

Are We Confronted with a New Italian Denominationalism? Marginal notes on a book on the relationships between Evangelicals and Catholics

Leonardo De Chirico, *Evangelical Theological Perspectives on post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism*, Peter Lang, Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles et al., 337 pp.

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In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Mark Noll, discussing the intellectual renewal among evangelicals after the Second World War, asks why this renewal had more success in philosophy:

That question hinges on the distinction between evangelical thinking and Christian thinking done by evangelicals that is, between thought guided by the distinctive of evangelicalism itself and thought inspired by other Christian traditions that take root among evangelicals ... The conclusion of this chapter suggests that, at least into the 1990s, the renewal of evangelical thought that has indeed taken place is mostly a matter of evangelicals' overcoming the encumbrances of the evangelical heritage and finding themselves in a position to exploit patterns of thought offered by other Christian tradition.¹

For a young Italian evangelical scholar (such as myself and surely as Leonardo De Chirico), this question entailed another question concerning the relationships with Catholicism. He had to determine if there was the possibility to get intellectual resources from the cultural tradition deriving from the Catholic Church. The decision was not simple. There was a cluster of intellectual elements to consider: living in Italy he knew all the aspects of popular Catholicism and the complicity of ecclesiastical authority with this phenomena very well. As well as that, he watched all the flirtations between Catholicism in its theological and spiritual expressions and international evangelicalism at large. This situation had an impact upon his proper identity because his dissatisfaction with the alternatives led him to a further *folding* on himself. So, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, many chose the first alternative of Noll's dilemma: to look for all their intellectual resources only in the evangelical traditions (dispensationalist or Reformed). But this solution was not, and I believe is not, a satisfactory solution, particularly on the philosophical and theological planes. In this area the depth of the

¹ M. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, 212.

history of thought does not permit one to just cut things out! Necessarily, the neo-denominationalism ensuing from this *folding* was confronted with two alternatives. Which was it to be: either a new theological war and controversy, or the quest for a new distribution of forces in the Italian ecumenical and ecclesiastical dialogue with the Catholic Church, in which the most important role is carried out by the historical Protestant churches (Waldensian, Lutheran, Methodist)?

All of these feelings moved me when I read the beautiful book by Leonardo De Chirico. He does not fully develop this intellectual level of analysis, but is not completely unconcerned with it and with the importance of a general ideological stance. We can demonstrate this thesis by indicating the interesting clarification that De Chirico tried to provide on a linguistic and semantic level (28, n. 1). He proposes to separate 'evangelical' Italian Christianity from Italian historic Protestant Christianity on one side, and from Italian fundamentalist Christianity on the other side by adopting a new term for the Italian translation of 'evangelicals' and 'evangelicalism'. Generally, we translate the terms with 'evangelico', 'evangelismo' and we further add an adjective to qualify the subject theologically (above all 'conservative'). De Chirico proposes instead the term '*evangelicale*'. In Italian that is not a beautiful word, having certain negative connotations: it looks auto-referential and has a separatist tone.

Leonardo De Chirico wrote a beautiful book! Well-informed and very deep. This is the dissertation he presented to King's College (London). In it he reviews the evangelical perspectives on Roman Catholicism (RM) after the Second Vatican Council. He examines firstly the thought of some evangelical thinkers (G. Berkouwer, C. Van Til, D. Wells, D. Bloesch, H. Carson and J. Stott). Secondly, he discusses the work undertaken by the World Evangelical Fellowship. Finally he discusses the American dialogues between evangelicals and Catholics (ECT). In the second part of the book he presents his personal proposal and in the last chapter, on the base of his approach, he tries to delineate the systemic elements of contemporary Catholicism.

The book is very elaborate and the reason for that is represented by the different levels which are covered. The title could suggest an examination of Roman Catholicism, but catholicism stays on the horizon. This is even the case when the author marks for us the two main elements that he considers central in a systemic understanding of Catholicism (the relationship between nature and grace, and the doctrine of the church). The subject of the book is: 'evangelical theological perspectives on ...', and as a result: 'what is really at stake in an Evangelicals' appraisal of Roman Catholicism' (14). When De Chirico speaks about the American dialogues between evangelicals and Catholics, he has this comment: 'The process which has led from ECT to GOS has shown that while confronting Roman Catholicism, evangelicals reflect and act upon their own identity' (161). The problem of evangelical identity seems to me the real focus of the book!

For the author, evangelical approaches to Catholicism in the last fifty years don't grasp the systemic character of Roman Catholicism. They are atomistic and inadequate, if not immediately begging the question. Also the work of the *World Evangelical Fellowship* is hardly sufficient as an approach to Roman Catholicism! He speaks continually of an 'atomistic perspective':

the whole thrust of the thesis revolves around the rather defective theological evaluation that evangelical theology has been able to produce in terms of systemic approach. Instead of applying a systemically oriented assessment, evangelical analyses of Roman Catholicism have been characterised by more

atomistic perspectives, resulting in fragmented critiques which concentrate more on theological aspects of the system rather than on the system as a complex, yet unified whole (305).

The fundamental issue of the book is that we will have a proper approach to Catholicism – a proper evangelical approach – only when we interpret catholicism as a system. For this to be done, however, we need to approach Roman Catholicism from another well-built theological system. It is necessary to have a theological system to recognise and to define the catholic system as a whole. The criticism of the atomistic perspectives of evangelicals with regard to Roman Catholicism, also includes the present-day stream in evangelical theology in which, according to De Chirico, the dismissal and erosion of what should be considered as 'foundations' or 'essentials', are evident:

In the end, a systemic analysis of a given theology, e.g. Roman Catholicism in the case of the present research, can be carried out only by using a theology which is self-consciously and thoroughly systemic ... The main reason why present-day Evangelical theology has not been able to elaborate a systemic approach to Roman Catholicism is perhaps the fact that Evangelical theology itself is not very perceived and thought of as a theological system by many Evangelical theologians themselves (307).

In these lines a pessimism is present as often appears in the theological work of Italian evangelicals; but we will return to this later on.

The theological category urged by De Chirico for evangelicals as central to the interpretation of Catholicism is taken from the ideological and philosophical speculation of the Dutch thinker, Abraham Kuyper, through the mediation (this is my interpretation) of the Vantilian stream of American neocalvinism. De Chirico considers the late idealistic concept of a worldview or life-system as used by Kuyper, to be both appropriate to Calvinists and Catholics, and as 'a suitable category for interpreting Roman Catholicism without reducing it to one or more of its constitutive elements, thus losing sight of the oneness of its essence' (182).

It is no accident that, in order to ground an Evangelical systemic approach to Roman Catholicism historically and theologically, the 'natural' place to start was the Dutch Calvinist Abraham Kuyper ... (whose insistence on conceiving Calvinism and Romanism as competing religiously based systems ... played an even more fundamental role in shaping his perception of his Calvinist theology and protestant culture constituting a whole (307).

In a few paragraphs De Chirico 'reinforces' his proposal by reviewing some Roman Catholic thinkers (J.H. Newman, R. Guardini, H.U. von Balthasar, A. Dulles, R. McBrien) in whom there would be a consciousness of the systemic structure of Catholicism. It goes without saying that all these Catholic thinkers, as with some Protestant thinkers, are people who worked and faced up to a new face of modernity, sometimes in a defensive context.

We can address the book by De Chirico on a different two levels, without forgetting the cluster of intellectual implications quoted above.

First: the historical level.

The attempt of De Chirico is not a novel one in the Italian evangelical context. At this point it is useful to quote another attempt that was elaborated in the golden century of Italian evangelicalism, the nineteenth century. In 1863 Teodorico Pietrocchia Rossetti, a leader of the Brethren movement (the largest denomination in Italy in those days) wrote a powerful little book entitled: *Principii della Chiesa Romana, della Chiesa Protestante, e della Chiesa Cristiana* (literally translated: *Principles of the Roman Church, the Protestant Church, and the Christian Church*). It would be interesting to compare these two publications and to understand all the presuppositions and implications of them, but this is not my aim here. Surely, it can be said that both books present a first level of discussion of Roman Catholicism, and attempt to reduce it to a simpler system. There is a second level – that of evangelical identity. Both books work on the first level with a positive tone. On the second level they both present a pessimistic appreciation of the general Protestant world with a subsequent stressing of the novelty and originality of their own work (see especially in De Chirico's book pp. 22–25, particularly n.6). Naturally the final appeals in the two books are very different: there is the traditional Anabaptist stance of Christianity, in Rossetti's book and the neocalvinism of Van Til in the case of Leonardo De Chirico. The general schema however is more or less the same: Roman Catholicism as a case study to evaluate evangelical identity and eventually to correct or reinforce it.

Between these exceptionally similar hermeneutical experiments, the Italian evangelical developed his approach to Roman Catholicism by learning from another little book. This was written by J. Blocher and entitled, *Le Catholicisme à la lumière de l'Écriture Sainte*, and was translated into Italian in 1971. This book had a great impact because it answered a particular charge that Italian evangelicals tried out new ideas and that this was done on the evangelistic level. This understanding is a child of the nineteenth century evangelical revival, and we could also find the similar thinker (Rossetti) as a source of this thinking. At an evangelistic and apologetic level, it seems to me, we Italians feel a very strong need to challenge our fellow Catholic people to confront themselves directly with the Word of God and not with another theological system.

De Chirico makes a strong case for the speculation of Abraham Kuyper and I find this most appealing, considering the great importance of Kuyperian legacy. De Chirico (?typically) provocatively challenges the reader to enter self-consciously into his or her own worldview and thus to recognise the Catholic world view as such.

The reference to Kuyper is founded on the antithetical logic that is present in Kuyperian thought; but there is also the correlate, if not the reverse, the logic of common grace. All thinkers that are working in the wake of A. Kuyper, with the notion of 'common grace' have tools necessary for putting forward very interesting ideas in theology as in philosophy, all reaffirming the 'reformed' roots of this experiments. I am thinking here of the well-known project of Reformed epistemology (A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff) and of the manner in which it has been able to interact with Catholic thought.² We can say that the intellectual movements originating in the thought of Kuyper, at least in its most significant expressions, have continually relativised the

² N. Wolterstorff, 'The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidential Apologetics', in R. Audi and W. Vainwright eds., *Rationality, Religious Belief & Moral Commitment. New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986, pp. 38–81; A. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, see particularly pp. 167–98.

denominational reference. For example, we can think of H. Dooyeweerd who begins his philosophical life as a 'Calvinistic thinker', and closes his career with an emphasis on 'Christian philosophy'. In Kuyper, the necessity to reinforce the borders of an evangelical identity not only at a theological but also, and above all, at a sociological level, was central to a political strategy in which an alliance with the Catholic party enabled him to confront a relativistic and pluralistic strand in Dutch society. People who have studied this extraordinary moment in the history of Holland know very well the difficulties in explaining this relationship. The relationship between the dialectic reinforcement of a religious identity and the successive alliances before the Second World War, and the post-war secularisation that practically erased all the symbols of the precedent religious based society after the war.

Second: the theological and philosophical level.

Leonardo enhances the notions of worldview and life-system: Catholicism, finally, is a particular worldview, and we need to assume our own worldview in order to understand it better. The worldview concept has recently enjoyed a very interesting revival among evangelicals: I am thinking of D.K. Naugle's³ book and the hot off the press title, *Naming the Elephant* by J.W. Sire.⁴ But all this debate, it seems to me, is concentrated on the possibility and value of a 'Christian' worldview that can confront other non-Christian worldviews (secular or religious, Islamic for example) in this post-modern context. So, the call of Leonardo De Chirico for a more Protestant worldview confronts us with a problem that is not simple: is it possible to build a Christian worldview? If this is possible, who will assume the responsibility, before the Lord, to say that there are absolutely no elements in Catholic theology that could be part of this Christian worldview? How do we confront ourselves with the history of Christianity? What would be the denominational identity of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and so on?

This brings me to my most critical remark on the necessity, underlined by De Chirico, of a system as a hermeneutic and epistemological presupposition which enables us to recognise, interpret and interact with Roman Catholicism. It seems to me that De Chirico does not explain why the evangelicalism he reviews in his interaction with Catholicism did not feel the need of an explicit and clearly-defined theological scheme. All the people quoted and reviewed by De Chirico (from Berkouwer to Stott) were and are famous evangelical theologians! A possible explanation is perhaps lodged in the desire of all these people to find a better plan in their interactions with Catholicism: this plan is very well formulated in the title of Blocher's book: *Lumière de l'Écriture Sainte*, 'The Light of the Holy Scripture'. Here is my suggestion. There is an approach to Roman Catholics not only in theological reflection, but also in bilateral dialogues, and above all in the witness of women and men to their Catholic friends. This has compelled the evangelicals of all times to leave their own Protestant identity and be understood as people who are engaged in hearing the Word of God.

It seems to me that the Bible is the great absentee in De Chirico's book, *even when he is obliged to recognise that the evangelicals he criticises use the Bible*: 'the GOS presentation of the doctrine of justification makes ample use of biblical language but adamantly avoids attempt to pursue a distinct systemic slant' (158). Obviously, I am not assuming a position on the American ECT dialogues in this article, nor am I discrediting

³ D.K. Naugle, *Worldview. The History of a Concept*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.

⁴ J.W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant. Worldview as a Concept*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

systematic theology. I am only suggesting that a biblically oriented approach helps us to assume a de-structured stance in our perspectives and relationships with the Catholic world. I believe that a careful study of the Bible could help us to find out biblical models for the interaction with a reality (RC) that we can assume is not ours, surely, but is not completely alien.

As an application of this proposal (a biblically oriented, not systemic, approach) I am taking the liberty of a little conclusive digression. In the missionary call to his disciples (Acts 1:8) Jesus had a strategic plan for the propagation of the gospel. We too, must adopt this plan (Jerusalem, Samaria and the ends of the earth) and that not only in geographical terms. Indeed, the three areas are charged with great theological significance⁵. Let us concentrate on the Samaritan context. In the four Gospels we can find three perspectives from which we can look at the relationships between the Jews and the Samaritans. There is obviously the Jews' perspective on the Samaritans and conversely the Samaritans' perspective on the Jews (see, for example, John 4). We can assume that these two perspectives were very systemic, and we can find out many evidences for that. There was, however, a third perspective on this relationship: Jesus' perspective. In this he systematically tried to pull down the ethnic and theological barriers. His aim was to put the question of his identity to the two theological communities. Later, in the book of Acts (ch. 8) we read that the mission among Samaritans revealed the very difficult problem of a strong syncretistic context. This led the disciples to look for new evangelistic strategies and a missionary creativity.

In conclusion, this seems to me a good biblical way to stimulate our reflection on the issues of confrontations and relationships with Catholic world. If we assume the Jews' perspective, sooner or later we could probably find Jesus inviting us to look at our (Samaritan/Catholic) fellow to listen and learn a strong lesson about our own hypocrisy (think about Jesus' account of the good *Samaritan*)!

I fear the proposal of De Chirico does not assume the perspective of Christian (evangelical) witness to the Catholic context. He does not discuss the consequences of his proposal, but probably this was not the principal aim of the book. We, however, can think about it and we can challenge the readers to confront Catholic people in the universities, at work, in the streets with a reformed-oriented, or dispensationalist-oriented approach. You will discover, sooner or later, that you are doing something that is very different from presenting the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I conclude this article-review with thanks to Leonardo for his deep and *stimulating* book. Personally, I am waiting for future and serious reflections, in Italy, on the issues of a Christian worldview, on the danger of denominationalism, and above all, on the honour we have to bear witness to the Gospel of Christ in a nation like Italy.

I would like to express my thanks to Maria Laura Ciccone for her help in translating this article.

⁵ A.J. Köstenberger, P.T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth. A biblical theology of Mission*, Leicester: Apollos, InterVarsity Press, 2001, p.130.