

Forty-five years after the Second Vatican Council, the debate continues about how to interpret, implement, and bring to fruition the teachings of the Council. Two books highlight this ongoing controversy. Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition proposes a hermeneutic of reform and renewal, suggesting that the Council is faithful to—and in continuity with—the timeless teachings of the Church. It does so by examining the product of the Council: the 16 documents. In sharp contrast, What Happened at Vatican II by John W. O’Malley, S.J. proposes that Vatican II is unique, even a discontinuous rupture from the preceding tradition, the result of which is a significant change within the Church. The purpose of John W. O’Malley’s book is not to analyze the documents of the Council, but to offer a narrative sensitive to the historical and theological context, and hence to provide a way to comprehend what the Council sought to attain. What can be learned from the tensions between these two books?

Renewal within Tradition (RWT), edited by Matthew Lamb and Matthew Levering, is a collection of 22 essays that analyze each document of the Council while aiming to maintain the unity of all sixteen documents; the book aims to provide a faithful rendering of the Council. Many of the essayists should be well known to this journal’s readers. One might say that each essayist takes a ‘canonical’ approach to interpreting the documents, interpreting each in light of the others. The aim of the Council fathers was not simply “discussion” or “creating a spirit.” Instead, the essays examine the texts of the Council, that is, the concrete teachings produced by the Council on the identity of the Church and Her relationship to the modern world. The editors explicitly state that their aim is to follow the interpretation proposed by Pope Benedict XVI with regard to a “hermeneutic of reform” that sees Vatican II as an occasion for “renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church that the Lord has given to us” (x). While not ignoring the historical circumstances around and in the Council, and by no means ignoring the sometimes heated discussions that took place, RWT focuses on the meaning of the Council by attending to continuity in the tradition as expressed in its texts.
What Happened at Vatican II (WHV), written by the Jesuit church historian, Fr. John O’Malley, aims to tell a story, that is, to give a historical rendering of the Council. O’Malley’s chief concern is not to interpret each document, but to explain ‘the event’ of Vatican II, tracing it from its calling by John XXIII to the conclusion by Paul VI. This gives the text a readable, narrative structure, a chronological flow that highlights how the attitudes and mentality of the Council gradually developed as the Council’s objectives became more focused. This sort of historical analysis that goes ‘beyond the text’ is exemplified in two ways. First, O’Malley argues for three “issues under the issues” which set the stage for the Council: 1) the correctness of change and the justification for it, 2) the relationship between the center and periphery of the Church, especially with regard to authority, and 3) the manner and style for the authority to be exercised. Second, O’Malley focuses on three predominant motifs shared by the majority: aggiornamento, ressourcement, and development. Each of the three issues is answered, in a way, by each motif, and one could argue that the divergent views of the majority about how to interpret the Council come from which motif is emphasized. O’Malley stresses the ways, in style and manner, that Vatican II is a break from the previous Councils and ushers in a new and different era of the church.

These two books obviously are written from very different vantage points. Although both books could be seen as the products of two opposing and conflicting interpretations of Vatican II, it is important to underline three points of agreement in order to understand exactly what is at issue in the disagreements. First, both books emphasize the importance of Pius XII for Vatican II. Both Fr. O’Malley and Russell Hittinger (who wrote the chapter on Dignitatis Humanae in RWT) see Pope Pius XII as an important part of the background to the Council with regard to the pre-conciliar development of the relationship between the Church and secular governments. Pius XII’s Christmas Eve radio address in 1944 began a greater recognition and approval of the democratic system, something that would take shape in the bishops by the time of the Council (though the acceptability of democracy was made clear in encyclicals at least since the time Leo XIII). One wonders what a document on religious liberty would have looked like without Pius XII’s influence.

O’Malley and the authors of RWT also share a recognition of the important link between the prominent motifs of aggiornamento and ressourcement. As the late Avery Cardinal Dulles states in his essay in RWT, “Any aggiornamento that it accomplished was intrinsically connected with the principle of ressourcement” (26). O’Malley also
recognizes that both *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*, along with the theme of development, shaped the context and the content of the Council. Finally, both works understand the Council as addressing the need for the Church to assess Herself in light of the modern world and Her role within it.

These examples, along with others, show that the debate, which might seem to be a standoff between two competing hermeneutics, is a shared conversation with multiple points of agreement. It is important to know exactly what is really at odds, and to move beyond renderings centered on ideological struggle to intelligent representations of the other side. The major difference is the point of emphasis: *RWT* stresses the continuity, *WHV* the otherness of the Council. While *RWT* examines how Vatican II’s renewal is one within the continuity of tradition, *RWT* does not reject that there was renewal and change. Some critics have charged, perhaps in an oversimplified and seemingly biased way, that *RWT* is all tradition with no renewal.

*WHV* looks at Vatican II as a ‘momentous shift’ from the previous Councils, so it might seem that Fr. O’Malley’s story is one of rupture. However, O’Malley is quick to recognize that the change that was ushered in must be situated historically by looking back into the Church’s rich doctrine and tradition. To argue that O’Malley sees a drastically new church that has no connection with the previous 2,000 years is also oversimplified and biased. The most important sign of ‘change’ or discontinuity for O’Malley was the style and language of the text, which, as O’Malley admits, was one based on the Church Fathers. The second major difference was how *RWT* and *WHV* treated *ressourcement* and its relationship with *aggiornamento*. For the authors of *RWT*, there is no *aggiornamento* without *ressourcement*, and in fact all *aggiornamento* is really *ressourcement* in action. *WHV* tends to distinguish and separate the two terms, suggesting two different movements. While the language of the Council and the major shift from all other Councils is attributed to *ressourcement*, (44) there are times, especially in *Sacrosanctum concilium*, that O’Malley sees the two working alongside each other, but separately.

The final illustration of the difference is how each appropriates the Constitution on the Church and the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes* (GS). *RWT* focuses much of its attention on how GS continues the Church’s teaching on the understanding of the human person and society (in the essay by Benestad), and its teaching on the family (in the essay by Levering). Though at times criticized for vagueness, GS roots its picture of government in ancient Greek philosophy and the human person in Augustinian and Thomistic language, thereby showing its
continuity with the Church’s rich social teaching and tradition. The dignity of the person is rooted in the threefold foundation of creation, redemption, and call to communion with God (151). Unlike the Kantian and modern notion of a just society, GS ‘sides with the ancients’ in articulating the position that justice in society is dependent upon the virtue of its individual citizens (157). If one is not versed in the Church’s rich tradition in social thought, one can easily misread this document as affirming a modern notion of society.

For O’Malley, GS might be the most pivotal document in the way it stresses the uniqueness of the Council. The very issue the document addresses is an anomaly throughout the Church’s history; no Council has ever discussed this topic. The novelty of the issue helps explain, according to O’Malley, why in many cases it is seen as a little optimistic and sometimes vague in its teaching. The Council fathers were doing something that had never been done before. However, when it comes to a detailed treatment of the family in *Gaudium et Spes*, the contrast between the two books is stark: Levering carefully attends to the teaching of the text, while O’Malley is more interested in what is not in the document.

These two books, in a way, mutually enrich one another by allowing the reader to have a deeper perspective of the Council. These two books, when read together, raise several questions for one another. First, to *Renewal within Tradition*, one might ask, “Why was Vatican II necessary?” Much of what Vatican II accomplished began with Pius XII and is a fulfillment of his pontificate, including reforms involving liturgy, church/state relations, and biblical studies. Could all that Vatican II accomplished have been done gradually without the need of a Council? Next, to Fr. O’Malley as author of *What Happened at Vatican II*, one might ask, “In what ways does the ‘spirit’ of Vatican II reflect the ‘spirit’ that has always been in the Church, even during ‘the long 19th century’? If this is a radically “new” spirit, one might ask, what is the difference between this way of understanding of Vatican II and the way that Protestants understand the reformation? What separates the camp of discontinuity from Protestantism?”
Two ‘issues under the issue’ seem to influence these two competing interpretations of Vatican II. First, who is Pius XII? The way that one understands the pontificate of Pius XII seems increasingly relevant to the way one understands the Council. Finally, in order for the debate about the meaning of Vatican II to proceed productively, both sides need to be more concise in their terminology. Too often in this debate, the two sides seem to be talking past each other. For example, what is meant by discontinuity and continuity? These two books provide a snapshot of the ongoing debate about the meaning of Vatican II, though the conversation is far from over.

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