

# Catholic Epistemology and the Faculty of a Catholic University

by Kenneth W. Kemp  
Department of Philosophy

## 1. Introduction

What should characterize the faculty of a Catholic university? The answer to that question is determined by the nature of a Catholic university and the role of the faculty in such a university. Hence, the prior questions: What is the ideal at which a university must aim if it is to be genuinely Catholic?<sup>1</sup> What kind of a faculty must such a university have?

A university, as an institution, has many facets. It is an employer, a user of resources, and a neighbor to private citizens, among other things. But it is none of those things as a university. By its essential nature, it is an institution dedicated to research and teaching, the creation and transmission of knowledge.

What about the creation and transmission of knowledge could make it appropriate to call it a Catholic university? What makes it appropriate to apply adjectives to a university at all? There are various considerations which might make such a description appropriate. Urban universities are so characterized because of their location.<sup>2</sup> Historically black universities are distinguished by their traditional constituency. Comprehensive universities are distinguished from research universities by their mix of teaching and research activities.

None of these is an exact model for the description "Catholic university." A university cannot be Catholic in virtue of its geographical location. Since American Catholics, unlike American Blacks, have never been the victims of segregation, there was never a need for Catholic schools analogous to the need which led to the establishment of what are now called historically Black colleges.<sup>3</sup> The only legitimate reason to have a Catholic university, or to call a university Catholic, is because the university has a commitment to a Catholic vision of education. It must be one in which, in the words of Pope John Paul II, "Catholicism is vitally present and operative."<sup>4</sup> This vision has three components.

The first is a commitment to the integration of the insights of the various sciences into a unified comprehensive perspective on the world and man's place in it.<sup>5</sup> This is an important component of Catholic education but there is nothing that is peculiarly Catholic about this. There is no reason why a thoroughly secular institution (such as St. John's College in Annapolis), or even an avowedly atheistic one, could not also adopt this component of the Catholic educational vision.

The second component is its Christocentric focus.<sup>6</sup> The traditional presence of a crucifix in every Catholic classroom should not be like the presence of a horseshoe above the cottage door. It is neither a superstition nor a merely traditional adornment. It is rather a

symbol of a deep reality. This reality, too, is not a distinctively Catholic component of education. Though the crucifix itself is a symbol which Latin rite Catholics do not share with all Christians, the Christocentric commitment which it represents is something we share with Orthodox, Protestant and other Christian institutions.

The third component of Catholic education is the composite theory of knowledge that I will call "Catholic epistemology."<sup>7</sup> This component, when fully spelled out, is uniquely Catholic. It is this component that will be the focus of this paper.

Understanding this epistemology is central to understanding what it is to be a Catholic university. Professor Fred Freddoso, in discussing the Catholic character of Notre Dame once said, "It's clear that Notre Dame is Catholic. And it's clear that it's a university. What's not so clear is whether it is a Catholic university." It is at least arguable that every university should aim at integration. It is undeniable that every Catholic institution should be centered on Christ. Since there's nothing uniquely Catholic about the first and nothing unique to the university about the second, a focus on the third is an appropriate way to focus on the question of what it means to be precisely a Catholic university.

The significance of this topic to the question of what should characterize the faculty of a Catholic university is obvious. If the purpose of a university is to pursue and transmit knowledge in a distinctively Catholic way, then it is necessary for faculty to operate under an epistemology which, as a minimum with respect to their own intellectual disciplines, is consistent with the epistemology which is constitutive of the very nature of the institution. *Nemo dat quod non habet*.

## 2. Epistemologies, Catholic and Liberal

Care with respect to the faculty's commitment to Catholic epistemology is particularly important in contemporary America because of the prevalence here of another—"liberal"—epistemology which Americans drink in with their mothers' milk but which is fundamentally at odds with Catholic epistemology.

I call the first epistemology "liberal" with some reluctance. There are, unfortunately, two confusions which the term might create. The liberal epistemology I have in mind has nothing to do with the relative importance at a university of liberal and vocational programs. Nor does it have anything to do with liberal or conservative accounts of the proper role of government and the private sector in the solution of various social problems. The liberal conception I have in mind has as its focal principle that free inquiry is the only way to get at the truth. This commitment to free inquiry, for liberal epistemologists, is a consequence of two prior beliefs.

The first presupposition of liberal epistemology is the denial that there is any such thing as revealed truth. Some liberals—all atheists, for example—are willing to put the point just that bluntly. More genteel liberals—some liberal Protestants, for example—resist such a straightforward denial, but their epistemological practice is indistinguishable from that of their more openly secularized colleagues.

The second presupposition is that institutions, traditions, authority, and the like are to be treated with some suspicion. They are, on the whole, more likely to reinforce entrenched old errors than to promote the discovery and promulgation of new truths. I leave this proposition vague deliberately, as different liberals will flesh it out in different ways.

This epistemology is now dominant in America's secular universities and many of its historically Protestant ones. It is fast taking over America's Catholic institutions as well.

Its classical defender is John Stuart Mill. His argument for the necessity of free inquiry<sup>8</sup> is that, with regard to any position on any issue, there are three possibilities—either it's correct, or it's partially correct, or it's completely wrong. If the suppressed position is correct, we risk missing out on the truth. If it is partially correct, suppressing it prevents us from perfecting the generally correct view on points with respect to which it is still wrong. Even if it's completely wrong, suppressing false rival views leads us to a shallow and uncomprehending acceptance of the very truth we are supposed to be defending. No matter which it is, Mill continues, suppressing it has bad consequences.

This argument has flaws which must be confronted even by those who think that only natural reason can lead us to the truth. It is true that one can learn much from a careful consideration of how erroneous views can be refuted.<sup>9</sup> Biology students, for example would benefit from reading some creation science. Creation science arguments are mostly bad, but in ways that are sometimes subtle enough to trip up the half-prepared. For example, "How can evolutionists say that the coelacanth evolved into amphibians millions of years ago since that species of fish can still be found in the waters of the Indian Ocean?" Students who can't answer that question don't understand evolution very well.

Unfortunately, facilitating the propagation of false views has bad effects as well as good ones, so, even on Mill's principles, merely pointing out the good effects of free discussion is not enough. We must also consider the seriousness of the countervailing bad effects. University sponsorship of (or even official neutrality towards) certain views will surely leave many students believing that there is a real possibility that the false views are true. So, it is with good reason that we do not hire racists, Holocaust-deniers, creation scientists, UFO enthusiasts, circle-squarers, and the like.

Catholics, however have weightier reasons for rejecting Mill's arguments, and liberal epistemology in general. The central tenet of Catholic epistemology is that there are two fonts of human knowledge.

The first font is the natural powers of man as an intellectual being—reason and observation. There is much that we can know by natural reason alone (including, for example, the existence of God and the basic principles of morality). Indeed, there are some things that we can know only by natural reason (e.g., how our natural and social worlds work). This far, Catholics and liberals can agree.

The second font is direct revelation from God, found in Scripture and Tradition and authoritatively interpreted by the Catholic Church. God has revealed to us certain truths which are necessary to our salvation and which we can know best (or only) by study of Scripture and Tradition under the guidance of the Church. We do not need free inquiry to know these things. Indeed, given our fallen nature, free inquiry might even harden us in our errors. These truths are, thanks to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, things which we can know with certainty. They are also too important to be left to the whims of academic fashion. Recognition of a supplementary route to the truth makes a genuinely Catholic university very different from a Millian one. The principles of this two- font epistemology, therefore, stand in direct contrast to the principles of liberal epistemology. While liberal epistemology, with the reservations raised above, may hold for some kinds of knowledge, it does not hold for all.

Fortunately, we can get the benefits of exposing our students to views we know to be false because they are inconsistent with the teachings of the Church without hiring faculty who accept those views. First, our students are already exposed to attacks on the Church's teachings from numerous sources outside the college. Second, one does not have to be an advocate of, say, racism, in order to introduce students to the things racists say. It is not only permissible, but appropriate, to read and discuss attacks on the Church's teachings on, say, racism or euthanasia. The point is to do this in a way that ensures that students are shown the inadequacy of such positions.

### 3. General Practical Implications

The certainty which, according to Catholic epistemology, we can have about some matters of faith and morals is not based on consensus; it is based on authority. The truths at issue will sometimes be controversial, as are the truths that the use of contraceptives is morally wrong and that it is wrong to aim at the killing of innocent people in warfare. It is precisely because they are controverted, however, that they must be emphasized in Catholic education.<sup>10</sup> But a Catholic university must be committed to more than just the substantive truths of the Catholic faith.

A Catholic university, properly so called, must also be committed to a Catholic understanding of the means of attaining knowledge — to a Catholic epistemology. The more a Catholic university claims to be a teaching university, the more it must take care that the intellectual work of its faculty exemplifies for its students, in its methods as well as its conclusions, a Catholic intellectual life. Its success as a Catholic university can be measured by the extent to which it succeeds in communicating to them the truths of the Catholic faith and cultivating in them habits of mind that include respect for Scripture, Tradition, and the magisterium. Students who cannot distinguish the teachings of the Church from mere personal opinion (their own or others') or who learn only the principle "Challenge authority!" are not epistemologically Catholic. They have not acquired a Catholic education.

Obviously, scholars who have no sympathy for such an epistemology will be able to do little to contribute to, and will often detract from, the mission of the institution.

#### 4. Practical Implications:

##### Distinctions among Disciplines

Since Catholic universities are committed to an integrated vision of the intellectual life, they must be careful not to be overly compartmentalized as they ask the question to what extent a full and explicit commitment to Catholic epistemology is an important feature in the faculty of each of the institution's various academic departments. Nevertheless, clear differences in degree of importance can be distinguished.

Such a commitment has the most relevance for theology and philosophy since these are the disciplines which, more than any others, are responsible for guiding the work of integration.<sup>11</sup> But the commitment is not relevant to each for exactly the same reasons.

It is relevant to theology both with respect to the theological method and with respect to the subject matter of theology. Theology, understood methodologically, is interpretation of revelation, reflection on it, and application of the resulting insights to contemporary issues and problems.<sup>12</sup> In order to be Catholic, of course, such work must be done in a way that respects the authority of the bishops. It would be subversive of the mission of a Catholic university to approach theology in any other way.<sup>13</sup> Although it uses the full array of human intellectual tools, its foundations are neither attained nor secured by natural means. In this respect, it is different from all other intellectual disciplines. Understood in terms of its subject matter, theology is an account of God and of man in relation to God.

It is relevant to philosophy with respect to the subject matter only. Philosophy, methodologically, is the attempt to answer on the basis of reason and experience alone those questions which do not require a special method (such as experimentation, field work, or archival research) for their solution. Consequently, it is done in the same way by atheists and by Catholics. But because philosophy includes within its subject matter both ontology (including questions of the existence and nature of God) and morality, doing philosophical research, more than working in most other subjects, runs the risk, in principle, of generating plausible arguments which conflict with revealed truths. The Catholic philosopher who believes, for example, that he has a valid argument that homosexual acts are sometimes morally permissible or that it is sometimes permissible to kill innocent people, would know (being a Catholic) that he had made a mistake somewhere and would be committed (as a philosopher) to determining where that argument had gone wrong.

The significance of Catholic epistemology would also not be small for all those faculty engaged in vocational programs.<sup>14</sup> Business, journalism, engineering, education, and similar programs are committed to teaching students certain skills. Such knowledge gives power and those to whom power is given must receive moral as well as technical training. All vocational education must, then, attend to moral issues. Business ethics, journalistic ethics, etc. are, in a good Catholic education, not just frills, but part of the integrative component. They must be taught in a way that is consistent with Catholic social teaching.

Theoretical social sciences (such as economics) are less likely than their practical counterparts (such as business administration) to raise moral questions. But they do touch on them. In addition, to the extent to which they presuppose a particular anthropology, particular care must be taken to ensure that currently popular academic views are not given priority over revealed truth.

History is another area where conflict is, in principle, possible. Catholic doctrine includes both claims about what has happened (both the Old and the New Testaments have historical components) and about what cannot happen (the indefectibility of the Church and the infallibility of its teaching<sup>15</sup> declare that certain events are not possible). Many such matters are so manifest as to be beyond controversy (e.g., the existence of Pontius Pilate). Others are matters with respect to which there is no probability of the discovery of historical counterevidence (e.g., the resurrection of Lazarus or of Christ). But there are matters on which faith and possible historical evidence could conflict—e.g., whether Pope Liberius promulgated an Arian creed.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the prominence of the myth of conflict between science and religion propagated by J. W. Draper and A. D. White at the end of the last century and perpetuated by credulous anti-religious propagandists down to our own day, the natural sciences as a body of knowledge are rather less likely than other disciplines to come into conflict with the truths of the Catholic faith.<sup>17</sup> The appearance that things are otherwise arises as a result of certain historical facts. Two in particular are illustrative. The first is the attempt of certain Aristotelian scientists in the seventeenth century to buttress their anti-Copernicanism by appeal to Scripture combined with Galileo's overestimate of the force of his own arguments and his relish for ridiculing his opponents. The success of the Aristotelian traditionalists in securing an ecclesiastical condemnation of Copernicanism is well known, though little understood. The second is the disposition of many nineteenth and twentieth century scientists to claim that modern science is, not just methodologically but metaphysically, committed to a deterministic naturalism inconsistent with free will and miracles. That modern science does not rule out either of these is manifest,<sup>18</sup> but the claim that they are particularly at risk of conflict continues to be a source of confusion to many.

The unlikelihood of doctrinal conflict between theology and natural science pursued with scrupulous fidelity to its method, however, does not rule out the possibility of social conflict. The willingness of some seventeenth century Aristotelian scientists to mix science and theology has its counterpart in the unwillingness of many contemporary scientists to separate their science from their metaphysics. (The prevalence of determinism in psychology and of materialism in biology are two examples.) Catholic universities must be aware of, and resistant to, not only these confusions at the level of theory, but the focus on the technical, to the exclusion of the ethical, at the level of practice.<sup>19</sup>

At the furthest remove from possible conflict with truths known on the basis of revelation is mathematics.

## 5. Practical Implications:

### Faculty Hiring In a Heterogeneous Society

If a Catholic institution, by its very nature, is committed to a Catholic epistemology, is there any place for non-Catholics on the faculty of such an institution? Institutions for whom their Catholic identity is to be something more than an attempt at product differentiation or an attempt to protect a market niche will have to recognize that there are many bright and personable academics who will not be able to contribute adequately to the institutional mission of teaching in a way that passes on to the next generation a Catholic epistemology. Nevertheless, just as it would be naive to think that every scholar with a Catholic baptismal certificate would, or even could, contribute to the project, it would also be mistaken to believe that no one who has not become a Catholic could make such a contribution.

In the hiring of faculty (nominally Catholic as well as non-Catholic), two questions must be asked. The first is how far the epistemology under which they operate deviates from the Catholic epistemology that must inform the intellectual life of the institution.<sup>20</sup> The second is how much these points of difference make to the subject to be taught. The second question was explored in the preceding section. Let us now turn to the first. In Section 2, Catholic epistemology was explicated by contrasting it to an avowedly secular, liberal epistemology, with little attention to the epistemologies that might animate the work of other religiously-minded academics. Now we must confront that question. To what extent do non-Catholic religions share the tenets of Catholic epistemology? To what extent do they reject it?

We can distinguish a variety of groups, at progressively greater remove from Catholic epistemology in their views on revelation and on institutions (in particular, of course, the Church).

At least remove are, of course, Old Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and such non-Orthodox Eastern Churches as the Armenians, Assyrians, and Copts. These, like all Christians, share with Catholic epistemology most of the canon of Scripture, the principle that Tradition is normative, and acceptance of the authority of at least some of the ecumenical councils. They agree also in their recognition of the teaching authority of the Church, disagreeing only with respect to the nature of Papal authority.

At somewhat greater remove are traditional Protestants. The principle of sola Scriptura, based as it is on an attempt to make a sharp distinction between Scripture and the rest of Christian Tradition, is an important difference in principle, though such Protestants are perhaps more constrained by Tradition on a variety of issues than their principles require of them. No less important is their rejection of the teaching authority of any institutional church in favor of private interpretation of Scripture. Fundamentalist principles of Biblical interpretation place them at somewhat greater remove from Catholic epistemology than other traditional Protestants, however much they may be more inclined than others to agree with Catholics on, say, Christology.

Liberal Protestants, as well as some liberal Christians who have remained within the Catholic Church, deviate more seriously from Catholic epistemology and are particularly likely to accept innovation in areas (such as sexual ethics or the reality of original sin) where traditional Catholic doctrines clash with doctrines approved by the culture. In areas where Catholic principles continue to have some hold, however, e.g., in the importance of attending to the needs of the poor, such scholars, although they can contribute little to the inculcation of Catholic epistemology can surely contribute to a Catholic university's battle against, say, excessive individualism.

Jews also, despite differences with Catholics over the content of revelation, share not only Catholic epistemology's concept of revelation, but a deep respect for tradition as a corrective to dangerous current trends.

Muslims, Baha'is, and Mormons all accord special status to the teachings of Christ. But all three also accept as revealed certain books which the Church rejects as not only of merely human origin, but as containing an admixture of error. Baha'is and Mormons, in addition, introduce the concept of on-going revelation, which places them, in principle, even further from the tenets of Catholic epistemology than are the Muslims. Nevertheless, all share with Catholic epistemology a commitment to the concept of revelation as a supplement to the intellectual tools that are part of human nature.

Hindus, Buddhists, and others from religions outside the monotheistic triad share recognition of the value of a tradition and at least (with the exception of some Buddhists) some concept of God.

With each of these, therefore, there is a basis for seeing some commonality with Catholic epistemology. To the extent that such commonality, and not points of disagreement, is formative of their academic work, they can contribute to the mission of a Catholic university.

The rejection of tradition that characterizes freethinking theists, and the one-font epistemology of agnostics and atheists is so completely at odds with that of Catholic epistemology that it is hard to see how they would be able to contribute to any significant extent to the project of passing that epistemology on to the next generation.

## 6. Conclusion

Catholic universities are not, and should not be, indistinguishable from the liberal universities that are so prevalent in our secular culture. They are not, and should not be, secular universities which add something, whether that something be a religious studies department, a theology department, or even (generic human) values. To be Catholic requires an institutional commitment to the truths of the Catholic faith. Some of those truths say something about how knowledge is possible. And since the acquisition and transmission of knowledge (by all legitimate means) is the proper function of the university, being a Catholic university is transformative, not only at the level of auxiliary services (admissions policies attentive to the underprivileged, spiritual ministry attentive

to sacraments and vocations, etc.) but at the very intellectual heart of the university enterprise. A Catholic university must be informed by a Catholic epistemology.

## References

1. I will leave to one side the important question, more legal than philosophical, as to the proper formal or institutional link between a Catholic university and the institutional Church. This subject, which Cardinal Pio Laghi has called "the ecclesiology of the Catholic university" is nevertheless an important concern both of Laghi (see "Trust, Cooperation, and Dialogue," reprinted in *Origins*; 177-179) and of Pope John Paul II (cf. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (hereafter, ECE) 27: "Every Catholic university ... has a relationship to the church that is essential to its institutional identity.")
2. That does not, of course, preclude their seeking to be "urban" institutions in other senses as well.
3. That is not to say that there was no need for Catholic schools at all. The need was not, however, that American Catholics would be refused admission to certain schools (as was the case in pre-Emancipation England or Soviet Russia). It was rather that in other schools, including public schools, the education offered was a Protestant education.
4. ECE 14.
5. Cf. ECE 15: "In a Catholic university, research necessarily includes the search for an integration of knowledge." In §20, this comment is extended to teaching as well.
6. Cf. ECE 21: "A Catholic university pursues its objectives through its formation of an authentic human community animated by the spirit of Christ."
7. This component is not explicitly mentioned in *Ex corde ecclesiae*, but is implicit in that document's attention to the interplay of faith and reason (e.g., §17: "a specific part of a Catholic university's task is to promote dialog between faith and reason...") and to the teaching authority of the Church (cf., e.g., §13, which cites as an essential characteristic of a Catholic university "fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the church").
8. Cf. *On Liberty*.
9. See my "Discussing Creation Science," *American Biology Teacher*, 50 (1988) 2: 76–81.
10. Cf. ECE 32.
11. Cf. ECE 20.
12. Cf. ECE 29.

13. Cf. ECE 27: "the institutional fidelity of the university to the Christian message includes a recognition of and an adherence to the teaching authority of the church in matters of faith and morals."

14. Cf. ECE 49, which mentions "professional training that incorporates ethical values and a sense of service to individuals and to society."

15. Lumen Gentium 39.

16. Even in such cases, of course, what is involved is not a purely historical judgment. Whether the creed of the Third Council of Sirmium was Arian, for example, is partly a theological judgment. Whether a particular act meets the standards which an infallible pronouncement must meet is a legal one.

17. J W. Draper, *History of the Conflict between Religion & Science* (1875) and Andrew Dixon White, *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896). For critiques of these works, see David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, 'Beyond War & Peace: A Reappraisal of the Encounter between Christianity & Science'. *Church History* 55 (1986): 338-354, and James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in Great Britain & America, 1870-1900* (1981).

18. This realization did not wait on the development of the non-deterministic interpretation of quantum mechanics. It is already clear in C. S. Peirce, *The Doctrine of Necessity Examined: The Monist*, 2 (1892): 321–337.

19. ECE 18.

20. That there must be such an institutional unity is suggested by ECE 13, which cites as an essential characteristic of a Catholic university "a Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such." Its relevance to hiring is brought out at ECE 27, which notes that "non-Catholic members are required to respect the Catholic character of the university."