

Review Article: Quick and Modeling the Difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism¹

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Abstract

Oliver Quick was in his day an important Anglican thinker. He was interested in pinpointing where the fundamental systemic distinction between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism lay. He located the difference in Catholicism's emphasis on the religious *act* and its consequences and Protestantism's emphasis on the *word* and its interpretation. Quick's analysis proposes an approach to the various features of the two.

Keywords

Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Anglicanism, grace, sacramentality, tradition

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The difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism is to be determined in a systemic, not piecemeal, fashion. If what is fundamental can be identified, other issues will fall into line.²

During the last century several suggestions have been made from different Protestant perspectives by scholars as diverse as Ernst Troeltsch, Karl Heim, and Paul Tillich.³ These have been largely forgotten, as has the model proposed by the Anglican scholar Oliver Chase Quick (1885–1944), a preecumenical figure who considered confusion, not definition, an enemy of peace.

Quick was a professor of theology at the University of Durham, Canon of Durham Cathedral, and from 1939 Regius Professor at Oxford University. He taught shortly before J. I. Packer and John Stott were theological students at Cambridge and Oxford, and he was surely known to them since he was well published and representative of the middle-of-the-road Anglican orthodoxy of his time.⁴ Like his Anglican colleagues, he wove together a threefold cord of Scripture, tradition, and apostolic succession to establish continuity in Christianity and confront modernity. This perspective explains his appreciation of Roman Catholicism’s approach to questions of church and history, rather than the bare bones of the Reformation *solas*.

Following Quick, we propose that the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism concerns how the relation between the invisible and the visible is construed. We will suggest how Quick helps describe this relation and give two illustrations relating particularly to Vatican II.

I have found Quick’s model stimulating and consider that it does not necessarily lead to the conclusions he drew from it, particularly concerning the superiority of Catholicism as a perennial expression of Christianity. His argument was published early in his career in a monograph, *Catholic and Protestant Elements in Christianity*.⁵

² Leonardo De Chirico, *Same Words, Different Worlds* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2021), 98–99.

³ Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1912); Karl Heim, *Spirit and Truth: The Nature of Evangelical Christianity* (1929; repr., London: Lutterworth, 1935); and Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (London: Nisbet, 1955).

⁴ On Quick, see John K. Mozley, *Oliver Quick as a Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1945), and, more recently, Alexander J. Hughes, *Oliver Quick and the Quest for a Christian Metaphysic* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁵ Oliver C. Quick, *Catholic and Protestant Elements in Christianity* (London: Longmans, Green, 1924). Quick wrote other major works on the sacraments (1927) and on the Apostles’ Creed (1938); see “Oliver Chase Quick (1885–1944),” Project Canterbury, <http://anglicanhistory.org/england/ocquick/>.

I. *The Argument*

Following Troeltsch, Quick recognized the limitations of proposing “ideal conceptions attaching themselves to the real.” Nevertheless, these are useful for understanding historical realities.⁶

Quick contrasts the “genius” of the Catholic and Protestant religions in analyzing faith as historical, the doctrine of the sacraments, religious knowledge as consciousness and desire, and the kingdom of God.

In Protestantism, origins are expressions of the relation between the visible and the invisible realms. Catholicism accentuates development in the context of the living church. Protestantism also accentuates inward experience over forms, whereas in Catholicism uniformity of outward form allows for greater inward variation. Quick refers to John Henry Newman as a case of development being more important than the source. Quick judges that the early church primarily pointed not back, but forward and up. This is an oversimplification. However, it points to a problem with the Protestant approach. If the incarnation is the source of the Christian religion, historical criticism presents difficulties. Development, on the other hand, refers to the power of the Spirit in the life of the church. Quick considers Protestantism to be essentially conservative and Catholicism more dynamic in its genius.⁷

Quick illustrates this systemic contrast of the reference to the source or the development by two contrasting models: either that of words and their meaning or that of acts and their intentions. This also explains why preaching is central in Protestant experience, whereas reenactment and rite is in Catholicism.

A word is declaratory and expresses an already-existing meaning. It refers naturally to something prior by pointing back to it. The hearer understands by looking back at what is meant. An act, on the other hand, is purposive and causes a new event, with an external effect. The observer looks at what has been done in terms of whether the act has effected the intention. Quick gives the Mass as case in point:

In a Latin mass the words have come to have the value of acts, and the acts the value of words; but the total effect is to stress the whole rite as an act. This is exactly congenial to the particular point of view from which Catholicism regards the sacrament. It is the fact that something is being done which it desires to stress.⁸

⁶ Quick, *Catholic and Protestant Elements*, vi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9–20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

The systemic difference lies in this. Protestantism refers to something *said* and Catholicism to something *being done*. Both seek to make real the relation of the physical world and the spiritual, the earthly and the heavenly, and the actual and the ideal. In the geographical gap between the visible and the invisible realms either the word or the act mediates.

Roman Catholicism relies on the primacy of the act in an unfolding chain of events, as acts express a purpose. A gracious intention gives value to the temporal process and so justifies the ongoing development of tradition in history. An illustration: a stone thrown in a pond creates ripples until the energy of the impact is exhausted. Catholic religion has emphasized the importance of developments from the beginning. Completed reality comes through development; the original is not the best representation of the thing. This emphasizes the importance of the continuity of tradition, the march toward a higher expression of the spiritual, and the importance of the church as guardian and cause of historical progress.

Protestantism proposes the word model as a witness to the invisible. It looks back to primordial grace as a word refers to its meaning. A word presents a different configuration of the temporal and the eternal. Protestantism refers not to the development but to the source, which is why the divine inspiration of Scripture is all important. Without it Protestantism is a lost cause because the source is lost. The truth of Scripture is timeless and eternal even when expressed temporally.⁹ To repeat the illustration: from a Protestant point of view, the important thing is not the impact or the ripples that flow out, but the one who threw the stone. In a radical way this is what Karl Barth was getting at when he said that when revelation lands in history it leaves a crater; the only analogue of revelation is further revelation. Christ stands above the church, and grace does not develop in and through it.¹⁰

Quick is, of course, careful to say that word and act are not opposed. A later development of their complementarity was made in speech-act theory. Words do have effect as well as meaning; acts do have meaning as well as effect. Word and act can pass into each other, something attested by the Hebrew *dabar*.¹¹ However, the important point is where the *primacy* lies and how it shapes the ethos of the two systems.

If a model is to be considered valid, it must have general application to detail as well as describing the big picture. The difference between Catholic continuity and development and Protestant discontinuity and return to

⁹ Ibid., 107–16.

¹⁰ De Chirico, *Same Words*, 102–4.

¹¹ Quick, *Elements*, 27–28.

the source is seen in the nature and grace structure of the first and the creation–fall–redemption discontinuity of the second. However, does it apply more generally? We think it does and propose to illustrate with reference to the sacramentality of the church and to Scripture and tradition.¹²

II. *The Sacrament as Enacting Grace*

The view of the role of the church that developed in the Middle Ages proposed that the church substituted for the absence of Christ. The church is a historical actualization, in different form, of the incarnation. It becomes an instrument of revelation; grace is known and received through the church and its offices.

1. *The Sacramentality of the Church*

The sacraments of the church in Catholicism are enacted in a self-referential fashion. The church itself is sacramental, and grace flows through its sacramental acts. Their nature is kingly and priestly rather than prophetic. John Calvin added the third office of Christ to the two traditionally recognized offices to describe the ministry of the confessing church. Union with Christ is different from Christ's continuing presence in the body of the church.

In his book *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, Edward Schillebeeckx calls Christ the primordial sacrament and the church the sacrament of the risen Christ. Christ and the church are two sides of the same reality, like the head and tail of a coin. The church as a signifier is bound to Christ, and Christ is bound to the church as the thing signified.¹³ In this way, it actualizes his redemptive presence.¹⁴

The Vatican II Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (§7) on the church has a realistic-materialistic notion of the church as body of Christ:

In that Body the life of Christ is poured into the believers who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to Christ who suffered and was glorified.

¹² What follows reworks some elements from Paul Wells, “Catholicisme romain, protestantisme et histoire,” in *En toute occasion, favorable ou non* (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 2014), 381–91.

¹³ Schillebeeckx uses Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *signifiant* (signifier/expression) and *signifié* (signified/content); see Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, trans. Paul Barrett (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 13–17, 47–49, and Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1915; repr., New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 79–81.

¹⁴ De Chirico, *Same Words*, 101–2, on Karl-Heinz Menke, *Sakramentalität: Wesen und Wunde des Katholizismus* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2012).

In the sacred rite (of baptism) a oneness with Christ's death and resurrection is both symbolized and brought about Really partaking of the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with Him and with one another. ... In this way all of us are made members of His Body.¹⁵

French theologian Daniel Bourgeois comments, "In the Catholic perspective sacramentality is not limited to the system of signs that accompanied the founding acts of the covenant between God and man. ... The system of signs that has accompanied the people of God is not a closed system." The church and its life are "a living, moving system of meaning, rich in dynamism and an inexhaustible capacity to express the truth of the acts of the covenant."¹⁶ There is a constant renewal of the initial act of redemption in the church and in its structures that works grace.¹⁷

One striking example of this is the Mass as a bloodless re-presentation of the one sacrifice of the cross. In the *ex opere operato* what is represented is done by the act itself. Through historical acts in the material world, the spiritual world is made present in a real way.

As a sacrament of redemption, the church is the vehicle uniting Christ and humanity. She is also the link between the eternal and the temporal in the acts she performs. Through the Church's acts nature is elevated to grace.

2. Church and the Kingdom of God¹⁸

Grace is also enacted through the church as the presence of the kingdom of God. *Lumen Gentium* states of the church (§5),

When Jesus, who had suffered the death of the cross for mankind, had risen, He appeared as the one constituted as Lord, Christ and eternal Priest, and He poured out on His disciples the Spirit promised by the Father. From this source the Church, equipped with the gifts of its Founder and faithfully guarding His precepts of charity, humility and self-sacrifice, receives the mission to proclaim and to spread among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God and to be, on earth, the initial budding forth of that kingdom. While it slowly grows, the Church strains toward the completed Kingdom and, with all its strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with its King.¹⁹

¹⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, §7, Vatican, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

¹⁶ Daniel Bourgeois, "Essai d'analyse théologique de l'intégrisme catholique," *La Revue réformée* 43.3-4 (1992): 41.

¹⁷ The idea of the re-presentation of the original act in modern Catholicism owes not a little to the thought of Johann Adam Möhler, *Symbolik oder Darstellung der dogmatischen Gegensätze der Katholiken und Protestanten nach ihren Öffentlichen Bekenntnisschriften*, 8th ed. (1832; repr., Mainz, 1871-72); translated into English by S. B. Robertson in 1843. This work influenced theologians like Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar and no doubt Cardinal Newman.

¹⁸ Quick, *Elements*, chap. 5.

¹⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, §5.

Despite the discrete formulation, the church is the instrument, “the initial budding forth,” by which the spiritual penetrates the physical world and gradually extends its presence. This idea, originating in Augustine, proposes that Christ’s reign on earth is already real in the church. The church has the mission of continuing God’s kingdom acts. So, the reality of this world takes its place in the other world.²⁰ In Marxism we find a similar structure as in the grace-enacted sacramentality of the church.

For Protestantism, the church does not continue the incarnation, which was completed by the resurrection and Christ’s presence in heaven. For this reason, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are “visible words” witnessing with the preached word to a once-for-all meaning. The efficacy of the sacrament is not in the *act* itself but in the *understanding* of it that unites the believer to Christ through the instrumentality of the word and Spirit.

The teleology is also different. For the Protestant, the coming of the kingdom is not about “supernature” mysteriously invading and transforming nature, moving it up Aristotle’s chain of being. It concerns righteousness that cancels sin in the divine declaration of justification, forgiveness announced in the word, and completion in Christ.

III. *Church Tradition as Revelation*

Roman Catholicism and its emphasis on the central role of the church as the bridge in history between this world and the world to come implies the development of dogma. Continuity is assured by the authority of the historical institution of the church: Christ through the apostles to their successors. The ultimate justification for the development of tradition alongside Scripture is that the church prolongs the incarnation under the guidance of the Spirit. Thus, it regulates faith not only by Scripture but also by tradition. “Sacred tradition” carries forward the word of God, as the constitution *Dei verbum* of Vatican II (§9) states:

Sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything

²⁰ This idea, secularized, gave rise to socialism, where the party rules over all life through its members. This affinity partly explains why Catholic or Orthodox nations have been bastions of Marxism-Leninism. Cf. Quick, *Elements*, 97.

which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.²¹

The church enacts teachings to further what is taught by Scripture itself. Gabriel Moran, in his book *Scripture and Tradition*, states that by 1500 tradition called “constitutive” had gained autonomy in its own right.²² Its teachings received by the church are normative for faith. Among their number, we can mention such teachings as purgatory, transubstantiation, Mariology, the primacy of the pope, and prayer to the saints.

As to the origin of those traditions recognized by the church as authoritative, various proposals have been made: the pope speaking *ex cathedra* as Christ’s representative on earth, church councils, oral tradition since apostolic times, or all three. The question is where the ultimate authority lies between Scripture and tradition. Rome’s position has not greatly varied over the centuries. Yves Congar bluntly stated that the Roman position recognizes the insufficiency of Scripture alone. Georges Tavard, in his book *Holy Scripture or Holy Church*, says, “Scripture and the Church are mutually inherent. Scripture has an ontological primacy and the Church an historical primacy, for it is only in its receptivity that men become aware of the Word.”²³

Historically both Scripture and tradition come from the church. The church passes on Scripture from one generation to another, supplementing its meaning. Tradition is essentially the interpretation of Scripture plus teachings that complete its statements. The Council of Trent responded to the Reformers’ *sola Scriptura* by affirming the authority of Scripture and tradition.²⁴ Congar comments, “By affirming, in effect, the normative value of apostolic traditions not contained in Scripture, the Council made tradition a formal principle other than Scripture, if not autonomous from it.”²⁵

As *Dei verbum* states at the end of the section quoted,

²¹ *Dei verbum*, §9, Vatican, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

²² Gabriel Moran, *Scripture and Tradition: A Survey of the Controversy* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963); cf. Robert B. Strimple, “The Relationship between Scripture and Tradition in Contemporary Roman Catholic Theology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 40.1 (1977): 22–38.

²³ Georges Tavard, *Écriture ou Église? La crise de la Réforme* (Paris: Cerf, 1963), 41.

²⁴ Cf. “Fourth Session: Decree concerning the Canonical Scripture,” *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, in *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 2:79–80.

²⁵ Yves M.-J. Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions* (Paris: Fayard, 1960), 1:188. From a conservative Catholic perspective, see Florent Gaboriau, *L’Écriture seule?* (Paris: FAC-éditions, 1997).

It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.²⁶

Just as revelation is given by a divine act, so also is tradition in the church. Thus, the incarnational presence of God presses on to the fullness of redemption. Divine grace comes to fruition with the church playing a vital and active role.

Conclusion

The issue is the relation of eternal and temporal reality. In Protestantism the model of the word in relation to its meaning shows how it is essential to return and conform to the once-and-for-all origin to confess the authority of divine truth, "the faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). That means cutting away the traditional historical foliage that blocks the route.

The Roman Catholic model of the act and its intention leads to completed acts that express the intention more perfectly. This is why in Catholicism reform movements are suppressed and eradicated, as in the case of Jan Hus and John Wycliffe, if they cannot be incorporated and redirected as new traditions in harmony with the whole. The New Testament accent on fulfillment, the fullness of time, the end of the ages, and the once-and-for-all of the incarnation is obscured. A theandric sacramental river flows on uninterrupted until the ocean of eternity is reached. On its way to finality the *totus Christus* envelops the whole world.

Behind these two visions of how God acts through the church, is there not ultimately a different conception of the God who reveals himself, a conception that expresses a metaphysically grounded essentialism or a relational personalism based on a saving knowledge of Christ?

²⁶ We will not enter into discussion about the interpretation of "partim/partim" at the Council of Trent. Many Protestants have now adopted the notion of the insufficiency of Scripture, as illustrated by the discussions at the 1963 Faith and Order Conference of the World Council of Churches in Montreal on *Tradition and Traditions*. A current consensus between modernist Catholics and liberal Protestants would affirm that Scripture is the first link in the Christian tradition.