

Religious Individualization, American Catholicism, and Vatican II: Issues of Influence and Interpretation

Laura Ehlen

Departmental Affiliation: Theology
Christ College

It cannot be denied that, throughout the history of the Christian tradition, religious doctrine has changed over time, yet a debate exists over the degree to which these changes are the effects of historically specific socio-cultural forces, and the degree to which they are the effects of solely theological forces, such as divine revelation or ecumenical councils. While many Christian thinkers want to consider doctrine as existing in isolation from history and culture and thus only altered by divine revelation, Christian history reveals a number of incidents, from the reign of Constantine to the Reformation to the Enlightenment, where culture influenced religion, and society in turn interpreted new doctrines through a specific lens. We see the former stance strongly in John Henry Cardinal Newman's understanding of changes in Catholicism; he argues that what seem like changes in Catholic doctrine over time are actually just the development of ideas already embedded in a doctrine's original formulation. For many thinkers, what is at stake in this question is, of course, the purity and theological truth of doctrine. This paper argues that socio-cultural forces do affect religious doctrine by exploring the case of Vatican II and, more specifically, by closely analyzing the "Declaration on Religious Freedom" from Vatican II and the changes it wrought in Catholic doctrine regarding religious freedom. Through the use of primary theological texts from the published documents of Vatican II, secondary sources on the interpretation and effects of these documents, and Robert Bellah's treatise on American religion and individualization, this paper first examines how the American culture of individualism and religious freedom influenced the Second Vatican Council as it sought to incorporate secular and cultural changes into its doctrines; then, it points to how Vatican II produced documents on religious freedom which American Catholics interpreted through the lens of American culture and implemented as such. This paper concludes the case of Vatican II's "Declaration on Religious Freedom," by offering one illustration of the mutability of religion in the face of cultural change. In this, it argues against thinkers like Cardinal Newman who want to think of Catholic doctrine as impervious to the effects of a wider cultural world. Throughout, the paper considers the consequences of doctrinal mutability for religious individualization within the Catholic Church and then, in its conclusions, suggests implications for the Christian religion as a whole.

Information about the Author:

Laura Ehlen is a graduating senior with a double major in theology and English and minors in humanities and classical languages and literatures. She is a member of Christ College, in which she serves as both a TA and a debate coach in the Freshman Program. She has edited the Shaker publication for the SALT staff for three semesters now, works at the Writing Center, and is the Vice President of Sigma Tau Delta. She wrote this paper for the course *Interpretation of the Self, Culture, and Society* in Christ College, and is presenting it at this year's National Conference on Undergraduate Research. Her hobbies include running, exercising, cooking, and reading.

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. David Western

Student Contact: laura.ehlen@valpo.edu