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Pondering Roman collars, the Latin Mass and 'holy ignorance'

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In *The Future Church* I identify ?evangelical Catholicism? as a key trend, defined as a strong reassertion of traditional Catholic identity coupled with an impulse to express that identity in the public realm. At a purely descriptive level that claim is a no-brainer, because the evidence is crystal clear ? from revival of the old Latin Mass, to new demands that pro-choice Catholic politicians be brought to heel.

tThe $64,000 question isn?t whether the trend exists, but what to make of it.

In that regard, a recent book from the famed French sociologist Olivier Roy, widely considered one of Europe?s leading experts on Islam, offers two perspectives worth pondering. One?s empirical in nature and the other analytical ? which is to say, one?s essentially a fact of life, the other a debatable line of interpretation.

tThe book is titled *La Sainte ignorance: Le temps de la religion sans culture*, published by Editions du Seuil in 2008. An English translation is scheduled for May 2010 from Columbia University Press, under the title *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Diverge*.

tFirst, Roy?s empirical point: It?s not just Catholics passing through an evangelical phase. In fact, the revival of traditional identity and the push to proclaim that identity in public is a defining feature of religion generally in the early 21st century.

tIn Europe, Roy points to the vigorous defense of the public display of crucifixes by Catholics, the insistence of Muslim women upon wearing veils, and a trend among younger Jewish men to wear the *kippah* at school and in the workplace. On the Christian side of the ledger, he also includes the massive crowds drawn by the World Youth Days instituted under Pope John Paul II, and the more recent ?Christian Pride? festivals organized in some European cities as a self-conscious response to ?Gay Pride? rallies. Globally, Roy notes the explosive growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal forms of Christianity, the success of Salafism, Tablighi Jamaat and neo-Sufism within Islam, the comeback of the Lubavich movement inside Judaism, as well as the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India and the popularity of Sri Lankan theravada Buddhism.

tThough highly distinct, Roy argues that these evangelical strains within the world?s major religions share certain defining features: ?The individualization of faith, anti?intellectualism, a stress on salvation and realization of the self, [and] rejection of the surrounding culture as pagan.?

tOne can debate the merits of certain items on that list, but in the main Roy?s observation is indisputable: The reassertion of traditional markers of religious identity, interpreted in a personal and evangelical key, is part of the physiognomy of our times far beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church.

tFor Catholics, that point suggests two insights which are sometimes overlooked or misconstrued in ?water cooler? conversation in the church.

tFirst, there?s a tendency in some circles to see evangelical Catholicism, with its strong emphasis on

hierarchical authority and traditional doctrine, as a ?top-down? project intended to bolster the sagging power of the clerical caste. No doubt, such political calculations can be part of the picture, but sociologists such as Roy confirm that the evangelical wave has much deeper roots in widespread social forces, and is thus a ?bottom-up? force too. The hunger for a ?thick? sense of Catholic distinctiveness among some Catholic young people these days, basically unsolicited by anyone in authority (and at times seen by church authorities with ambivalence), makes the point.

tSecond, and even more basically, findings such as Roy?s confirm that debating the merits of evangelical Catholicism is akin to debating the desirability of winter: Whether we like it or not, it?s here. The only meaningful question is what to do about it.

tNow for the more analytical, and hence more subjective, bit: Roy believes this evangelical wave isn?t a sign of a comeback for religion, but more akin to a symptom of chronic illness.

tTo be sure, Roy concedes that the confident expectation among secularists in the 1960s and 70s that religion was slouching towards extinction had it wrong. Nonetheless, he insists that the continuing influence of religion upon public policy (even in Europe), or its growing fluency in the media, shouldn?t be confused with a return to health. Instead, he sees today?s revival of traditional religious symbols as a sign of weakness, because it illustrates how those symbols contrast with the broader culture which surrounds them.

t This is the ?holy ignorance? of the book?s title. Instead of freeing the world from religion, Roy argues, secularization has instead encouraged an anti-intellectualism that promises immediate, emotional access to the sacred, and sets itself up in direct opposition to contemporary pagan culture. This divorce between religion and culture, Roy argues, creates space in which fundamentalism and radicalism metastasize.

tRoy sees all this as a body blow, or at least a serious challenge, for religions such as Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, which historically have emphasized the integration of religion with cultural, national and ethnic identity. Certainly the heavy losses Catholicism has suffered to Pentecostals in Latin America, and more recently in parts of Africa, seem to lend credence to that view.

tOn the other hand, there is another possibility. One could argue that Catholicism is uniquely positioned to do justice to the legitimate aspiration for identity expressed in today?s evangelical push, while ensuring that it does not become so thoroughly disengaged from, or antagonistic to, the surrounding culture that it ends in the extremist pathologies Roy describes. That seems to be what Benedict XVI has in mind when he talks about contemporary Christianity as a ?creative minority? ? clear about what makes it different, but aiming to renew the broader culture from within, not forever warring against it.

tWhether evangelical Catholicism develops in this direction remains to be seen, but it doesn?t take a Nostradamus to predict that a great deal about the future, both for religion and for culture, will depend on which way things break.

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