashionable. Christian denominations saw homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, sex outside of marriage, and divorce as wrong,

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb01595.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

had all-male clergies, and worshipped in old-fashioned ways. My friend's church had officially opposed abortion in the past and its ministers had been men. But a number of his fellow churchgoers who felt strongly about feminism, he said, began to take a pro-choice position and to recommend hiring a women minister.

Other members of the church were outraged at what they took to be an attack on the integrity of their beliefs and customs, which, they felt deeply, was ultimately coming from outside their religious traditions. What made it particularly galling was that their fashionable opponents looked down on them as intellectually and morally lacking. At the same time, the rebellious members identified more and more with their fashionable allies outside the church whose approval they valued and at whom they aimed their apologetic endeavors.

I asked my friend how it would all play out. He thought for a minute and said both factions were so dug in around their positions that compromise was impossible. The fashionable would take control, he predicted, and the others would go away. And unless these others could regroup, he added, the history of their church, as it was at least, would come to an end.

Change and Critical Mass

Bickering over old and new doctrines (the latter often coming from outside pressures) with the resultant fission is of course nothing new in the history of religions. And what is happening in my friend's church is not an isolated incident; the same sort of thing has been going on in many mainline Protestant denominations and in Judaism as well in the U.S.A. and elsewhere. Where the fashionable group has gotten the upper hand, doctrine (Biblical exegesis, dogmatics, theology) and practice (worship, spirituality, morality, counselling) have indeed been deeply altered. Faith loses some of its specifically Christian or denominational character and comes to resemble the surrounding fashionable mind set. *Plus ça change, plus ce n'est pas la même chose.*

This broadening out process is at times so advanced that no behavior sanctioned by secular fashion is seen as wrong (let alone sinful), no fashionable belief is rejected as mistaken (let alone heretical). Indeed it becomes increasingly hard to state exactly what theological and moral stands the denomination should take, what the minimal belief required for membership is, if any. Christians have reversed or hedged on their churches' age-long teachings on sex and other moral issues. One highly placed church man has urged a new rite for divorce: the church should mark not only the marriage of a man and a women, he thinks, but also the break-up of their family. Main line

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb01595.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

churches, over the protests of their unfashionable members, sponsor the marriage of homo sexuals and admit them to their ordained ministry. Congregations of gays and even atheists ("humanists") have been formed in Judaism, and Orthodox rabbis have recently questioned the Jewishness even of Reform and Conservative Jews. The World Council of Churches at one point came to see converting non-Christians as less urgent than support ing leftist political movements, thus leaving the evangelizing of all nations to unfashionable missionaries.

Fashionable Christians are not absent from the spiritual fringe. As they repudiate the traditional spirituality of the Church (asceticism has a "Neo-Platonic anti-body bias," humility creates "low self-esteem," original sin is not "affirming," moral exigency is a "Catholic guilt-trip"), they co-opt not only "Eastern" and "Native American" religion—a borrowing often angrily repudiated by the Native Americans themselves—but witch craft, goddess worship, and other phenomena on the current spiritual scene.

The battles, as in my friend's church, are bloody. They rage not only over doctrine but over economic resources and the control of the seminaries. The wars, whoever wins, are not won easily. Witness the recent painful confrontations in the Southern Baptist Convention. The Episcopal Church has come close to schism and one bishop has been tried on a charge of heresy for advocating the ordination of active homosexuals.

The clergy are indeed in the forefront of change, often far outstripping the laity in fashionableness and spreading it through their ministry. They often play down their teaching office by telling their members they have "come of age" and must make up their own minds on the issues.

Unfashionable denominations on the other hand are aggressive in their defense of traditional values. They take to the air waves, organize demonstrations, and work to acquire political clout-- and provoke a vitriolic response from their fashionable opponents, who think the unfashionable ought not to be political. The typical danger for the unfashionable is a rejection of anything new touching on religion, and they sometimes become anti-scientific and anti-intellectual.

So the battles within Christendom rage with new intensity as the churches line up on the issues. But with a difference: current secular opinion affects unfashionable far less than fashionable religious bodies.

Fashion and Leadership

What is the practical effect of intellectual upward mobility in the churches? Unfashionable churches and religious groups are apparently

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb01595.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

among the most successful in retaining and increasing their membership. One study shows that several U.S. mainline denominations which have moved toward the fashionable are losing members, not only in "market share" but, in several cases, in absolute numbers as well. There are now more Muslims and Buddhists in the U.S.A. than members of some of these venerable American denominations. To counteract their losses, some churches have recently launched energetic "evangelization" drives, often following the lead of successful unfashionable congregations, e.g. by introducing charismatic features.

Admittedly, speculation on the reasons for increasing and declining membership is a murky area and it is risky to predict long-term results. However, I think we can say something about why a church that affirms tradition has a strong appeal.

People want guidance, especially in the deepest part of their belief system and in their most intimate community. But they want responsible guidance, guidance that works. They are frightened by fashionable attitudes they see as threatening to marriage and family. When a husband and wife seek counselling they want solutions, not divorce facilitation. Parents think their children have enough to worry about without pastors or teachers telling them they might turn out to be homosexual. And they want teachers in public school to forget their "values" and concentrate on showing their children how to solve math problems and write correct English sentences. In short, people want proven guidance that will stabilize and strengthen their families; they need, not anomalies, but a strong belief system able to stand up to the present social entropy.

They often look in vain to their churches for direction. The churches seem to be giving up their leadership as they give in to secular fashions. When their pastors tell them to make up their own minds, they feel they could do that without a church. Churchmen who condone abortion now that it is socially respectable, and say "until death do us part" no longer holds now that marriage is a rescindable 'partnership' and serial polygamy is overtaking monogamy (half of U.S. marriages end in divorce), may appear to people in the pews more led than leading.

Christendom in reverse

Of course, fashionable churchpeople would be the first to recognize the reality of pluralism and, with Kierkegaard, to adulate an 'authentic' Christianity over against Christendom, societies where values and structures are supposedly Christian. Yet they seem to

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb01595.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

envision a Christendom in reverse: not a society imbued with Christian principles but a church increasingly changed by incorporating secular values.

No wonder there is a leadership crisis. I think one of the most significant social changes in our time is the abdication of traditional guides—parents and family, priests and nuns, ministers, rabbis—, in favor of the new industry of behavior professionals. As the churches and families relinquish their moral leadership, the vacuum is filled by a host of therapists, sponsors, certified counsellors, psychiatrists, pop psychologists, gurus, work shop facilitators, self-help authors and lecturers, 12-step experts, TV talk-show hosts and consultants, news commentators—and public school teachers. Their mindsets, which usually ignore or are openly hostile to traditional worldview and morality, range from the responsible to the eccentric. Instead of helping families to stay together, marriage counsellors, often divorced themselves, instruct them in graceful failure ("I, too, thought my marriage was for ever, but it wasn't, and I survived, so you can too"). The result of this often unseemly competition among experts is not only more family break-up but also the confirmation and spread of ethical relativism.

The Catholic Church

Much of the above commentary, of course, applies to Catholics (clergy, religious, and lay), and the polarization in the Catholic Church is roughly the same as in mainline Protestant denominations, since their fashionable mindset is the same. Fashionable Catholics identify with like-minded groups outside the Church, and toward them they direct their apologetics. The polarization is as bitter. Fashionable Catholics ridicule what they call "Catholic fundamentalism" as a "galloping disease." And in their zeal to adhere firmly to the traditions of the Church, unfashionable Catholics some times defend what they take to be Catholic positions with inquisitorial fervor. I say "take to be" since some, more papal then the Pope, take things like Biblical literalism as the Catholic attitude to the Bible.

The bishops are often in the middle. Like the Pope, they tend to be fashionable on social issues and unfashionable on family issues. For example, they have spoken out against both abortion and the death penalty and defended the rights both of victims and criminals. Fashionable Catholics welcome division in the hierarchy, habitually repudiate appeals to ecclesiastical authority in "line-staff" disputes.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb01595.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Catholic Catholicity

On the other hand, the Catholic Church differs from other U.S. religious bodies in ways that will affect the outcome of the polarization. First of all, the very international character of the Church relativizes the polarization among U.S. Catholics. In this it is like the Orthodox Churches and unlike Protestant bodies which are not counter balanced by a large foreign membership or a strong leadership from abroad. Even the worldwide Anglican Communion and the Church of England itself seem now to be more responsive to what is happening in the U.S. Episcopal Church.

The U.S.A. shares with some countries in Europe a sort of a "developed-world" moral fashion, visible in the United Nations and in international conferences, for example, on family matters. It represents a powerful cultural diffusion and has been attractive to those making policy for the non-developed world. However, this Euro-American morality has met with stubborn resistance in lands with different—and relatively unfashionable—familial, social, religious, and legal traditions, especially in the third-world. This is obviously true in Islamic countries, but it is also true in Latin America, where preachers ultimately from American "sects" (an abusive label used by the fashionable) appeal more to the people than fashionable missionaries from Protestant mainline denominations.

Citizens of other lands, Catholics among them, may not welcome American fashionable view points—or unfashionable ones for that matter—, and they may even see them as a form of ethnocentric cultural intrusion. My point is that since secular polarization in the U.S.A. does not affect the Church in other countries as much as it does here, American fashionable groups do not have the same influence on the Catholic Church as a whole as they do in mainline Protestant bodies. Catholic leadership is much more cosmopolitan. Fashionable U.S. Catholics are vigorous and influential—but they must compete with millions of Ukrainians, Mexicans, Lithuanians, Spaniards, Poles, Italians, etc.—"ethnics," as it were, from the American point of view. And this catholicity, which favors restraint, is, I believe, a great advantage indeed of the Catholic Church.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is indeed a factor in the upward mobility I have been describing. In years gone by many American Catholics continued to hold on to the ways of the old country, and their thinking and acting could differ significantly from more general American belief systems and patterns of behavior. In fact, it was to preserve this difference that they erected—at considerable self-sacrifice—a separate school system

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb01595.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

from kindergarten through college. Ethnicity of course tended to be unfashionable, and the fashionable may call it a ghetto mentality.

Catholic ethnicity is now in decline. Although there are still pockets of ethnic Irish, for example, now over half of Americans with Irish surnames, I understand, do not claim to be Catholic. Especially as they move up the social ladder, Catholics tend to evolve out of their old traditions and acquire a fashionable mindset—intellectual upward mobility. Some who never had much religious consciousness or have lost their interest in religion, and some who have opposed teachings like the prohibition of artificial birth control, drift away from the Church. Many, not knowing or caring that the Church has its own spiritual traditions, move to Eastern religions. Others remain highly committed to the Church and work to bring about change in accordance with their fashionable positions.

However, there are Catholics who are unimpressed by the beliefs the fashionable take for granted. They may see the loss of their Catholic identity, their "differentness," as just that: loss. And some intend to get back some of this Catholic ethnicity. I believe this sort of recovery is going on not only in the Catholic church but in other Christian communities and in Judaism as well (there is now a concerted effort in many denominational colleges and universities to put back into practice the principles upon which they were founded upon but which they lost in the recent past).

The Church before Constantine

Consequently, many Catholics may not feel the pressure to conform to outside norms, and at the same time they may not expect society to reflect their Catholic principles. It does not surprise them that the law in their country allows same-sex marriage and late-term abortion. Indeed, unfashionable Catholics are more like Kierkegaard than are their fashionable pewmates: they do not assume they are living in a Christendom nor are they surprised when there is a gap between many of the values reigning outside the Church and important Christian traditions. They may feel the way Christians felt in the first three centuries of the Church's existence: submerged in what is, in some ways at least, a pagan society.

But often their religious yearning—spiritual, intellectual, and aesthetic—may not be met in the Church. They may have to seek their Catholic symbolism where it is co-opted into secular—and commercial—settings. Witness the extraordinary interest in Gregorian chant at a time when it is hard to find chant actually being done outside sound studios.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb01595.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

A Final Thought

The chief point I wish to make is the following. The distinction between fashionable and unfashionable views and the people having them is sociological and psychological. It has nothing to do with the truth or falsehood, let alone the functionality, of the opinions themselves. There is no presumption that the ideas which society considers relatively fashionable are correct or, if put into practice, will be socially advantageous. Personally, I have been struck by the weakness of fashionable arguments in favor of abortion, and I think the destructive effect of wide spread divorce on education and other aspects of society is becoming more and more apparent. Teaching sex in public schools was supposed to combat teen-age pregnancy and AIDS, but a recent study shows that girls whose mothers take a firm stand against pre-marital sex without bringing up birth control methods are over twelve times more likely to abstain from sex before marriage. The fashionable revolution around 1970 advanced social programs that did not solve the problems, while its liberation from traditional family ethics coincides with the huge rise in illegitimacy and crime in the U.S.A., England and Wales.

I have not been neutral, then, in the sense that I have been more critical of fashionable than unfashionable positions (I obviously do not deny the weakness of some of the latter). The reason is that I think it is crucial to de-glamorize fashionable opinion precisely because of the irrelevance of its glamour. The truth value and social benefit of a claim is to be decided on its merits. That is why it is important to face squarely this not-so-subtle social manipulation.

Obviously, balance is called for between what is traditional and what is current. If the Church remains in the past, it is cut off from the present. But, more importantly, it is also cut off from the present if it has lost its own past, since it has nothing at all to say of itself.

By "ideology" I mean a cause that involving an obviously valid ethical or religious principle that is so simplified that it doesn't quite fit the facts. Ideology divides people into we's and they's with no middle ground for distinction or compromise. It is moralistic: opponents are "wrong" not only as mistaken but as bad. It may go beyond the immediate situation to color all of reality. An organized ideology may be supported by a strong advocacy net work with a solid economic base. Ideological people typically do not foresee the adverse effects that the success of their cause might have.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb01595.x Published online by Cambridge University Press