

# THEOLOGISCHE REVUE

116. Jahrgang

– Mai 2020 –

---

**Neuner, Peter: *Turbulenter Aufbruch*.** Die 60er Jahre zwischen Konzil und konservativer Wende. – Freiburg: Herder 2019. 310 S., geb. € 32,00 ISBN: 978-3-451-38414-1

Peter Neuner (professor emeritus of dogmatic and ecumenical theology at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Univ. in Munich) offers a historical appraisal of the meaning of the year 1968, not without disappointment for the legacy of Vatican II and the sixties in the Catholic Church of today. The focal point of his analysis is that particular year as the moment of condensation of different movements and counter-movements in the Churches (not only in the Roman Catholic Church) and in society: “Es gibt Perioden, in denen sich die Geschehnisse gleichsam wie im Zeitraffertempo bündeln, und 1968 gehört zu ihnen.” (14)

The book is structured chronologically-thematically in six chap.s. In the first chap. the author looks at the evenemential history of the students’ movements in the 1960s: the “Neue Linke” (new left) in Germany, the protests against the Vietnam war, the “revolutionary actions” in Germany but also in France and Italy, the developments on the other side of the “Iron Curtain” (especially in Czechoslovakia), and the “hippies” in the USA. The second chap. considers the new cultural orientations of the sixties: the Frankfurt School’s critique against bourgeois society, the role of the university in cultural and social analysis, the new perspectives on family and sexuality, and the “sexual revolution”. The third chap. synthesizes the role of the Second Vatican Council: the end of the “Catholic milieu” as separated from the rest of society, the ecclesiology of *communio*, and a new engagement of the Church in society.

Chap. four (85–201) is a key chap. in the book as it delves into “Church events in the long year 1968” with a look at the wider Catholic world: the conference of CELAM in Medellín (Colombia), the rise of theology of liberation and of political theology, and the assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala. For the intra-Catholic events, N. focuses on Paul VI’s encyclicals *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Sacerdotalis Coelibatus* (1967), and *Humanae Vitae* (July 1968); the “Katholikentag” in Essen (4–8 September 1968) which took place in the immediate aftermath of *Humanae Vitae*; new forms of political-theological engagement in Germany such as the “Nachtgebet” in Cologne, the conferences of the “Paulus-Gesellschaft”, and the short-lived, independent Catholic weekly *Publik* (1968–1971). Another section in this chap. is about the new ecumenical relations, and the controversies about doctrine in the Catholic Church: the *Dutch Catechism*; the stand taken by cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens in the early post-Vatican II period; the role played by Joseph Ratzinger’s book *Einführung in das Christentum* (1968) in his intellectual and ecclesial biography; the new *Credo* of Paul VI (June 1968);

the new developments in schools and universities, and Catholic students' groups; the rise of the "new ecclesial movements".

Chap. five addresses the movements of counter-reaction ("Gegenbewegungen") to the Catholic sixties: Lefebvre's anti-Vatican II traditionalism but also ecclesial conservatism in response to theology of liberation; the embattled transition towards a new understanding of the relationship between ordained ministry and the laity in the Catholic Church; the struggle of Catholic theology for academic freedom in the Church; the successes and difficulties of the ecumenical path.

In chap. six, dedicated to the conclusions, N. addresses the peculiarity of the council being applied "im Gegenwind" of secularization, and reflects on the growth in the responsibility of the laity in the Church, on the plurality of ministries and ecclesial and religious experiences in the global world of today, for a Church with new social responsibilities. New theological approaches (biblical exegesis, the question of God, historicity, anthropology) make of Vatican II a point of no easy return to the past, at least intellectually: "Die Kirche erscheint heute anders als noch in den Jahren des Konzils, und es ist offensichtlich, dass kein Weg mehr zurückführen kann zu ihrer damaligen Gestalt." (252).

This book is an important contribution to the historiography of the post-conciliar period towards a global appraisal of the trajectories of Roman Catholicism in the last fifty years. N. tackles 1968, naming the issue in a way that in other countries (e. g., the USA) would be "the sixties" and assigning to that year a periodizing role that in other countries and continents would be more spread out, before and after 1968. But the choice of focusing on that particular year is justified: not only in light of the universal iconic understanding of that particular moment, but also based on the facts of Church history that happened in close sequence, especially in Europe and in Germany but also in the Americas, with a very prominent role played by Catholics.

N. looks at this developing, newly globalized Catholicism from a German perspective, connecting the reception of Vatican II in one of the most important countries for the making of the council with developments taking place in the rest of the world, specifically North America and Latin America. Very interesting is the insider's look at the connections between the reception of Vatican II and the German political situation, especially the German-German relations in the sixties (Western and Eastern Germany), Soviet Communism and other Marxist movements in Western Europe, and the peculiar proximity between Catholic radicalism and political groups inspired to Marxist thought in the decade between the late 1960s and the late 1970s. An interesting, recent book by Guido Panvini cast a light on this issue for the Italian case (*Cattolici e violenza politica. L'altro album di famiglia del terrorismo italiano*, Venice 2014).

The most relevant part of the book from a global perspective has to do with N.'s rejection of a certain Vatican II revisionism which borders an anti-Vatican II sentiment. N. addresses and names the various forms of intra-Catholic resistance against the council. His negative assessment of the effects of the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI for the reception of the council is part of a worried assessment on the state of the council half a century later. N. offers an assessment that from a German perspective echoes what the late Italian historian Giovanni Miccoli (1933–2017) wrote in his book *La Chiesa dell'anti-concilio* (Rome/Bari 2011) about the attempt of neo-traditionalists to conquer Rome.

It is time to take a deeper look today, more than fifty years later, at some of the shortcomings of the vision of the council and the need of an *aggiornamento* of the conciliar *aggiornamento*. The fact is that Catholicism in the Western world today is divided intellectually on the effects of Vatican II: the

sixties and the year 1968 play a key role in the current revanchism against the council. The traditionalist critique is not able to mount a theological critique against the conciliar teaching per se, rather takes the shape of an indictment of the social and political consequences of the end of the Catholic milieu and the opening to the world. In this sense, N. is right in antedating historiographically in 1968 the beginning of the reversion to a pre-Vatican II theology: “Faktisch war 1968 der Beginn einer Kehrtwende zu einem Kurs der Restauration, der dann weithin die Pontifikate von Papst Johannes Paul II. und Benedikt XVI. prägte. [...] 1968 war ein Wendejahr auch in der Kirche, nicht nur im Sinn eines ungeduldigen Drängens, sondern vielleicht noch mehr im Sinn einer Gegenbewegung zu dem Aufbruch, den das Konzil gebracht und intendiert hatte.” (251) We should be grateful to N. for this book, especially when he affirms correctly that there is no way back to a pre-conciliar Church. But a look at 21<sup>st</sup>-century global Catholicism suggests that there could be a way forward for the future of the conciliar teachings that are different from the ones imagined by the early reception of Vatican II in Western Europe.

About the author:

*Massimo Faggioli*, Dr., Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova University, USA (massimo.faggioli@gmail.com)