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Contemporary Jesuit Epistemological Interests

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Apart from an orientation to and interest in the discernment of spirits as laid out in St Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, there does not exist a Jesuit epistemology as such. Compared to the numbers of Jesuit systematic theologians, scripture scholars, metaphysicians, and ethicists, there have been few Jesuit epistemologists.² In metaphysics, Jesuits have been Thomist or Suarezian, even Platonist. In ethics, they have ranged from proportionalist through deontologist to virtue ethicist. No similar distinctive Jesuit presence is to be found in epistemology.

On the other hand, from its earliest years, the Society of Jesus has been committed to education, not just in theology and philosophy but also in the humanities and the sciences. That commitment has led it into wide engagement with different ways of knowing, to a diversity of interpretations of the world, human beings, and God.

Accordingly, the focus of this article is not Jesuit epistemologists as such, but epistemic aspects of Jesuit ventures: it attempts an overview of how Jesuits have grappled with issues of knowledge in theology, philosophy, and the sciences, roughly since the second Vatican Council (1962-65). It ranges across how they have viewed the epistemic status of experience and perception, the role of theory and interpretation, the appropriate

¹ Thanks to Stephen Schloesser SJ whose suggestions have greatly improved this paper. His 'Jesuit Hybrids, Catholic Moderns, and Futural Pasts', in *For the City & the World: Conversations in Catholic Studies and Social Thought (Lane Center Lectures 2005-2010)*, ed. Julia Dowd (University of San Francisco Press, 2010), pp. 114-141 gives a fascinating overview of aspects of the history of Jesuit scholarship. Thanks also to Gerry O'Hanlon SJ and Conall O Cuinn for helpful criticism.

² Bernard Lonergan, Vincent Potter, and Patrick Heelan are among the notable few.

ways to link theology and the sciences, the nature and sources of moral knowledge, the role of the Spiritual Exercises and particularly the discernment of spirits as an epistemic guide to spiritual wisdom, the importance of judgment leading to commitment to action, and the cognitive potential of different religions and cultures.

HUMANISM: ALESSANDRO VALIGNANO SJ vs. POPE BENEDICT XIV

Traditional and pre-Vatican II Catholic theology and philosophy in which the Jesuits, like other Catholic clerics, would have been trained, tended to be based on premises from scholastic philosophy that were heavily *a priori*, or derived from the authority of Scripture and magisterium. While critics at the time and subsequently saw scholastic philosophy and ecclesial authority as objectionable, the real problem was the apparent rejection of, or perhaps more precisely, the attempt to limit and control science and experience.

From the foundation of the Society of Jesus in 1540 to its suppression in 1773, and again from its restoration in 1814 to Vatican II (1962-65), its members had a well-worked out philosophy (usually Thomist or Suarezian) and were thoroughly grounded in post-Tridentine systematic theology. Few theological uncertainties were to be found among them; and, epistemologically, certainty was a virtue in that era. At the same time, their strong faith-commitment and conviction that the Christian Church was the indispensable means to salvation made them strongly missionary, leading them to bring the gospel to the peoples of Asia and the Americas. However, in fulfilling that mission, they were also humanist. Their Renaissance-based humanism led their missionary zeal to take seriously the language and cultures of the peoples they sought to evangelize, a stance most associated with Alessandro Valignano SJ (1539-1606). They did not just seek to ‘know’ those peoples, in the sense of knowledge as acquaintance; they also sought to understand how different peoples interpreted the world. In short: their knowing of their target people and intended converts came to involve cognitively embracing their culture, which included knowing how those people knew and interpreted their experience.

A significant instance was the Jesuit missionary project in China from 1600 to 1773.³ As early as Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), the Jesuits interested themselves in Confucianism, as a natural quasi-religion. They also took Chinese culture seriously in a way that many of their European contemporaries did not. The contrast in that period between the Jesuit and the Franciscan approaches to evangelizing the Chinese is vivid testimony to Jesuit humanism. This divergence in culture distanced the Jesuits from the dominant Roman view, leading to the clash between Rome and the Jesuits in the Chinese rites controversy. The fact that the pope who finally decided the issue was Benedict XIV (1740-58), perhaps the most enlightened pope between the Council of Trent (1545-63) and Vatican II, indicates the depth and seriousness of the clash: it was no mere misunderstanding.⁴

The clash over rites and religion reveals an underlying epistemological divergence. The Jesuits believed there was important knowledge to be had through immersing themselves in Chinese culture, partly because some of it would probably lead them to discover how to mediate Jesus Christ to Chinese culture, and partly because Chinese culture seemed of value for its own sake as a way of interpreting experience, the world, and human nature. Their opponents deemed such inculturation unsound, thinking non-Christian ideas would dilute the gospel message, making it harder for the Chinese (and the Jesuits themselves) to know who Christ was and where he was to be found. They judged that the results of such inculturation could not possibly be epistemologically authoritative: it was bad enough for the Jesuits to argue that inculturation was good, it was worse to suggest that it was necessary to the point that the gospel could not be communicated to the Chinese except through Chinese culture.

VATICAN II: SIGNS OF THE TIMES

The conventional view of Vatican II is that it was an ‘opening-up’ moment for the Catholic Church. From a condemnatory mode of rhetoric going back to the 16th century

³ The Jesuits didn’t confine themselves to “high” culture. In the 17th century, they also studied the cultures of North American natives, as the multivolume *Jesuit Relations* shows. For important papers on these topics, see John W. O’Malley et al, eds, *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540-1773* (University of Toronto Press, 1999).

⁴ In 1939, as war with Japan engulfed China, the newly-elected Pope Pius XII rescinded the ban on the Chinese rites.

Council of Trent, continued and heightened from 1815 to the 1950s, and a generally fearful and defensive stance towards the modern world, the Catholic Church suddenly began to express a cautious openness, even a willingness to listen and learn.

The view that Vatican II represents a revolutionary moment for the Catholic Church is, no doubt, rather crude in its sweeping generalization, but it has sufficient accuracy to let it stand. As Vatican II recedes into the past, historians are increasingly able to discern the continuities with previous developments, such as Pius XII's opening doors to Catholic scripture scholarship and liturgical reform.

At the time, it was amazing to hear an ecumenical council of the Catholic Church, not merely accept the principle of freedom of religion, but also commence its document about the Church's stance towards the modern world as follows: 'The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age ... are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ'. It continues: 'the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which people ask about this present life and the life to come... We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics ... True, there is a growing exchange of ideas, but the very words by which key concepts are expressed take on quite different meanings in diverse ideological systems'.⁵ Such a note had never been struck before in official Church documents, not because the pre-Vatican II Church had been opposed to such ideas but because it hadn't thought them important.

Where the Church had seen its role as that of handing on the message of Christ, presenting and teaching Catholic doctrine clearly and precisely, it now seemed to want to listen also: it was not abandoning its traditional role, but it was also expressing a novel epistemological openness. The novelty lay not in prelates and priests being open to new ideas and insights, but in their taking such openness to be of value for its own sake: first, as an intellectual, cognitive or epistemic virtue and second, as directly relevant to effective evangelization and communication of the Christian faith.

⁵ See http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html: Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 1 and 4.

In the extract quoted from *Gaudium et Spes*, the points of epistemological interest include (i) the claim that anything belonging to the range of human experience or interest is relevant to understanding the Christian message, so must be cognitively appropriated by the Church, (ii) the requirement that the Church identify and interpret ‘the signs of the times’, (iii) the importance of being receptive to the questions and concerns of the people of the age, and (iv) the difficulty of understanding where humanity is situated on its historical journey, given major cultural change, technological revolution, ideological clashes, and even shifts in linguistic and conceptual meaning.⁶

VATICAN II: STABLE TRUTH, DEVELOPING TEACHING

From an epistemological perspective, the most significant moment at Vatican II may have come in Pope John XXIII’s opening address to the council. The pope, probably reflecting the influence of the *nouvelle theologie* or *ressourcement* theology of de Lubac, Congar, Chenu, Rahner, and Balthasar, created space for fresh inquiry and new insights by stating: ‘The deposit or the truths of faith .. are one thing, while the mode in which they are enunciated, keeping the same meaning and the same judgment, is another’.⁷ No truths of faith would be denied or rejected. But new formulations could be developed for those truths, fresh interpretations were to be encouraged, traditional truths could be deepened or further elaborated, and maybe new truths emerge.

The pope’s comment illustrates something important about human cognition. Epistemological concern is not confined to coming to know new things or recognize previous. It also embraces (a) exploration of what we know in part, since most knowledge is partial, (b) deeper understanding of what is already known to be true, (c) application of what we know to situations not hitherto encountered, with the result that we may

⁶ It is doubtful if many bishops at Vatican II had read Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962), published the year the council assembled. But the views expressed in the passage quoted from *Gaudium et Spes* reflect a similar sense of cultural and semantic transformations.

⁷ John XXIII, Opening address to Vatican II, n 6: ‘Est enim aliud ipsum depositum Fidei, seu veritates .. aliud modus, quo eadem enuntiantur, eodem tamen sensu eademque sententia’. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council_lt.html

understand that truth in new ways, and (d) translation of the language within which the truth is expressed into other formulations.

JESUITS BEFORE VATICAN II: NEW PATHS TO THEOLOGY

The change at Vatican II had been in the making since the 1920s, and Jesuits had been prominent among its makers. To describe what they contributed would take several books; here I merely point to the epistemological dimensions.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a palaeontologist and cosmologist who, influenced by Henri Bergson's *L'Évolution Créatrice*, grappled with the challenge that evolution appeared to present, not directly to formal Catholic doctrine, but more to the general network of ideas and concepts that made up Catholic tradition(s) on anthropology. By the late 1930s, he was in trouble with Church authorities for his openness to Darwinian theories of evolution, who did not share his sense of the importance of approaching the evolutionary aspects of anthropology scientifically. Given the importance of evolution, however, somebody had to knock forcefully on the Church's door, even though it might produce a "Shoot-the-messenger" reaction. Teilhard stood in a long Jesuit tradition of openness to new knowledge in knocking loudly, and in accepting the personal sacrifices involved in remaining faithful to science.

Henri de Lubac SJ's *Catholicisme: les aspects sociaux du dogme* (Paris 1938) was significant in proposing the Fathers of the early Church, rather than the medieval scholastics, as offering a more fruitful epistemological model for developing an up-to-date theology. His later work promoted this essentially epistemological '*ressourcement*' and was influential at Vatican II.

In the years after Vatican II the term 'theological reflection' was often heard. In many theologates, students were encouraged, not simply to learn the tradition and familiarize themselves with the Church's doctrines, but also to 'do' theology themselves. Professors bred under the older scholastic system would have wondered if this notion was not merely an empty rhetorical flourish. However, the *ressourcement* movement could point to the Fathers as providing but an example of theological praxis, since they were bishops

and pastors developing theological thought in response to pastoral need. They modeled how to do theology, in a way responsive to the concerns of the people of their times.⁸

In the 1930s, Karl Rahner's doctoral dissertation treated epistemological issues in Thomas Aquinas from a perspective influenced by Kant, Heidegger, and another Jesuit, Joseph Maréchal. His dissertation-director Martin Honecker judged it unacceptably Heideggerian.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Jesuits such as the Frenchmen de Lubac and Yves de Montcheuil and the German Alfred Delp, all involved in active resistance to the Nazi regime, became keenly aware of the social and political dimensions of human existence as sources of knowledge for a more adequate theological anthropology. Montcheuil was influenced by Maurice Blondel's focus on the primacy of action, and on what might be called the importance of knowing-by-doing. Scholastic philosophy's notion of experience was increasingly seen as too narrowly Aristotelian or Humean in its focus on sense-data. Montcheuil and Delp died at the hands of the Nazi regime, but Jesuits (like de Lubac) who survived had been transformed, almost overwhelmed, by their experience, and pre-Kantian categories seemed quite inadequate to the experience of war, occupation, and genocide. They meant something quite new in the Catholic theological tradition when they argued that theology must arise from lived experience.

JESUIT MISSIONS: ATHEISM

Vatican II called on religious orders to renew themselves in line with their founder's charism. The Society of Jesus duly made a start at its 31st General Congregation (1965-66).⁹ In his opening address to the Jesuits assembled for GC 31, Pope Paul VI asked the Society to tackle the distinctively modern phenomenon of atheism. Distinguishing between the state atheism of contemporary Communist states, philosophical atheism, and

⁸ In reading de Lubac and the others, we are most aware of their criticisms of standard theological and philosophical positions; but in historical perspective, we see the continuities between them and the scholastics. Furthermore, intellectual and cultural contexts change: in some, the scholastic systematic approach might be precisely what is needed.

⁹ From here, I abbreviate 'General Congregation' to 'GC', followed by the congregation number.

what he called ‘hedonistic’ atheism, he called on Jesuits to study atheism seriously and systematically.¹⁰ It wasn’t like being asked to combat Protestantism or heresy, where the issue was to clarify Christian doctrine and defend the orthodox variant of it, for atheism was not a doctrine that defined a particular group.

In their response, Decree 3 of the GC 31 documents, the Jesuits showed that they understood that it also involved seeking to understand modern atheism, that the view of it current before Vatican II was dated and inadequate, and that acquiring understanding required significant dialogue with atheists.¹¹ The sources of atheism appeared to be many: ideological Marxism, a kind of materialism encouraged by the rise in material wellbeing, simple de-Christianization in older Christian countries such as France, and the Church’s frequent support of ultra-conservative causes and perceived hostility to modern culture and modern science.

Like the Church, the Society of Jesus in the 1960s was changing its response to the world. The traditional approach would have taken an ontological stance on the facts: the facts are that atheism is irrational and false, since its anthropology is mistaken on several major points, so let that be reiterated firmly. Now came a shift of emphasis to an epistemological stance: (a) If atheism could be understood, it could be more effectively countered and defeated; (b) Acquiring that understanding is not just a matter of identifying false philosophical theses, but also exploring why modern people are drawn to it; (c) Doing this requires culturally wider and more open-minded engagement.

The next step, unacknowledged because not fully realized in 1965, was: (d) Such engagement with atheism could shift Jesuit goals from opposing atheism to clarifying it, dialoguing with it, and living with it. Atheism as an ideological or philosophical movement would probably be around for reasons that the cultural historian would be better placed to address than the philosopher, so refuting atheism, while important, was not as overridingly important as might have been thought. Atheists, agnostics and the indifferent were persons whose need called Jesuits to walk with them.

¹⁰ See John W. Padberg, ed. *Jesuit Life and Mission Today: The Decrees and Accompanying Documents of the 31st-35th General Congregations of the Society of Jesus*. (St Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009), p. 231.

¹¹ GC 31, nn. 24-30, in Padberg 2009, pp. 53-56.

In any case, winning arguments was relevant only to atheism of the doctrinaire kind, which did not flourish in the post-1965 era. Academic Jesuit philosophers or theologians did occasionally engage in well-publicized debates with unbelievers. In 1948, English Jesuit Frederick Copleston, author of a famous multi-volume history of philosophy, debated Bertrand Russell on BBC radio, and from the 1950s to the 1970s Jesuits could be found at academic conferences with such Marxists as Roger Garaudy.

Since about 2000, the challenge from what have been labeled the ‘New Atheism’ (with Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and even Stephen Hawking falling under this label) has appealed to science as an epistemic authority that proves religion to be false and God not to exist. In some ways, the New Atheism is quaintly old-fashioned, harking back to Enlightenment ideas about the universal scope of science and instrumental reason. Jesuits have been involved in responding to the critique. Some have argued that various developments relating to what astrophysicists sometimes term the ‘fine-tuning’ of the universe support or at least show the theist stance as not unreasonable and no more implausible than the atheist stance.¹² In that respect, the Jesuit response was one with long roots in Jesuit history, going back to the Society of Jesus’s early engagement with science through such Jesuit contemporaries of Galileo as Kristoph Klau (Christopher Clavius), who developed the Gregorian calendar still in use, and in the age of the Enlightenment through Jesuits such as Rudijer Bosovic.

Others have focused on highlighting the epistemological distinctions between the sciences, metaphysics, and theology, making the case for the position that the science-religion clash is something of a mirage.¹³ They have also drawn attention to the importance of disciplinary boundaries within science, noting the difficulty of identifying what scientific method is, and effectively queried the supposition that there is such a thing as ‘science’ as distinct from particular sciences. Modern philosophers, including the

¹² See Robert J. Spitzer, *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2010). See also George Coyne and Michael Heller, *A Comprehensible Universe: The Interplay of Science and Theology* (Springer, 2008); Guy Consolmagno, ed., *The Heavens Proclaim: Astronomy and the Vatican* (Vatican Observatory Publications, 2009).

¹³ See Séamus Murphy 2007, ‘Science vs. Religion: The Phony War’. *Studies, Irish Jesuit Quarterly* 96 (2007): 245-256.

logical positivists, Husserl and the phenomenologists, and Heidegger have recognized the epistemological significance of the fact that the sciences differ among themselves both with respect to the entities they treat and with respect to their methodologies.¹⁴

The relationship between the sciences and theology remains a significant issue for Jesuit engagement with contemporary scientific and philosophical culture. In the ongoing multiplication of disciplinary specialization and the increased divergence of those disciplines, Jesuits sense a challenge to the Renaissance humanist view of the unity of knowledge and seek in their universities to respond to that.¹⁵

JUSTICE AND INTERDISCIPLINARY ISSUES

GC 32 (1974-75) was momentous principally for two reasons.

First, the Congregation committed itself to the proposition that the promotion of justice is an ‘absolute requirement of’ or ‘integral to’ the service of faith. Social justice was clearly uppermost in the minds of the delegates, even if the justice that is integral to the service of faith is necessarily broader than social justice.¹⁶ Referring to Paul VI’s mission to the Society of Jesus of combating atheism, GC 32 expressed the sense that social injustice, often global in extent, sometimes structural and state-sponsored in nature, both reflected and reinforced a kind of practical atheism.¹⁷ While it was easy enough to find Scriptural and patristic support for that claim, what was striking was the change in emphasis: the Jesuits had come quite a distance in their interpretation of the world since 1965 when their talk about atheism seemed primarily concerned with the ideas of people such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Nikita Khrushchev.¹⁸ Now their judgment was that the

¹⁴ The most famous Jesuit epistemologist of the 20th century was Bernard Lonergan (1904-84), whose two major works, *Insight* (Longmans, 1957) and *Method in Theology* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972) direct attention to these issues, notably in his discussion of functional specialties.

¹⁵ See, for example, <http://www.luc.edu/mission/index.shtml> for Loyola University Chicago’s mission statement, in particular the document ‘Transformative Education’.

¹⁶ See Séamus Murphy, ‘The Many Ways of Justice.’ *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 26/2 (1994).

¹⁷ GC 32, nn. 76-79; in Padberg 2009, p. 305.

¹⁸ It would be easy to retort that Jesuits had been well aware of social injustice long before the early 1970s, and point to Fr General Janssens’ document on the social apostolate of 1948 as well as to social initiatives undertaken by Jesuits in those years,

spread of atheism had more to do with social structures and mass culture than with philosophical ideas.

A Jesuit who was particularly influential both as catalyst and as non-academic synthesizer of these disparate trends in the Society of Jesus in the early 1970s was the Jesuit general, Fr Pedro Arrupe. He had survived the atomic bomb blast at Hiroshima and, along with Jesuits who had been marked by their war-time experiences, seemed striking proof of the epistemic authority of experience, particularly extreme social experience, as distinct from (and in some sense trumping) the authority of academic theology and philosophy.¹⁹ Fr Arrupe communicated to young Jesuits in a way that no previous or subsequent Jesuit general (except Ignatius) has matched, and his addresses seemed to suggest that knowledge without social commitment was without value.²⁰

It is not surprising that the ‘we-need-to-learn’ note was struck more strongly at GC 32 than at GC 31. GC 32 admitted: ‘Too often we are insulated from any real contact with unbelief and with the hard, everyday consequences of injustice and oppression’.²¹ Accordingly, it called for greater experiential learning through insertion into the lives of the poor and marginalized. In response, a number of Jesuits undertook initiatives in this direction with varying degrees of success.

In order to understand the nature of oppressive social structures that should be transformed in the interest of human liberation, GC 32 also directed Jesuits’ attention to the social sciences.²² Liberation theology had emerged in Latin America a few years earlier, and its popular slogan was that theology should be done with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Among Latin American liberation theologians and European political theologians it was widely held that theology’s privileged dialogue partner should be sociology or economics, not philosophy.

such as the Latin American Jesuit educational movement *Fe y Alegría* founded in the 1950s by Fr José María Vélaz SJ. What was novel was that the experience of social injustice was now beginning to change their thinking about what evangelization meant.

¹⁹ As one commentator put it later, late 20th century people (including Jesuits) rejected the experience of authority in favour of the authority of experience.

²⁰ I owe this point to Steve Schloesser.

²¹ GC 32, nn. 84, 96-99; in Padberg 2009, pp. 306-310. It was also struck at GC 34 in its document on women in Church and society; see GC 34, n. 372, in Padberg 2009, p. 618.

²² GC 32, nn. 84, 93; in Padberg 2009, pp. 307-8.

At the same time, GC 32 noted a crisis in Jesuit attitudes to philosophy, and perhaps to reason in general: ‘From different parts of the Society it has been reported that philosophical studies in recent years have suffered deterioration’.²³ In some respects and in much of the Society of Jesus in the late 1960s, philosophy had ‘lost its way’: in the post-Vatican II years, theology was in a state of ferment and excitement, having liberated itself from the scholastic philosophy that had supported – and constrained – it up to Vatican II. No doubt that meant many Jesuit philosophers were out of work, but the deeper issue was that with respect to philosophical foundations Jesuit theologians and Jesuits in general were adrift. One response was that philosophy could be replaced by the social sciences. A number of Jesuits were directed towards studies in sociology. Forty years later the outcome of that commitment suggests that the Jesuits involved were not quite sure what to do with sociology in order to transform their theological understanding of their corporate ministry.

It gradually became clear that if theology was to be connected fruitfully with the social sciences philosophy was indispensable. Drawing attention to the fact that economics and sociology were empirical disciplines while theology was not, Francisco Ivern SJ warned of the danger of giving a theological stamp of approval to a particular economic theory (e.g. dependency theory, widely influential on the thinking of liberation theologians in the 1970s) or of claiming a quasi-scientific status for one particular theological approach (such as liberation theology).²⁴ His point was that valid linkage of theology with any science required philosophy, specifically epistemology and philosophy of science, as a kind of transformer or mediator. Epistemology and philosophy of science were needed to identify and distinguish between the different kinds of knowledge provided by theology and the social sciences.

How successful Jesuits (or others) have been in linking the social sciences and theology so as to produce something substantially new in the forty years since GC 32 is unclear. Today, the verdict would probably be that it has not yet been achieved. In economics, Jesuits have not been immune to the temptation to escape into anti-

²³ GC 32, n. 156; in Padberg 2009, p. 326.

²⁴ Francisco Ivern SJ, ‘The Future of Faith and Justice: A Critical Review of Decree Four’. *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 14/5, pp. 18-20 (1982).

intellectual populism as response to globalization and the collapse of communism. Jesuits who became sociologists often seemed philosophically underdeveloped, unable to think their way through the positivistic limitations of traditional sociology.

Matters became worse later. From the 1980s onwards, the seductive attractions of post-modernism influenced many Jesuits, in theology, philosophy, and sociology, far more than was healthy for the Society of Jesus's intellectual and theological commitments. It was one thing to shift emphasis from ontology to epistemology; it was quite another to abandon metaphysics or to regard truth and objectivity as mere cultural tools for Western hegemonistic oppression.

CLASHING EPISTEMOLOGIES

The second reason that GC 32 was so momentous was that it revealed, and also exacerbated, rising tensions between Pope Paul VI and the Society of Jesus. Those tensions later reached crisis point under Pope John Paul II in 1980-81. I suggest that the tensions can be viewed interestingly from the prism of conflicting epistemologies.

Pope Paul VI's opening address to the Jesuits assembled to commence the General Congregation was lengthy and serious. One expects popes to admonish, or at least suggest reforms, when they officially register the fact that the Jesuits are convening a General Congregation, the equivalent of a general chapter for other religious orders. But this time there seemed to be more involved. The pope expressed his sense that the Jesuits no longer knew who or what they were. He invited them to reflect on the questions 'Where do you come from?', 'Who are you?', and 'Where are you going?' and proceeded to give his own answers.²⁵ To the first question, he recalled their history, and to the second he stated that they were religious, priests, apostles, and united with the pope through the special vow of obedience to the pope.

Much of what he said was laudatory of Jesuit achievements, and he praised their willingness to engage in intellectual ministry: 'Wherever in the Church, even in the most difficult and most extreme fields, in the crossroads of ideologies, in the front line of social conflict, there has been and there is confrontation between the deepest desires of

²⁵ Padberg 2009, pp. 380ff.

man and the perennial message of the Gospel, there also there have been, and there are, Jesuits.²⁶ This was praise indeed, but many Jesuits differed profoundly from the pope with respect to what was involved in Jesuit encounters with others at the ideological crossroads. Where the Jesuits might have thought dialogue and learning was the goal, the pope had something else in mind.

For he then demanded: ‘And why then do you doubt?’ He told them that the doubts they experienced were precisely what was to be experienced in a world hostile to God, and complained: ‘You are as well aware as we are that today there appears within certain sectors of your ranks a strong state of uncertainty, indeed a fundamental questioning of your very identity ... What is the state of acceptance and loyal witness in regard to the fundamental points of Catholic faith and moral teaching as set forth by the ecclesiastical magisterium?’ He went on to criticize a desire for novelty for its own sake that he detected in the Society of Jesus, and among other things urged the Jesuits to be more discerning between the demands of the world and those of the Gospel.²⁷

Of interest here are the charges of doubt, uncertainty, and the apparent pursuit of novelty for its own sake. While linked to loss of faith, as well as to a kind of moral weakness, they also imply a kind of epistemological failure: a loss of intellectual nerve and conviction through being too open-minded to the world.

At the time, many Jesuits viewed Paul VI and his advisers as intellectually timorous and closed. They saw the pope as taking Vatican II to be a point of terminus, with the remaining task for the Church to be reception of the council’s decrees, whereas they, as progressive Jesuits, saw Vatican II as a point of departure in a radically changing world. They wanted more openness to the global range of cultures and ideologies, while the pope insisted that there was little point to being open to other positions if one no longer understood one’s own position.

Which view was correct? Perhaps both, depending on one’s angle of perception. Some of the pope’s more excitable advisors probably thought that heresy was rife among the Jesuits, but even they knew that formal heresy would have been hard to identify, let alone to prove. There was quite a diversity of socio-political views among Jesuits, although the

²⁶ Padberg 2009, p. 384.

²⁷ Padberg 2009, pp. 384, 385, and 388.

overall balance was more ‘left-wing’ than was the case among the pope’s advisors. But focusing on this is sterile. While a few Jesuits rejected some Church teachings, the typical Jesuit was not heretical, and didn’t think that a firm reaffirmation of dogma was the most important thing needed.

Bernard Lonergan’s tri-partite structure of cognition seems a useful metaphor here to image the divergence at GC 32. The Jesuits felt that the Church, of which they were a microcosm, was still at the level of seeking insight and understanding, by trying to read experience in new ways and by widening the scope of what was to count as experience, and by seeking to think ‘outside the box’ without being constricted in a slightly uncritical and even fearful way by focusing on dogma. The pope believed the range of possible understandings and interpretations of the world and human experience that had emerged in the previous decades was rich enough for the present, and that, at least with respect to Jesuit identity, the stage of judgment had been reached, where specific propositions had to be affirmed as true and other options excluded. No wonder there was a clash. I suggest that the clash was not doctrinal or ontological (i.e. about how things are, or about what propositions are to be affirmed and held as true) but epistemological: are we doing our knowing well? The Jesuits could have defended themselves by saying that no doctrines were being challenged by the Society of Jesus as a whole. Paul VI could have retorted that understandings that never moved to judgment were epistemologically sterile.

On this front, the dialectic continues. Subsequent decades have been less tumultuous than were the 1970s, the Jesuits have dwindled in numbers, and gradually a wary *modus vivendi* was reached between later popes and the Jesuits. Pope Francis, the first Jesuit pope, has repeatedly affirmed appreciation of cultural diversity and the epistemological emphasis that sees the importance of listening and being willing to aim for new insights.²⁸ The Catholic Church has come a long way since the time of Pius X (1903-14)

²⁸ In his homily at the Gesu church in Rome on January 3, 2014, the pope remarked: ‘to be a Jesuit means to be a person of incomplete thought, of open thought: because one always thinks looking at the horizon which is the ever greater glory of God, who ceaselessly surprises us. And this is the restlessness of our void, this holy and beautiful restlessness! However, because we are sinners, we can ask ourselves if our heart has kept the restlessness of the search or if, instead, it has atrophied.’ See <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-francis-homily-at-mass-in-the-church-of-the-gesu>

when the anti-Modernist movement had become a veritable witch-hunt within the church, hunting down any intellectual originality in theology or philosophy even when oriented to orthodox ends.

On the other hand, Paul VI's challenge has yet to be fully received by the Society of Jesus.²⁹ The Jesuits correctly grasped that knowing is culturally conditioned, and wanted to be open to and accommodate other perspectives. It would then have been easy to dismiss the pope as simply reasserting orthodoxy and demanding an end to creative rethinking in theology and ethics. However, the pope's point can be read more charitably, as worried that cultural openness risked implicitly assuming that truth could never be reached from a particular perspective, since all perspectives are limited and constrained. But since all knowing is indeed perspectival, it follows that if truth is attainable it must be attainable from a particular perspective. Culture and perspective may be critically transcended, but cannot be escaped.

Furthermore, the pope's address implied that to know how to go forward Jesuits needed to remember where they were coming from. If the knower forgets who she is, either losing her cultural and cognitive grounding or lacking critical awareness of her cultural presuppositions, she cannot know, since she cannot judge and hence cannot grasp truth and move, in informed faith, to action.³⁰ The drive to inquire loses its moorings if its metaphysical grounding in the culturally-rooted embodied cognitive agent is forgotten.

Finally, the epistemological drive loses its purpose and creative tension if its metaphysical goals are considered impossible. Christian faith affirms that reality is intelligible, that its intelligibility is independent of human knowers and their cognitive constructs, and that it is knowable by human knowers. A post-modernist rejection of ontology, and a historicist or culturally relativist stance that excludes the possibility of truth, can only doom the Society of Jesus's commitment to the intellectual apostolate, since that commitment's intelligibility assumes a coherent theology. The only option left

²⁹ John Paul II reiterated the challenge in *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) and *Fides et Ratio* (1998).

³⁰ Not every judgment succeeds in arriving at the truth; truth is hard to come by. The point is that if the real is merely conceptual, there is nothing for judgment to grasp, nothing about which it can say 'it is thus-and-so'; and without judgment, epistemology degenerates into non-normative cultural studies.

will be some kind of ‘retreat to commitment’, i.e. to a practical activism chasing an elusive relevance.³¹

Philosophically, the implication was unavoidable: banishing metaphysics (along with the possibility of truth-claims) meant the death of epistemology. Metaphysics that foreclosed on epistemology meant a dogmatic sclerosis; epistemology that excluded metaphysics quickly becomes pointless. The Jesuits and the pope needed each other.

CULTURE AND THEOLOGY

In GC 34 (1995) the Jesuits addressed culture. This widened GC 31’s focus on atheism and shifted the angle of perception of GC 32’s theme of justice. There is thus a kind of natural evolution in thought at work here, since the decrees of any Jesuit general congregation reflect the reception of the decrees of previous general congregations. In this instance, the work of Jesuits of inculturating the gospel in Asia and Africa was bearing fruit. In addition, the creative contributions of such notable students of culture as American Jesuit Walter Ong (1912-2003) and French Jesuit Michel de Certeau (1925-86) played a significant role. The harvest of the explorations of ways of knowing involved in the diversified Jesuit outreach to culture was rich.

However, GC 34’s document on culture shows hesitant uneasiness and intellectual softness. On the one hand, it wished to express openness to those cultures where Christianity had never put down deep roots, particularly in Asia and Africa. On the other, it saw the importance of taking a critical stance towards various aspects of contemporary (particularly Western) cultures. But it did not succeed in harmonizing these two perspectives. The insights of H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* (1951) portraying the different ways Christ is related to culture, whether in antagonism, affirmation,

³¹ This is not a criticism of Jesuit social, spiritual, or pastoral ministries. The point is that if the Society of Jesus drifted into thinking its intellectual engagements in theology, philosophy and the sciences had little value (apart from an instrumental value of providing teachers in Jesuit universities for undergraduates) it would indicate a profound loss in the Society’s sense of what it means to hear and communicate the word of God.

transcendence, or transformation, seemed forgotten at GC 34.³² The critical intellectual edge the Jesuits had traditionally displayed seemed blunted.

To speak of this as a Jesuit intellectual crisis would be an exaggeration. It is more an indicator of a kind of uncertainty, a continuing intellectual hesitation in the Society of Jesus.³³ A few years earlier, around 1989, the bicentennial of the French Revolution, communism in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe had collapsed. The age of ideology, as the early 20th century had been called, seemed over. The radically relativist disciples of Kuhn and Feyerabend, the pragmatist disciples of Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, as well as the nihilistic thinkers in post-modernist thought, had moved in a direction of rejecting truth and objectivity as Western cultural tools of oppression.³⁴ While these figures were a minority among philosophers, they were remarkably influential, joining up with and reinforcing wider post-modernist culture.³⁵

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

At GC 34, it also seemed that the great intellectual projects that Vatican II had put on the table seemed to be yesterday's agenda, not in the sense that the Jesuits no longer believed in them but in the sense that the intellectual excitement and challenge involved had worn off.

Those projects were, and necessarily had to be, theological in nature. They were not primarily about scriptural theology, since Catholic scripture scholars had caught up with

³² Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) is more coherent in dealing with evangelization and culture than is GC 34's decree on culture. At one point the latter even suggested that cultures had rights, oblivious of that claim's implications for adopting a critical stance towards cultures; see GC 34, n. 112, in Padberg 2009, pp. 544-545.

³³ A landmark book is Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (New York: Orbis, 1997). It reflects both success and ambiguity in contemporary Jesuit engagement with religious and cultural plurality.

³⁴ One well-known Indian Jesuit, influential as a retreat-giver and writer on spirituality, would regularly dismiss objections to his claims as products of a "Western logic" and hence lacking in rational cogency or force.

³⁵ For a thoughtful Jesuit pastoral response, see Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (Paulist, 2003). A collection of papers that reflects post-modernist influence in the Jesuit world is Francis X. Clooney, ed, *Jesuit Postmodern: Scholarship, Vocation, and Identity in the 21st Century* (Lanham: Lexington, 2006).

their Protestant counterparts and there was little controversy around Scripture in post-Vatican II years. Significant difficulties emerged in moral theology after Vatican II and became sharper after 1980, reaching an impasse around 2000: 'liberal' moral theology seemed too epistemologically shallow, while the conservative 'restorationist' project (encouraged by John Paul II) was too dominated by a tacit desire for an anti-epistemological stasis and doctrinal inertia. Help could only come from outside and that depended on a revitalized systematic theology.

In the 1930-80 period, there were major strides in Catholic systematic theology, through Jesuits Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac, and Avery Dulles, ex-Jesuit Hans Urs von Balthasar, diocesan priest Joseph Ratzinger, and Dominicans Yves Congar and Marie-Dominique Chenu. The break-through for these theological modernizers came in Vatican II and what it made possible. The legacy of these theologians continues to influence. But most had faded from the scene by the 1980s, some unhappy at post-conciliar developments. They had made a revolution, probably to their surprise, but were not so clear as to what was to come afterwards. They were creative, innovative, and illuminating, but their work was also defined by its relation to pre-Vatican II theology and Thomistic scholasticism. With that older world swept away, as it rapidly was after the mid-1960s, the significance and influence of their work faded.

In the third millennium, with Vatican II already a half-century in the past, and its battles largely historical now, a revitalized systematic theology is needed in the Catholic Church, if such groups as the Society of Jesus are to regain their intellectual *élan*. The Jesuits, like the Dominicans and a few other groups, are among those to whom the Church looks to make such renewal possible.

I content myself here with drawing attention to Jesuit commitment to knowledge, and to the epistemological tasks involved in acquiring knowledge. There are two principal epistemological modes: critical and constructive. In the lead up to Vatican II, critical thought was needed, involving a willingness to listen to those outside the Church and a desire to rethink and develop Church doctrines in ways that eschewed easy answers. In that mode, historically we can see the Jesuit epistemological contribution as critical, placing distance between our ways of knowing, in all their cultural and contextual diversity, and any systematic metaphysics that went beyond a vaguely general

Weltanschauung. The other mode is constructive, and its goal is to be productive, to midwife (as Socrates ambitioned) a metaphysic and an anthropology that is rich in Christian thought, intuition, faith, and experience of practical love. If the critical mode then required breaking the chains of a rigid and ossified conceptual system that passes for orthodoxy, the constructive mode today will have to express itself in resisting the enervating post-modernist sensibility that is skeptical of truth, anti-metaphysics, and fearful of intellectual boldness. It is an essential service that Jesuits, who work in epistemology, the sciences, or cultural studies, must offer if systematic theology is to flower in our time.