The One and the Many:
Archer's Analysis

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In the mid-1950s I recall hearing Joseph Fichter, the prominent American sociologist and Jesuit, say off the cuff at a large gathering of Catholic sociologists in Belgium that there was no such thing as Catholicism. He substantiated his remark with words something like: 'There's American Catholicism, there's French Catholicism, Italian Catholicism, and so on, but there's no *Catholicism*.'

Until very recently the Catholic Church presented, to the outsider at least, a totally different picture. It was one of the Church being a monolithic structure, the biggest international organization of the world, the most uniform in policy and ideology, and the most efficient to run. Doubtless this image was deliberately encouraged by the hierarchy and by those of an Ultramontane outlook so that the world should see the Church in such terms. And if the image emerged by accident, the hierarchy made no effort to modify it. Emile Durkheim saw it in this fashion but for him it was not a glorious achievement but *un monstre sociologique.*[1] A debating opponent, Abbé Hemmer, replied to Durkheim's comment, which was also made off the cuff in an academic group, that the assertion proved the divine nature of the Church. It was divine because it was able to transcend sociological laws. The Church was thus a miracle or mystery as much in theological terms as in social reality. Durkheim's judgment was hardly value-free. From the viewpoint of his unwavering commitment to something which approximated to humanism, the Catholic Church was a sociological monstrosity, in part due to its enormous size, but more importantly because it exerted controls over independent nations and tried to weld together diverse and perhaps hostile groups. For him the most important social entity in modern society was *la nation,* and to that end the church or churches within the nation should be dedicated. National churches were thus legitimate: international churches unacceptable. As a Jew by birth he appeared to approve of the fact that Judaism was without a world-wide governing body.

Modern sociologists have not followed the path Durkheim pointed to in appraising the Catholic Church. Rather, when they have been concerned with it, and particularly since the end of the Second World

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War, they have preferred, consciously or otherwise, to follow the approach indicated by Fichter. For a long time they have shown themselves to be skilful in breaking social images, or at least in being instrumental in portraying the gap between the image and what projects it. An examination of any social body, not least a large one, reveals divisions, counter-groups, hostility, tension, and honest differences of opinion which were not generally recognized by the wider society before the sociologist, and for that matter the anthropologist, had begun to work. No church, even one which claims to have a divine point of origin, or to project a divine character, can claim exemption from such sociological analysis.

The Catholic claim of 'oneness' and universality becomes difficult to sustain in the face of national characteristics and ideals. Every church has to come to terms with, and is embedded within, the culture in which it is set. The question of paramount importance is how deep is such culture-involvement. The most obvious lines of demarcation or subdivision for a world-wide body is along national lines, as Fichter said. But there are other possibilities and within any one country there may be and usually are different types of Catholicism which relate to particular social groups. Gramsci saw Catholicism as a 'multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions' and this 'precisely because of its efforts to retain surface unity'.[2]

There thus emerge different Catholicisms for the peasants, artisans, the *petit bourgeois,* merchants, intellectuals, the nobility, and so on. It seems correct to say that the genius of any great church is to possess a net of common beliefs and practices—a kind of minimal definition—in which all groups get caught or at least want to be retained. Breaking out of the net inevitably means sectarianism. And a church which is able to influence only one social class or similar grouping in a society is extremely limited in its notion of Christian involvement and mission.

One might well revere and perhaps praise the Roman Catholic Church for its ability over the centuries to contain its many 'Catholicisms' and restrain them from going their various ways. This is in marked contrast to so many Protestant churches which hold to particular doctrines or their interpretations and at the same time only influence specific social groups. To achieve containment, however, the Catholic Church has often had to compromise principles and allow 'Catholicisms' a certain amount of self-identity or autonomy, notably along nationalist lines. An example of this at the present time is to be seen in the city of Winnipeg, in Canada, where in the one urban area there is an archbishop administering a predominantly English-speaking sector, another archbishop for the corresponding French-speaking sector, and, with vaguer episcopal boundaries, a Ukrainian Catholic archbishop. All three are canonically independent of each other. So

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much for the notion of one bishop having the jurisdiction of a city or coherent geographical area.

And is this kind of containment any longer effective? The social image of unity and uniformity which was associated with the Catholic Church, and which to many was something to be admired and indeed envied, is now being defaced. There are various reasons why. The sociologist, as a new breed of investigator, has continued to hammer at the doors of the Church and his persistence has been rewarded, as in England; or welcomed, as in the United States. He is now in the home and can investigate for himself the quarrels and squabbles that may or may not be there. Added to that, the mass media, with ever inquisitive TV camera and reporter, have opened up nearly every institution to the gaze of the world. The present demand is for complete openness and frankness: nothing is to be hidden from the public eye despite lip service to the principle that all that is personal should be private. The Second Vatican Council was at heart an attempt to update the Church and in so doing the Church found itself caught in a process in which many of its restrictions and demands for canonical obedience were suddenly removed or disregarded. If there were quarrels in the home, they could now be publicly proclaimed. Books could be written about the Church and its internal divisions without any official censor. The institutions could be examined objectively and without fear that criticism would lead to the muzzling or excommunication of the author. Tensions and factions became accepted and have been given relatively full coverage in the media. There has been some censure of theologians such as Küng, Schillebeeckx, Boff and Curran. Liberation theology became for at least a time a point of issue between its followers and the Vatican. The followers of Archbishop Lefebvre, who have been outspoken critics of Vatican II in the media, resorted to something approaching force in their takeover of the church of St Nicholas du Chardonnet in Paris. But the Vatican, at least at the moment, shows no willingness to excommunicate dissidents as it did in previous generations. The 'Catholicisms', which Fichter implied were fairly hidden, are now more open to view.

In England, sociologists, as distinct from the gentlemen of the mass media, have not rushed into an examination of the new situation in which the Catholic Church has now found itself. They might be excused in the period which preceded Vatican II, when the Church was seen to be so sacred as to debar the entry of the profaning sociologist. Researchers were few and far between and the sad attempts of Tony Spencer to create what was nothing more than an initial step in the establishment of a demographic unit, which in the end came to nothing, should not be forgotten. There are many reasons why sociologists in this country avoided the Roman Catholic Church and, instead, plumped for sects, certain components of the Church of England and Methodism. What
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studies have been carried out on Catholicism have been mainly of the survey-variety based on questionnaires, such as those of Hornsby-Smith—very useful, no doubt, but restricted in their scope. Why sociology has been accepted only reluctantly by the Roman Catholic Church cannot be explored here. Suffice it to say, however, that in recent times there has been a gradual acceptance of the discipline within the Church from those who work as individuals and on their own initiative, as well as the few who are commissioned to undertake research.

Anthony Archer, in his book, *The Two Catholic Churches*, attempts to fill a long-established gap in providing an analysis of contemporary Catholicism in England in an objective and meaningful way, working within the canons of sociology. He sees Catholicism since the early nineteenth century not as a homogeneous development but one in which there has been tension and division about the aims and practical policies which the hierarchy has embarked on. And the result is not the delineation of just two Catholicisms but many Catholicisms. A book which highlights such internal tensions would have been inconceivable before Vatican II. But now it is here for everybody to read, a book penned by a Dominican, subject to no censorship and published through a Protestant press. By a strange irony the book is in part a criticism of Vatican II in its bearing on English Catholicism. It seems to Archer that the opening of the windows which allowed him to write the book have not been of universal benefit.

When the Catholic hierarchy was recreated in England in 1850 it had two main tasks. The first was to weld together, or create a net around, the different forms of Catholicism which had then emerged, particularly the recusants and Irish immigrants. The second was to forge a policy so as to re-establish Catholicism in such a positive way as to anticipate its continual growth. The two tasks were in some measure connected. The policy for future development was to become a choice between the Ultramontane model supported by the Anglican convert, Cardinal Manning, and the more liberal, intellectual approach led by another ex-Anglican, Cardinal Newman. The tussle between these two ex-Anglicans, resulting in the triumph of the former, is now becoming common knowledge and Archer adds nothing new to the tortuous saga. Where he places his emphasis is on the ways the various models of development emerged in the parish situation, and, more importantly, in the enunciation of the various modes of Catholicism which the hierarchy had to contain at all costs.

From the time of the Emancipation the development of Catholicism, according to Archer, is to be viewed as a power struggle within the Church—hence the notion of two Catholicisms, the dominant and the dominated. Obviously it was the hierarchy who had the guns, and the unarmed were the parishioners, who had little chance of

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influencing them. Within these two major groups changes in attitude and interest occurred, particularly in the former, where Ultramontanism was first espoused and later forsaken. In an almost Marxist motif, the middle classes tended either to side with the hierarchy or, because of their relative strength, be somewhat aloof and to hold lightly to certain Catholic doctrines, for example, the taboo on birth control. The Catholic middle classes, disliked much by the recusants, have themselves changed; an old merchant group gave way to upwardly mobile professionals. But the greatest change to that class and to English Catholicism itself was the influx of Anglican converts who, in their public school and Oxbridge training, were able to exert their muscle in forging the policies of the Church. These *nouveaux catholiques* were generally over-zealous in their enthusiasm for their newly found religion and were often an embarrassment to the time-serving Catholics, notably the recusant gentry. Nor did convert priests find satisfaction in dealing pastorally with Irish immigrants.

The main thesis of the book, which is not original but which is original in so far as it is applied to the English situation, is that the reforms of Vatican II were a triumph for middle-class intellectuals. The highest authoritative body, an ecumenical council, decided to support measures initiated by theologians which it was hoped would be supported by the middle classes. The 'needs', the mentality and the ideas of the powerless working classes were overlooked or misread. Their simple approach to Catholicism, with its clear-cut boundaries, and their unconscious acceptance of the Church as a cultic and cultural centre, provided them with a sense of security which some theologians, let alone sociologists, might designate quite simply as that of folk religion. All this was to disappear or to be down-graded overnight as a result of the reforms. And so the powerless felt themselves even more powerless. Hence 'the Passing of the Simple Faithful' (to quote one of Archer's chapter headings).

The other possibility was for the Roman Catholic Church to have allied itself, even identified itself, with the working classes in their social and economic amelioration. The Irish immigrants were much helped in their identity by being attached to a church which kept them together and at the same time constituted a religious group which was not part of the Establishment. Eventually they became acculturated and absorbed into working-class society as a whole. But how did the Church in fact help the poor? Politically it achieved nothing; at least judged from the standpoint of the poor themselves. Devoted priests they had but their role was as functionaries of the sacred. And the encyclicals on social justice produced little practical help. From *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to *Humani Generis* (1950) the worst aspects of capitalism were condemned but so also was socialism and Marxism. The encyclicals were essentially middle

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of the road pronouncements whose appeal was never heard by the working classes. Above all, they spoke of a society long past. Like the Christendom group of the Anglican Church, their basic thinking was medieval rather than contemporary—guild socialism rather than modern secular or Marxist socialism.

Liberation theology, which would seem to offer hope in certain Third World countries, has had and seems likely to have little or no effect on English Catholicism. What might have been more promising was the marriage of Marxism with Catholicism in the late 1960s. In the event it was short-lived. As a middle-class dream, it scarcely reached the ears of working-class Catholics. The journal, *Slant,* lived and flopped, read only by those who took the *Times* or the *Guardian.*

Other rescue operations have not proved successful. The extraordinary emergence of the charismatics within the Catholic Church has been counterproductive in creating a new force that would have universal acceptance. Archer probably undervalues it and his phrase 'charismatic chicanery' reflects an earlier article by him, 'Teach Yourself Tongue-Speaking'[3]. The cult, for surely that is what it is, has turned out to be a fringe phenomenon, highly subjective, and has no relevance to the major problems of working-class Catholics. Catholic Pentecostalists experience some tensions with the hierarchy but on the whole the movement has been well contained and has not been irrevocably divisive, as it has been in many Protestant churches. Further, in the Catholic Church, the practice of tongue-speaking is not part of the Sunday liturgy but is kept discreetly in the background and usually occurs in small groups away from the main worshipping body.

Another group within the Catholic Church in England which has its roots in Ultramontanism is one which presses for the full acceptance of the Catholic Church as a nationally authoritative body. In practising or committed membership the Catholic Church is now equal to and indeed may be superior to the Church of England. Internal dissensions, falling statistics and a wishywashy liberalism which seems to be going out of favour, all suggest that the Church of England no longer has the right to speak for the nation. The Free churches are really out of the picture. Triumphant Roman Catholics feel that victory is at last theirs and that their Church has every right to be near or at the helm of the country, if not *de jure* then *de facto.* Certainly most people would agree today, especially in the light of ecumenical *bonhomie,* that the Catholic Church should be given a high place in speaking for the nation. But such a Catholicism is bought at a considerable price—that of seeking an Establishment status—and it is precisely such status which many Anglicans want to see taken away from the Church of England.

The sub-title 'A Study in Oppression' is misleading. Although Archer sets out to demonstrate that the main groups in English

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Catholicism have contrasting, even conflicting, interests, nowhere is there the hint of hostility, let alone oppression. The Catholic hierarchy, who ultimately possess power—and Vatican II has given no power at all to the laity—have tended to be indifferent to working-class aspirations and, according to Archer, as has been noted, have backed various middle-class groups. The Council did nothing to deflect the English hierarchy. Indeed, the Council, in following the scent of Protestanism, and maybe that of Anglicanism in particular, has ridden rough-shod over the cultic practices of the working classes. The hierarchy in England readily accepted such decisions and so continued its path of lip-service to the proletariat. But lip-service or disregard cannot be seen as oppression. For its poorest parishes, bishops have been fortunate enough to have many hard-working and devoted priests.

The major problem raised in trying to assess the impact of Vatican II on the Church and society at large is that it took place against the background of what appears to have been galloping secularization. In England since the middle 1960s at least, there has been a decline in the proportion of Catholics who attend Mass regularly against an ever-increasing Catholic population. Various calculations have shown that although the Catholic population has indeed grown, there has been a drop-out of massive proportions of those of a Catholic background who should acknowledge their Catholic affiliation but do not. Official statistics put the number of Catholics today at about 4.3 million, or roughly a tenth of the population. The proportion attending Mass fell from approximately a half in the late 1960s to about a third today. There has been a decline in the number of clergy, and especially in the number being ordained. The priest is a vital link in worship and a shortage of priests is most serious. The decline of converts has been quite remarkable, from a peak of just under 16,000 in 1959 to 5,000 in 1982. The figures may not be reliable but, that apart, they show a remarkable drop which makes Archer comment that Catholicism to the outsider is not as popular as it used to be. One can go on using various indicators to try to show what has been going on at the parish level over the past twenty or so years but the general picture, quickly reached, is one of continual but not catastrophic decline. This constituted a new situation for a heretofore growing Catholic Church in England which has tended to ignore with complacency the falling away of 'Catholicisms' in various parts of the world, especially South America and the Continent. But, then, other churches in England have long suffered from a non-reversible decline and an erosion of commitment, and this as particularly marked at the same time as the falling away of Catholics. In trying to get to grips with the situation it is very difficult to isolate the effects of Vatican II from general secularizing forces, whatever they are held to be. Quite rightly Archer argues that there is a combination of factors. According

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to some indicators, a decline in English Catholicism had set in before Vatican II. What is apparent is that the Council did not stem the ebbing tide, as was the ardent hope of some that it would. *Aggiornamento* meant the drawing of new boundaries and the attempt to make the committed more committed. Thus, there was the notion of a 'gathered church' or a 'pilgrim church' which, while it was fine for those within such groups, that is, the dominant groups, made those at the edge feel further on the outside than they had been formerly. If in fact the well-informed, reformed and committed core could become the spear-head for a missionary harvest, the policy might be justified. But the harvest has not been apparent and so sociologically there has been loss without a corresponding gain.

So where does this leave the Catholic Church in England now? Probably Archer's conclusion will not be liked by many of his co-religionists. For him the consequences of Vatican II have meant that the Catholic Church is becoming like any other major denomination in the country. Its distinctiveness in supporting marginal or dispossessed groups—its potential for social criticism—have given way to forms of worship, belief-systems and social support which make it something like the Church of England—that dreadful and once dreaded establishment. Ecumenism dominated by theologians has been partly responsible for this, and is now espoused by the Catholic Church. Those who negotiate the ARCIC get-together are essentially quasi-establishment figures who play it right down the middle. The Roman Catholic Church in England, with its early possibilities of being unique and 'standing on the other side', appears to have lost its vocation and so it now proceeds hand-in-hand with others who reflect all too easily the consensus of society. Other Catholicisms still exist but one, as always, dominates and it is this which Archer so ably and in great detail analyses. But can such a form of Catholicism continue and allow full vent to other Catholicisms? Some stifling must surely occur. Perhaps Durkheim had a point in what he said but in ways he both did and did not realize.

1   W.S.F Pickering, *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston and Melbourne, 1984, pp. 432ff.
2   A. Archer, *The Two Catholic Churches,* quoted p. 104.
3   *New Blackfriars* Vol. 55 (1974) No. 651, pp. 357ff.