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Comment on Melissa Wilde/2

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by Roberto Marchisio

Melissa Wilde's work provides interesting and innovative applications of Supply-Side theory to the recent history of the Catholic church. Before proceeding with sociological arguments, I will briefly consider a preliminary question. Exploring the development of the Second Vatican Council, the paper recalls a wide range of historical and theological questions of great interest. Undoubtedly, the Council convened in 1962 has deeply marked history of modern Catholicism. Quoting Andrew Greeley:

> there are two major tendencies in interpretation of the Second Vatican Council. The first, which currently dominates the Vatican, is that the council was an *occurrence*, a meeting of the bishops of the world who enacted certain reforms and clarified certain doctrines. This response and clarification were necessary but they did not drastically change the nature of the church. To find out what this occurrence meant, the 'council rightly understood" of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, one must go to the conciliar documents.

In other words, "Constitutions", "Declarations" and "Decrees" contained new ecclesiastical visions and new solutions to old problems. But in order to discuss Wilde's paper, we must consider the second interpretation cited by Greeley. This interpretation "holds that the council was a momentous *event*, indeed one of the most dramatic and important events in the history of Catholicism, a structure-shattering event which one could almost call a revolution" [Greeley 1998, 1]. In Greeley's construction, Vatican II is an event. And so it is for Wilde. She defines the Second Vatican Council "a watershed event because of the multitude of changes it brought about". The Catholic church was called to interact with the mundane sphere adopting new modalities, through adaptive processes and reforms which create and

stimulate a broad and difficult discussion. The Council changed the liturgy, encouraged ecumenical relations with "separated brethren", "sent nuns from their cloisters and into the world, relaxed dietary restrictions, confessional obligations, and service attire for the laity; relinquished the Church's claim of being the one true church; and officially renounced its claim to power in relation to nation-state" [Wilde 2004, 576].

Moving from this point, Wilde's paper develops an innovative and convincing sociological interpretation. It is well known that many sociologists have examined the extensive effects of Council reforms, however her study tries to understand how they came about. Thus, I believe that Wilde introduces theoretical innovations in the sociology of religion. My following considerations will discuss two major theoretical points.

Religious pluralism and catholic church's accommodation with the modern world: applying Supply-Side theory to Vatican II

Sociologists have long been fascinated with religious pluralism and its consequences for the religious landscape. In the traditional view, pluralism weakens faith; competition between multiple religious groups in the long term produces a disintegration of the religious field. Historical evidence, however, says otherwise. Rejecting this perspective, Supply-Side theory argues that pluralism (religious diversity) increases religious participation. Diversity therefore "causes religious institutions to feel more competition and work harder to attract members, by marketing their religion actively" [Wilde 2007]. Supply-side theorists interpret religious economies as analogous to commercial economies: they consist of a market made up of a set of current and potential customers and a set of firms seeking to serve that market. The fate of these firms depends upon aspects of their organisational structures, their sales representatives, their product and their marketing techniques. In this view, "religious diversity is the key independent variable because it determines the amount of competition religious leaders feel" [*ibidem*]. In Stark and Finke's terms, "religious pluralism is important insofar as it increases choices and competition, offering consumers a wider range of religious rewards and forcing suppliers to be more responsive and efficient" [Stark and Finke 2000, 201]. Appling Supply-Side theory to Vatican II, the goal of the entire work now becomes clearer. Trying to examine the ways in which competition directly affects religious leaders, this paper explains the differences among the four groups of bishops (including the three groups of progressives and the staunch conservatives from Italy and Spain) who participated

at the Council in terms of general openness to reform. The effect that competition has on religious leaders is the key causal relationship for explaining what kinds of bishops were more or less open to reform. On the basis of the measures currently employed to measure competition (pluralism, market share and regulation) Wilde says that bishops "who participated in Vatican II came from two types of religious economies – those in which the Roman Catholic Church was the predominant religion in the society numerically and legally (including Italy, Spain, Portugal and some Latin American countries), and those in which it was not (Northern Europe, North America, Africa and Asia)". And she therefore concludes stating that "for at least three of these four groups, this dichotomy seems to accurately predict the overall openness of the bishops at the Council. Bishops from monopolistic environments in Europe were, as the theory would predict, against accommodation with the modern world. Bishops from pluralistic or religiously free environments in Northern Europe, North American and missionary countries in Africa and Asia, most of which Supply-Siders would identify as competitive, were open to change" [Wilde 2007].

Religious organizations cannot be studied in isolation from their socio-cultural environments: theoretical weakness of Supply-Side theory

The re-reading of Vatican II in terms of Supply-Side theory – based on the relationship between degree of pluralism and openness to change and supported by a brilliant use of data – represents a convincing theoretical contribution. But Wilde's paper also contains a major theoretical innovation. Briefly, in order to understand, explain and ideally even predict the "organizational strategies" of religious leaders, Wilde thinks that sociologists must broaden their understandings of the factors that affect them. Supply-side theory, for example, "simply cannot explain why bishops from the *most competitive* situations were the *least* interested in marketing their Church to their constituents, but were instead focused on bettering relations with the leaders of other institutions" [*ibidem*]. In order to explain variation in bishops' organisational strategies at the Council, sociologists of religion must examine not only the *presence* of other religious institutions in an organisational field (the degree of pluralism), but also the *relationships between* those institutions. This is the case because like other organisations, religious organisations are affected by legitimacy concerns as much as they are the efficiency concerns pointed to by Supply-Side theorists. By combining organisational theorists' understandings of the effects of field structure with Supply-Side Theory's focus on the importance of religious diversity, Wilde is able to

accurately predict the variations in the bishops' organisational strategies. "As their fields became more structured, the bishops in them began to see Protestants not as competitors, who might take their members away, but as colleagues who had similar goals and interests, a process which only accelerated once the Council began. This shift explains why, ironically, religious leaders from the most competitive religious economies were the least focused on marketing concerns of the three progressive groups" [*ibidem*].

Some final considerations: the findings presented in Wilde's paper: *a*) demonstrate that Supply-Side theory seems to suggest a very original understanding of the event Vatican II; *b*) at the same time they reveal that some key concepts within Supply-Side theory need to be broadened. In particular, such concepts need to be incorporated alongside insights from organisational and economic sociology; *c*) finally, it highlights the role played by legitimacy concerns in shaping organisational strategies in different environments. This last remark has to do with cultural factors. Might it not be a plausible hypothesis (or a further step towards a general theory of religious change) to incorporate the symbolic dynamics through which different organisational cultures are framed in this kind of analysis?

References

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Who Wanted What and Why at the Second Vatican Council?

Toward a General Theory of Religious Change

Abstract: This paper explores the differences among the four groups of bishops who participated at the Second Vatican Council, with the goal of answering a simple, but key, sociological question about the Council: who wanted what, and why? In brief, I argue that in order to understand, explain and ideally even predict, the perspectives, interests and goals, or what I call organizational strategies, of religious leaders, sociologists of religion must broaden their understandings of the factors that affect them. Though Supply-Side theory recognises that the presence of other religious institutions (i.e. religious pluralism) has powerful effects on religious leaders, I argue that in order to predict not only whether religious leaders will be open to reform, but also what reforms they will prioritise, we must consider not only the presence of other institutions in a society, but the relationship between those organisations, especially whether those relationships are stable. This is the case because in stable fields, legitimacy concerns trump concerns about efficiency and growth.