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REL 1300

Course Project – Essay Option

Protestantism versus Catholicism: The Ever Evolving Nature of Church Growth

The battle between Protestant and Catholic versions of Christianity is long-waged; since the dawn of the Protestant reformation in the 16th century, both sects have changed dramatically in the way they identify themselves as well as in the way they identify each other. Hate between the two is a common sentiment, seen in literature and political commentary in regions around the world. However, it is notable that these sects have recently, in the post-WW2 era, found a way to coexist, especially in the United States. In this paper, I will focus on how these sects have moved closer together in their beliefs and practices, the advent of the 'non-denominational Christian church' that is sweeping the nation, and ultimately the shared mission that both sects have.

In his piece titled "Protestant-Catholic Tensions," John Kane notes that the tensions were indeed growing stronger as of the early 1950s. He notes "Protestantism's lack of vigor [as] the result of urbanism, the attack on fundamentalism by physical science, and the inherent weakness or strength of Protestantism – its right to protest by splitting off from the parent organization into numerous sects" (Kane 666). This establishes then that the multiple sects within the overall picture of Protestantism can be seen as either strength or weakness, and that regardless it is a significant part of the definitional difference between Protestantism and Catholicism. It is important to note the impact that situational factors can have on these Protestant-Catholic relationships in America as well as what the general history between the sects has looked like. Kane speaks at length on the "impression that Protestant-Catholic relationships in the United States are shifting in the direction of conflict" (Kane 663). He notes that the conflict between

Protestants and Catholics have "rarely been static" throughout the history of the United States; he explains that the pattern the conflicts seem to follow is a shift "from accommodation to conflict to a limited cooperation and back again as situational factors and the definition of these factors have varied" (Kane 663).

This rollercoaster shift noted by Kane is evident even from the early 1950s to now. To begin, we will establish the landscape of the tensions at the beginning of this span of time. Catholicism is, according to Kane, "predominantly an urban religion" and saw growth with the influx of central and southern European immigration at the beginning of the twentieth century (Kane 666). He argues that the structured element of Catholicism that came with schools and churches ready for newcomers was very inviting, and that even their policies against contraception contributed vastly to their growth. This establishes, then, that the tension at the beginning of the postwar era were there and relied heavily on the very structure of the two which allowed Catholicism advantages in growing much quicker than the often stagnant Protestantism.

In an effort to more empirically judge these tensions and their growth, Kane quotes a study made by Professors Berelson and Lazarsfeld of *Christian Century* and *America* for the beginning of the years 1939, 1944, and 1949. *Christian Century* is a _____ and *America* is a Roman Catholic publication of the Society of Jesus; both are claimed to "have wide circulation and appear influential within their respective fields" (Kane 568). Using the method of content analysis, this study found an "increase of items critical of the respective groups in each case over the period of five or ten years prior to 1949" (Kane 569). *Christian Century* almost tripled their critical items of Catholicism in 1949 and while *America* initially decreased their items critical of Protestantism initially, they had grown nearly five times by 1949. He uses this study to conclude that the tensions had either rose or at the very least grown more articulate.

It is established, then, that the 1950s began with heightened tensions between these two sects. However, despite these heightened tensions leading up to this period, it is worth noting that this period also saw the aftermath of World War 2, which ended in 1945. War is something that has historically brought the two sects together, giving them a common enemy to base their relationship on. Mark Wild, in his piece titled *'Urban Christianity' in the United States After World War 2*, notes that "the postwar period witnessed a sea change in American religious beliefs and practices; church attendance and membership rose to unprecedented levels by the late-1950s, traditional bases of religious authority weakened, and new forms of belief and practice proliferated" (Wild 645). What this suggests, then, is that not only does war provide a common enemy – it also provides the common struggle of rebuilding in its aftermath. It is worth noting, too, that Kane is writing in 1951, just before this surge in church attendance and membership for all denominations across the board happened. Both authors also point out the recent rising in scholarship not only on the church and its function in general but also specifically on the divide within the church and what it takes to overcome it.

Before progressing past this point in our timeline, it is important to understand that these tensions are based in more than church structure and theology. Kane explains that "Protestant objections to Catholicism are not entirely on religious grounds" and that as religion constitutes a way of life, its teachings very often bleed into areas including market values, political beliefs, and family structure, and this is where the majority of tensions lie between Protestants and Catholics (Kane 665). This struggle between religion and culture is touched on in Anthony Carroll's *Church and Culture: Protestant and Catholic Modernities*. In it, Carroll explains that the "question of how church and culture should relate to one another is not a new one" and that due to our "increasingly pluralistic and interconnected world with competing worldviews, the

church and culture relationship needs to be re-actualised for our time" (Carroll 163). This is important to keep in mind, because not only are these conflicts rooted in culture as much as they are rooted in theology, but they are also being pushed farther by culture. In other words, the shape of our current cultural landscape is encouraging these conflicts in ways they have not been subjected to in a long time.

For this phenomena, the response of the churches to racism and integration provides an excellent case study. Wild sifts through the varying yet limited studies done on this issue and found that "given the concordance between religion and community, Christians almost inevitably drew on their faith to understand and negotiate the ways that race structured social relations in the city" (Wild 648). His findings indicate that within this understanding of race structure was impacted by the specific denomination's view to where their community exists. The Catholic parish has a fixed nature: "Catholic churches often remained in 'transitioning' neighborhoods" and thus "became a site of contest and accommodation for modern race relations" (Wild 649). He notes that there was often social, cultural, and economic resistance to integration in these neighborhoods that paired with movements for racial justice and tolerance among the clergy. In other words, the church's response and understanding of the vent were directly influenced by the churches community to stay where it was and let the people shift accordingly. Protestant parishes, on the other hand, tended to migrate with their congregations; instead of staying in one place and letting the people shift, the parish would follow the people.

Another factor that has impacted this divide is the accelerated rate of immigration the United States has seen since 1965. The immigration of southern and central European Catholics to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century and the subsequent impact it had on Catholic growth was touched on earlier. According to Wild, his immigration happening from

1965 onwards is of a different nature. It has spurred a rise in smaller church communities that were independent and unattached from the larger sphere of politics within the Christian religion. In other words, non-denominational churches have seen their rise in concordance with the rise in immigration. Wild notes that despite the smaller impact the independent churches he describes as "smaller, ephemeral, and less socially active institutions" leave, they have seen growth due to the gravitation of immigrants to "institutions that resembled those they'd left behind, even if these institutions were disconnected from municipal politics" (Wild 650). Interestingly, Wild cites studies showing that the growth in these independent, evangelical, or otherwise Protestant city churches recently has been concentrated in immigrant communities. In these communities, "even traditionally Catholic populations have built Pentecostal and other Protestant churches" (Wild 650). All of this is to suggest that the heightened rates of immigration have complicated the landscape of Catholic and Protestant relations in ways that have required them to work together for the overall implementation of their faith and has also caused a growth in the communities of the latter.

In the wake of this re-actualization occurring in our cultural landscape of pluralism and interconnectedness, urban American Christianity has changed in its function from its original appearances. Notably, urban Christianity, regardless of denomination, is learning to work with governments and other agencies for the betterment of the people as a whole. Wild notes Sacramento as a case-study for this interaction; various denominations, including the modern non-denominational strand, of Christianity have engaged with municipal politics on welfare issues in this city. The Catholic Church has taken it a step farther; he notes that "the Catholic Church participated in an 'urban consensus' in which secular and religious leaders of various faiths worked together for the benefit of the city" (Wild 647). This is important because it shows

that causes besides mutual enemies, as we saw earlier with war, can bring these often conflicting sects together. This goes beyond the Catholic/Protestant divide, too; this examples alone shows secular leaders and religious leaders of completely different faiths working together for overall good, and there are more examples like it.

Ultimately, Kane's observed rollercoaster of relations between these two areas of Christian influence is proved here: from accommodation to conflict cooperation, even our recent history proves that these religious institutions have an extremely complicated and fast-evolving relationship. In this post-WW2 era, relations between the Protestant and Catholic institutions have shown the same pattern that their history has followed since the 16th century, though perhaps in a more expedited form. We are now in a phase of cooperation as the churches move together to stand against secular growth; whether it will last is hard to determine. Regardless, the modern, independent churches played a huge role in developing these relations and have helped both see that they do in fact share the same mission in the end.

Works Cited

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