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## SOME FRENCH REACTIONS TO THE COUNCIL OF TRENT\*

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In this age of growing ecumenicism, many scholars are turning to the history of the sixteenth century for a fresh examination of the origins of those ideas and institutions which continue to divide the Christian community. During these years of the widely publicized meetings of an ecumenical council sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church, many are turning specifically to the canons and decrees drafted by the Council of Trent for a fresh study of the extent to which they do or must divide Christians. But fully to understand these Tridentine decisions from an ecumenical perspective requires not only a knowledge of their texts and of the debates from which they emerged. It requires also a knowledge of the hostile reactions which they aroused among the many Christians who would not accept these decisions or the authority of those who promulgated them. An interesting spectrum of such reactions can be found among French criticisms of Trent published during the sixteenth century. Of these publications, three seem to me to demonstrate this proposition neatly: one by a distinguished French theologian, John Calvin; a second by a distinguished French juriconsult, Charles Dumoulin; a third by a prominent French lawyer and historian, Innocent Gentillet. These works have not been ignored by such experts on the historiography of Trent as Professor Jedin.<sup>1</sup> But I feel they merit a more detailed and more considered examination than they have as yet received. This paper sketches some of the lines upon which such an examination might proceed.

John Calvin's most extended comment on the Council of Trent was his *Acta Synodi Tridentinae cum antidoto*. It was published in 1547, after the first seven sessions of the Council, held under the sponsorship of Pope Paul III, had been completed. It was soon re-issued in a French translation, which was somewhat longer and earthier than the Latin original.<sup>2</sup> And it quickly provoked a spirited retort by the German Catholic polemicist Cochlaeus. The main purpose of Calvin's pamphlet was to demonstrate that the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent do not conform to the basic truths of Christian doctrine revealed in Holy Scripture. It took the form of a full reprint of texts of the decisions by these early sessions of the Council, with Calvin's opinions of each appended. From a purely polemical point of view, this method would seem to have certain obvious disadvantages. It makes accessible to one's readers not only one's own views but also those of one's opponents. But it was a method that Calvin was to use many times. Another example is provided by his refutation of Servetus, when there was even more reason, from Calvin's point of view, to suppress statement of the rare but dangerous

doctrinal position he was then combating. Such was Calvin's confidence in the irresistible logic of his own arguments, however, that it never seems to have occurred to him that his readers might find superior merit in those of his opponents.

Of the seven sessions upon which Calvin comments in this book, the one which absorbed by far the greatest amount of his attention was the sixth—at which the decree on justification and thirty-three related canons were adopted. Analysis of them occupies more than a third of the entire book. Since corollary to the doctrine of justification are elements of the doctrine of predestination, so commonly identified in the popular mind with Calvin, this should, perhaps, not seem surprising. Not, that is, unless one takes seriously the view of those interpreters of Calvin who hold that a rigid view of predestination was less of a preoccupation with him than with his followers.<sup>3</sup> Certainly in this particular pamphlet, however, it absorbed more of his attention than any other doctrine.

More incontrovertibly characteristic of Calvin are the sources he uses in this work. He depends above all upon Scripture, insists generally upon plain or literal readings of Scripture, and occasionally even hinges interpretations of its meaning on such fine points as the grammatical constructions of specific Scriptural passages. In his refutation of canon fourteen attached to the decree on justification, for example, Calvin's argument depends in part on the tense of a verb translated as "live" in a passage from "the prophet," apparently Habakkuk 2:4.<sup>4</sup> As a guide to authoritative interpretation of Scripture, Calvin is frequently willing to rely on such early Church Fathers as St. Augustine. In this work he makes particularly great use of Augustine's anti-Pelagian tracts, above all of the *Contra duas epistolas pelagianorum* and the *De prædestinatione sanctorum*.<sup>5</sup> Occasionally Calvin refers to a medieval figure like St. Bernard or a contemporary scholar like Erasmus. But he never depends very heavily upon their authority.

At first glance this work may seem to be a very unlikely one to study for any contribution to an ecumenical hope. This, indeed, seems to be the opinion even of those modern historians who enthusiastically claim Calvin to be one of the great ecumenical figures of the Reformation period. On close examination, their claim generally seems to be that he was irenic in his dealings with most other orthodox Protestants, but that he did not really consider seriously the possibility of reunion with Rome.<sup>6</sup> This latter view is certainly supported by a reading of the language he uses in this tract, particularly in the French version. While some may find a certain raw humor in his comparison of the Council of Trent to a diseased whore, his constant references

to the Tridentine Fathers as "horned beasts" with "stinking muzzles," his labeling of sacramental chrism as "stinking grease"—such wordings are hardly likely to soothe Roman Catholics or contribute in any very helpful way to contemporary ecumenical dialogue.

Yet Calvin was too careful in his thought and too concerned for theology to base his argument entirely on cheap name-calling. And a more considered examination of his reactions to the Tridentine decisions reveals a degree of agreement which, to me at least, is surprising. To some of the many Tridentine texts he republishes, his only comment is a simple "Amen." This is the accolade he accords, for example, to a number of the canons anathematizing Pelagian views and some anathematizing Antinomian views. To other Tridentine texts he registers a partial assent. Occasionally he objects to details of wording. Occasionally he objects to philosophical assumptions or logical distinctions which he claims a given text implies and to which he takes exception. In doing this, incidentally, he reveals himself to be no fool in matters of scholastic theology. In one place, he takes malicious delight in exposing Erasmus' ignorance on a point of theology.<sup>7</sup> Calvin even makes some concessions which have far-reaching implications. In discussing the fundamentally divisive Tridentine decree on the Scriptures, adopted at the fourth session of the Council, Calvin grants some authority to an unwritten apostolic tradition,<sup>8</sup> although not as much, of course, as would most Roman Catholics. It is these areas of consensus between Tridentine Catholicism and orthodox Protestantism, recognized by Calvin himself, which seem to me to merit particular attention from those interested in the history of ecumenicism. And his entire argument can be profitably studied by all who seek to understand the deep Protestant concern that all Christian doctrine be securely based on Scripture.

Reactions to the Tridentine tradition are not all of them religious, however. And neither were contemporary reactions to Trent itself. This is demonstrated by the other pamphlets I have selected for analysis. The more secular reaction to Trent finds its first great statement in a jurisconsult's brief by Charles Dumoulin, published in 1564, shortly after the definitive adjournment of Trent. It was prepared, perhaps at the request of the Protestant Admiral Coligny, as a guide to the French courts which would soon be asked to consider formal reception of the Tridentine decrees and their integration into the body of French law. Dumoulin was a man whose religious position is not easy to define. During his mature life he was certainly not a Roman Catholic, except, perhaps, for a short time before he died. But neither was he any orthodox sort of Protestant—although he flirted with Calvinism, Lutheranism, and Zwinglianism. And neither was he a mere amateur in matters of religion. His published collation or har-

mony of the gospels, whose printing the Calvinists tried to prevent and whose appearance was harshly condemned by a national synod of the Reformed churches of France, has nevertheless been judged by such an expert and relatively impartial an authority as Richard Simon to be a good piece of work—superior even to Calvin's own harmony of the gospels. Dumoulin was a man, however, whose position in the history of French law is beyond dispute. In an age of great French jurists, Dumoulin was among the greatest. His monumental studies of the legal customs of the Paris area influenced generations of French lawyers and servants of the crown.<sup>9</sup> Religion and law combined to make Dumoulin deeply suspicious of the temporal claims of the Roman Catholic Church, and this suspicion erupted in a predictably hostile way in his brief on the reception in France of Trent. It was issued in French, under the title *Conseil sur le fait du Concile de Trente*, and also issued almost simultaneously in Latin, in a slightly longer version. Like Calvin's critique, it became the target of a Catholic polemical retort drafted by a rising young jurist named Pierre Grégoire, and released after a delay of some twenty years.<sup>10</sup> And it got Dumoulin into serious trouble with the French government, from which he was extricated only with the help of extremely powerful friends.

The announced intention of Dumoulin's brief was to persuade French courts that the Tridentine decrees were profoundly subversive of both church traditions and regal rights, and should consequently not be received in the kingdom. Its argument is denser and its style less popular than those of Calvin's treatise. And in form it is somewhat more analytical. Dumoulin considers in turn the convocation of the Council, attendance at the Council, the Council's dogmatic decrees, its reform decrees, and, finally, its provisions for promulgation of the decrees. In each of these aspects of conciliar activity, Dumoulin finds legal flaws. The convocation of the Council violated procedure dictated by natural law, since the defendant, the Pope, called it and appointed its presiding officers, and since the plaintiffs, the German Protestant princes, were neither summoned nor allowed to attend.<sup>11</sup> It also violated precedent, since all early ecumenical councils were convened by emperors and secular rulers.<sup>12</sup> Attendance at the Council similarly violated natural law since the delegates all were sworn enemies of the plaintiffs,<sup>13</sup> and it again violated precedent, since there were no official representatives from such important Christian countries as France at certain sessions.<sup>14</sup> As for the dogmatic decrees, Dumoulin argues that a number of them corrupt truth and promulgate heresy, as a study of Scripture and certain specified Church Fathers reveals.<sup>15</sup> This part of his argument is comparatively perfunctory. With more persuasiveness, he argues that many of the reform de-

crees cannot be accepted in France because they violate laws of centuries' standing, both in Christendom generally and in France particularly. In developing the latter part of this argument, Dumoulin is at his best, since he could draw on his own magnificent knowledge of French legal precedents.<sup>16</sup> But even this part of his argument is not documented in great detail. At several points, he contents himself with citing more substantial works of reference, including such works of his own as the monumental Commentaries on the customary laws of Paris.<sup>17</sup> The brief ends with Dumoulin's legal objections to the Council's submission of its decrees to the Pope for final promulgation.<sup>18</sup>

Underlying Dumoulin's entire argument is the assumption that in all matters affecting the temporal organization of human society, the state must take precedence over the church. Consequently in all matters pertaining to the organization and discipline of the French clergy, French law must take precedence over canon law or papal dictate. Equally basic to Dumoulin's entire argument is a general if not altogether consistent prejudice in favor of tradition and against innovation. He normally shares that conviction so widespread among lawyers of the common law tradition, that customary ways of doing things are legal and right. And this conviction goes far to explain his determination to resist acceptance of the Tridentine reforms, even at some real personal risk.

Here again the scholar concerned with history as a background to ecumenicism might not expect to find much of value. Dumoulin's language, if not as salty as Calvin's, is nonetheless strong and insulting. Yet Dumoulin's reaction epitomizes a persisting concern among non-Catholics, that the Roman Church is tampering with the structure of society in ways which are hardly necessary to its essential purpose. And the forms which this concern has taken then and since merit, I feel, extended attention.

Reactions to the Tridentine decisions were not all as doctrinaire as Calvin's and Dumoulin's. One of greater suppleness came from Innocent Gentillet. Again this reaction was in character. Gentillet was a lawyer, active in southeastern France late in the century, in the 1570's and 1580's. He became involved in practical politics, as a Protestant member of the *Chambre mi-partie* of the Dauphiné, a position requiring not only legal skill but also a tact rare in that day of raging religious passions. This activity led him to an interest in the theory of politics, which was expressed in a number of writings.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the best known of them is his *Anti-Machiavel*, an extended refutation of the Florentine political analyst's cynical *Prince*. But his political interests also led him to an examination of Trent, and

explain much of the form in which it is cast. This examination is titled *Le bureau du Concile de Trente*. It was published in 1586, in French and in Latin, was soon translated into German, and was later republished in at least two further Latin editions.<sup>20</sup> It was dedicated to Henry, King of Navarre. Its formal purpose was twofold: first to support the king's announced willingness to submit himself in matters of religion to a truly "free" general council; then to refute an argument this announcement had provoked from Catholic polemicists, that such a council had already been held, at Trent.

At the beginning of his book, Gentillet admitted that he was no theologian and therefore could not present authoritative arguments against the theological validity of the Tridentine formulations. But he did claim to be an expert both in law and in history.<sup>21</sup> And he argued that the Tridentine decrees, before being accepted as French law, not only had to pass the test of theological truth, but also had to meet certain standards of legal and historical acceptability. For Gentillet these standards were established, not, as for Dumoulin, primarily by French tradition, but above all by the internal history of the Christian church. In a way he was trying to meet Catholic polemicists on their own grounds, by arguing from church tradition. His evidence comes consequently less from Scripture and the early Church Fathers than in Calvin, and less from French legal history than in Dumoulin. It comes more from canon law. He uses Gratian extensively. And he also uses certain other collections of the canons and decrees of early councils, and even of early popes. Many of these councils were not, in the opinion of most canonists of our day, true ecumenical councils, representing the entire Christian church and possessing a peculiarly impelling authority. They were rather regional, national, or even provincial synods of the clergy, such as the synods of Carthage in Africa of the second to fifth centuries, the synods of Arles in France of the fourth century, the synods of Toledo in Spain held throughout the medieval period. If this be a technical flaw in Gentillet's method of argument, he was not aware of it, for his book is filled with references to decisions by councils of this character.

In form, Gentillet's book resembles Calvin's. He proceeds from session to session of the Council of Trent, recording and sometimes quoting decisions, and then registering his reactions. Unlike Calvin, he does not try to discuss all the decrees issued in the period he surveys. He rather discusses only those to which he takes exception, in company with most orthodox Protestants and many Gallicans. Unlike Calvin and Dumoulin, moreover, Gentillet goes well beyond the actual texts of the decrees and canons adopted. He discusses in more detail the ecclesiastical and secular intrigues enveloping certain of the Council sessions. He summarizes many of the orations delivered to

the Council, appending his own acid comments on some of them. He discusses some of the Council's modes of operation. In this he reveals a greater sensitivity than his predecessors to the historical context in which the Tridentine decisions were reached. And he thus points out ways which were later to be followed by many of the really important historians of Trent.

Gentillet also reveals a considerable sensitivity to French political developments of the period in which he was writing. When he discusses the Tridentine decrees on the episcopal powers of excommunication, for example, he adds a lengthy aside, arguing that the recent excommunication of the King of Navarre by Pope Sixtus V is illegal and invalid.<sup>22</sup> And he tacks on to the end of his historical analysis of Trent proper, an extended refutation of two recent petitions which had been presented by the French clergy to King Henry III, requesting that the Tridentine decrees all be received as a part of French law.<sup>23</sup> In this, of course, he was carrying on Dumoulin's campaign, but in a more specific context.

In Gentillet, we also finally find a sixteenth-century French critic of Trent who is at last somewhat irenic in tone—who realizes, for example, that Catholics do not like to be called “papists,”<sup>24</sup> and that language of this sort does not encourage dialogue. But Gentillet remains deeply troubled by the impact of Trent upon the country in which he lived. And he is particularly disturbed by the ways in which issues raised by Trent upset the course of political events in his country, especially around the courts of Navarre and of the Valois king. This fear of intervention in the course of political events is, of course, as we Americans recently had cause to observe, yet another concern among non-Catholics which makes difficult the advance of religious reconciliation.

In summary, these sixteenth-century critics of the Council of Trent feared that its decisions would limit the religious authority of Scripture, would alter the structure of secular society, and would trouble the course of human events. In this, they articulated fears which are still with us, fears which must be faced with honesty by men of good will.

\* This is a slightly revised version of a paper read at the joint session of the American Society of Church History and the American Catholic Historical Association in Philadelphia, December 29, 1963.

1. Hubert Jedin, *Das Konzil von Trient: ein Überblick über die Erforschung seiner Geschichte* (Rome, 1948), pp. 44, 67-69, 71-73. Cf. Generoso Calenzio, *Esame Critico-Letterario delle Opere*

*riguard-anti la Storia del Concilio di Trento* (Rome & Turin, 1869), pp. 2-3, 5-6.

2. A convenient copy of the Latin edition can be found in Baum, Cunitz, and Reuss (ed.), *Ioannis Calvini Opera*, VII, pp. 365-506. The French edition, titled *Les Actes du Concile de Trente, avec le remede contre la poison* (1548), is somewhat less accessible. I have used the copy in the Folger Shakespeare Library, and all my references are



- to this edition, hereafter cited as Calvin, *Actes*.
3. I would not, however, argue that Calvin's precise definition of his doctrine of predestination was quite as rigid at this stage in his career as it was among his most devoted followers. In fact a comparison between his largely favorable reaction to Trent's condemnation in canon 23 attached to the decree of justification, of an extreme doctrine of the perseverance of the saints (Calvin, *Actes*, pp. 278-280), and the affirmation of such a view of perseverance by the Synod of Dort, head 5, article 6, leads me to suspect that Calvin himself might not have been able to subscribe completely to this most quintessentially Calvinist definition of predestination.
  4. Calvin, *Actes*, pp. 233-234: "Le Prophete ne dit pas seulement que le juste vit de foy, mais qu'il vivra." Cf. Habakkuk 2:4 ". . . but the just shall live by his faith." (Italics mine.)
  5. Luchsius Smits, *Saint Augustin dans l'oeuvre de Jean Calvin* (Assen, Louvain, Paris, 1957-58), II, pp. 88-91, identifies and tabulates these references.
  6. See particularly W. Nijenhuis, *Calvinus Occumenicus* (the Hague, 1959), p. 247 and *passim*. Cf., however, John T. McNeill, "Calvin as an Ecumenical Churchman," *Church History*, XXXII, 4 (Dec. 1963), especially pp. 390-91.
  7. Calvin, *Actes*, p. 333.
  8. *Ibid.*, pp. 109 ff.
  9. The fullest biography of Dumoulin is Julien Brodeau, *La vie de Maistre Charles du Molin*, in Charles Dumoulin, *Omnia quae extant opera* (Paris, 1681, 5 vols.), I, pp. 1-60. For text of synodical condemnations of his *Collatio et unio quatuor Evangelistarum*, see John Quick, *Synodicon in Gallia Reformata* (London, 1692, 2 vols.), I, p. 67. For analysis of this work, see Richard Simon, *Histoire critique des principaux commentateurs du Nouveau Testament* (Rotterdam, 1693), pp. 772-74; cf. p. 745 for comparison to Calvin's harmony.
  10. Charles Dumoulin, *Conseil sur le fait du Concile de Trente; Consilium super actis Concilii Tridentini*; Pierre Grégoire, *Response au Conseil donné par Charles du Molin sur la dissuasion de la publication du Concile de Trente en France*, republished in Dumoulin, *Opera* (1681 ed.), V, pp. 347-64, 365-93, 395-444. Dumoulin's brief is hereafter cited as Dumoulin, *Conseil*. Harold Bauman of the University of Oregon first called this work to my attention. For authoritative comment on it, see Victor Martin, *Le Gallicanisme et la réforme catholique* (Paris, 1919), pp. 70-73.
  11. Dumoulin, *Conseil*, articles 5 and 6, re the Pope's role; 7 and 8, re the role of the German Protestant princes. In arguing that the plaintiffs had not been summoned (article 7), Dumoulin may well have meant that he felt they were not properly summoned. Or perhaps he was simply misinformed.
  12. *Ibid.*, article 6.
  13. *Ibid.*, article 9.
  14. *Ibid.*, article 18.
  15. *Ibid.*, articles 26 and ff.
  16. *Ibid.*, articles 38 and ff.
  17. *Ibid.*, article 64. Cf. articles 58, 59, 92 (French version), references to others of Dumoulin's works.
  18. *Ibid.*, article 99.
  19. For biographical sketches, see articles in *Nouvelle biographie générale*, XIX, pp. 948-50; Eug. and Em. Haag, *La France protestante*, V, pp. 247-48.
  20. *Ibid.* I have used the Folger Shakespeare Library copy of the 1586 French edition; hereafter cited as Gentillet, *Bureau*. For another recent analysis of this work, which concentrates attention on Gentillet's remarks about French participation in Trent, see Philippe de Félice, "A propos d'un Concile: le Bureau du Concile de Trente par Innocent Gentillet," *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire du protestantisme français*, CVIII (1962), pp. 185-191.
  21. Gentillet, *Bureau*, sig. iii verso.
  22. *Ibid.*, pp. 279 ff.
  23. *Ibid.*, pp. 329 ff. For a discussion of the drafting of these petitions, see V. Martin, *op. cit.*, pp. 219-29.
  24. *Ibid.*, p. 10. Gentillet's relative irenicism is also noted by de Félice, *op. cit.*, p. 191.