

Comment

Cardinal Yves Congar OP

Developments in theology owe a good deal to social and political circumstances. Since the early Middle Ages, France has been home to one intellectual movement after another which has decisively shaped Catholic theology. It would be a mistake to ignore the non-theological factors. They inhibit as well as stimulate developments. Later on, for example, no doubt mainly because Pope Leo X prudently made concessions to the King in the Concordat of 1516, there were no great landed interests to support Protestantism in France. True, it took over thirty years (1562–94) of brutal civil war, and a further century of the appalling dragonnades, to drive the Huguenot minority into apostasy, exile and martyrdom. But Calvin's theology left little mark on his native land. Intellectually, the Church of France never had to come to terms seriously with the Reformation.

The Revolution of 1789 had far more effect, visible even in our own day. As the Church gradually recovered from the Napoleonic wars, the enmity between anticlerical republicans and devout Catholics broke into increasingly open and bitter conflict. Religious instruction was forbidden in state schools in 1882, for example. The Dreyfus case split the country apart in the 1890s, with many Catholics displaying obsessive hatred of supposedly free-thinking Jews and Freemasons. In 1898 the movement known as *Action française* came into existence, devoted to opposing democracy. Although condemned by the Vatican in 1926, the movement retained the sympathy of many Catholics, particularly among the clergy.

Laws passed in 1905, separating Church and State, meant that the Church was deprived of support from public funds, church buildings became the property of the state, parish finances were subject to civil supervision, and so on. Since religious orders and congregations needed to be licensed by the state, many chose exile. The German invasion of Belgium in 1914 united France, at least for the duration of the war. But the majority of Catholics kept their distance from the Third Republic right through the political upheavals of the 1930s. In 1940, when France collapsed, the Third Republic gave way to the Vichy state. With its triple ideal of 'Work, Family and Country', and with its generous fiscal

policy towards church institutions, Vichy had a great deal of appeal for many Catholics. The ideas of *Action française* came into their own.

The French theologians whose work was to have decisive impact on the Church at large through their contribution to the Second Vatican Council had no truck whatsoever with the Vichy regime. Henri de Lubac (1896–1991) spent six months in hiding in 1943, with the Gestapo looking for him, because of his denunciations of the anti-semitism with which many Catholics colluded. Yves Congar, who died on 22 June 1995 at the age of 91, was taken prisoner as a military chaplain and was sent to Colditz for disobeying his original camp commandant's order not to preach.

Yves Congar joined the French Dominicans, then in exile in Belgium, in 1925. Born in Sedan, in the French Ardennes, he had first trained for the diocesan priesthood, in Rheims and in Paris. Having heard lectures by Jacques Maritain about Thomism, he decided to transfer to the Dominicans after his year of military service (1924–25), which he spent with the French troops then occupying the Rhineland. When he, and many others of his generation, such as de Lubac, who spent his formative years as a Jesuit in England, burst on the theological scene in France in the 1930s it was as if their years of research and reflection in exile had prepared them to return home to France with a wholly new vision of the Church in the world — the Church as revealed in the fulness of Catholic tradition — in a world of which the secular modernity was not to be feared.

With *Chrétiens désunis: principes d'un oecuménisme catholique* (1937, *Divided Christendom* 1939), Yves Congar opened the way to participation by Catholics in the ecumenical movement. It was to take thirty years before his ideas gained acceptance and in the meantime he was accused of 'false eirenicism'. In *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Eglise* (1950, untranslated), a book which many Catholics at the time found deeply shocking, he argued that, after four centuries, the Church must finally come to terms with the theological insights of the Reformation. In his third major book, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïc* (1953, *Lay People in the Church* 1957), Congar offered an equally challenging account of the role of the laity, whose ministry he regarded as mediating between church and world.

All three books provoked so much hostility that, when he wrote an article in 1954 in defence of the 'priest-worker' movement in France, the opportunity was taken by the Master of the Order of Preachers to have Congar stopped from teaching at Le Saulchoir, the Dominican study-house on the outskirts of Paris. Choosing to go to the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem, he wrote *Le mystère du temple* (1958, *The*

Mystery of the Temple 1962), a biblical study of the divine origin of the Church. Then, after an unhappy year in Cambridge, perhaps the most unrewarding in his life, he was invited by the Bishop of Strasbourg to undertake pastoral and theological work in his diocese. In 1960 he was surprised to find himself among the first theologians to be summoned by Pope John XXIII to help to prepare for the forthcoming Council. Few expected much of the Council but it soon became clear that, with these books, dealing as they did with ecumenism, reform of the Church and the role of the laity, and so on, Congar had been writing most of the agenda.

With *La Tradition et les traditions* (1960–63), and other historical investigations of patristic and medieval ecclesiology, researched during and for the Council itself, Congar greatly enriched our understanding of the nature of the Church. The massive shift in ecclesiological self-understanding inaugurated at Vatican II owes a great deal to the notes in Congar's legendary dossiers.

In no way a speculative or systematic thinker, as he was the first to acknowledge, he demonstrated the indispensability of historical research for renewing theology and for reforming church structures and ways of worship and devotion.

Finally, in *Je crois en l'Esprit Saint* (1978–80), his last great work, he offered a fullscale doctrine of the Holy Spirit in three volumes, concluding with a picture of the life of the Church as a prolonged epiclesis — a prayer for the coming of the Spirit.

Slowly immobilized by a bone marrow disease, symptoms of which (as was later realised) manifested themselves as early as 1936, during the first week of prayer for Christian unity which he conducted at the Sacré-Coeur in Montmartre, Yves Congar spent his last years with the military veterans in the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris. On 8 December 1994, the sixty-eighth anniversary of his profession, he was invested in the hospital chapel with the insignia of a Cardinal of the Roman Church. His generous and eirenic explorations of Catholic tradition, together with his confidence in the presence of God in ordinary life, certainly transcend the rather narrow and introverted Church which he inherited — and are just as critical of a Church that is perhaps somewhat tempted to remain ignorant of its past and gloomy about its relevance to the present. When the history of Christianity in our century comes to be written, Yves Congar will be remembered as one of the very rare theologians whose work helped to change the face of the Church.

F.K.