

Chapter 21

A *De Fide* Case Against ‘Faith Development’?



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Abstract This chapter focuses on one of Vatican I’s theological teachings and suggests that it has been neglected in Religious Education in Catholic schools. It is maintained that this possible neglect is to the detriment of Religious Education in several ways and thus warrants our attention. The focus is shone on *Dei Filius*, with its deep roots in Aquinas, on human reason being capable of demonstrating the existence of God. This theological insight has tended to be overlooked, and this has impacted on the way ‘faith’ and ‘faith development’ are often approached in contemporary Catholic schools. It is argued that the challenge is not only to avoid a narrow conception of faith development but also to frame Catholic education as theism built on faith *and* reason. The priority is to have a richer theologically and ecclesially informed account of Religious Education in Catholic schools, and in particular, of faith development.

Keywords Theism · Rationalism · Vatican I · Faith development

Introduction

When we hear references to ‘the Council’, we probably think immediately of Vatican II, but there was also a Vatican I which, although it took place 150 years ago, is still important. The great Anglican apologist and fiction writer, C. S Lewis, once said that it is a very good idea to read an old book after reading a new one, so that one’s understanding is never confined to the present moment with its own peculiar blindspots and errors. That is one reason why looking to Vatican I is useful. But another reason is even more significant for Catholics, and that is the fact that Vatican I taught dogmatically (and in doing so, it formed a basis for the teaching of Vatican II). This chapter focuses on one of Vatican I’s dogmas and suggests that it has been neglected in Religious Education in Catholic schools and that this possible neglect is to the detriment of it in several ways. So it merits our attention.

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What We Can Learn from Vatican I

I begin with Canon 2.1 of The Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*: ‘If anyone says that the one, true God, our Creator and Lord, cannot be known with certainty from the things that have been made, by the natural light of human reason: let him be anathema.’ (Tanner trans., cited in Turner 2004 p. 4). As this is a language from another age, and expressed in a negative manner, one might be tempted to ignore it, as Catholics personally and also as professionals concerned about Religious Education in Catholic schools. But this would surely be a mistake. The Canon sets out a *de fide* teaching; it is ‘of the faith’, a dogma, an infallible teaching of an ecumenical council of the Catholic Church. It illuminates an important truth. It is definitively part of the Catholic faith, to be believed by divine and Catholic faith. If Catholics wish to know what is to be believed as an integral part of Catholicism, then this Canon tells them of one important dogma; if non-Catholics wish to know what is essential to Catholic beliefs, then this Canon informs them too.

As already stated, the negative tone and language of the Canon might put us off. It is quoted here because it is considered particularly authoritative when expressed in a negative form and as a conciliar canon. In any case, its message can be put also in a very positive form. In *Dei Filius* Chap. 2, ‘Divine Revelation’, the Council sets out the dogma positively and then quotes from a famous verse, Romans 1:20, as a basis for the teaching: ‘The same Holy mother Church holds and teaches that God, the source and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason: ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made’ [Tanner trans.].

This dogma does not claim that people do in fact know God with certainty by reason, but states that God *can* be known. It does not teach that in order to have Catholic faith, one must first find or work out a sound and developed philosophical argument for God’s existence as Creator and Lord. The philosophical argument for God’s existence is not easy. Some people, perhaps even the majority, come to accept God’s existence primarily by way of faith rather than reason alone. On this, Wahlberg (2014) is particularly good at the reasonableness of learning via an ethically responsible belief in testimony. Nevertheless, Vatican I does not present the natural knowledge of God through reason as something for the very few. God can be known with certainty through the things he has made, perhaps for many people only in a simple fashion, although still with certainty. Perhaps the point may be put another way: the existence of God, even though it can be and often is known by faith, is a kind of reality that can be known by human reason. God makes himself known through his creation.

St. Thomas Aquinas held famously that the existence of God—along with some knowledge of what God is and is not (primarily what he is not: see Turner 2004)—can be demonstrated ‘scientifically’. Thomas was not speaking of what most today refer to as ‘science’, namely, the natural sciences such as physics and the social sciences such as sociology. He was referring to metaphysical knowledge (see Feser 2008).

He meant what Vatican I later defined as a dogma: God's existence as Creator and Lord *can be known with certainty* by unaided human reason. Like Vatican I, Thomas Aquinas too quotes Romans 1:20 to back up his approach (see ST 1, 2, 2 'on the contrary'). He goes on, in the *Summa Theologiae* 1, 2, 3, to outline his famous 'five ways' to prove that God exists. Then, in the next 24 Questions (which are sometimes overlooked by those, such as Richard Dawkins, who mistakenly assume that they know what Aquinas said about God's existence from the one famous article alone), he works out in detail what reason can know by analogy and negation about God: God's simplicity, perfection, infinity, omnipresence, immutability, eternity, unity, and more. Although *Dei Filius* does not 'canonise' St Thomas's approach as dogma (see Kerr 2016, and also Dubay 1985 on Newman's different approach to theism), it is clear that it is following the same line of thought based on scripture's witness. God has created the world and humans can know him as Creator and Lord, as our source and end, through our natural reason's understanding of the things that God has created as pointing towards their creator (see Levering 2016; Feser 2017; Fradd and Delfino 2018).

The First Vatican Council did not replace Catholic faith with human reason. *Dei Filius* says plenty about the importance of faith. We can know and love God so much more fully through responding with faith to divine revelation 'It was, however, pleasing to his wisdom and goodness to reveal himself and the eternal laws of his will to the human race by another, and that a supernatural, way. This is how the Apostle puts it: In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son' [Chap. 2, quoting Hebrews 1:1–2: Tanner trans. In Turner 2004 p. 3]. God has revealed himself and his will to us by divine revelation in a supernatural way. Also, he has revealed to us that we are called to a supernatural end, which we could not know by reason alone. So clearly faith is extremely important and should not be replaced by reason alone. Vatican I clearly rejected *rationalism*. It does not allow us to reduce the Catholic religion to reason alone (nor to history or science or imagination alone—not, of course, that these are unimportant in their proper place).

Vatican I and the Rejection of Fideism

However, Vatican I also rejected *fideism*, namely the reduction of the Catholic religion to faith alone, divorced from reason. So, even whilst acknowledging fully the necessity and superiority of Catholic faith that the Council clearly taught, it is important not to pass over its teaching on reason. What can be known of God through reason is important, even if the reason does not reach the heights and depths of what Catholic faith can know (see Catechism of the Catholic Church pars. 31–43). And it is hugely important that we can know by reason, at least in principle, God as Creator and Lord¹.

It is the opinion of the present author that the teaching of Vatican I on the ability of human reason to know God, albeit in a limited fashion, seems to be seriously neglected today in Religious Education in Catholic schools, and this neglect of the

dogmatic truth set out so clearly by *Dei Filius*, and even at times Catholics' contradiction or rejection of it, has seriously negative consequences. One of these consequences is the way that our understanding of Catholic faith and 'faith development' can be impaired.

Consider first what Denys Turner has to say about theology: 'Within theological circles in our times, there can scarcely be a proposition less likely to meet with approval than that which, on 24 April 1870, the first Vatican Council decreed to be a matter of faith' (2004 p. 3), namely, what is in Canon 2.1 quoted above and in the more positive expression of the dogma. Turner is quite correct to note that in theology today, the dogma is highly unlikely to be approved and it could be argued this problem extends also into Catholic Catechetics and RE, into Catholic schooling, into Catholicism as it is understood and lived, and into modern culture generally. It is generally thought now that God's existence is purely a matter of faith, at best, and not at all a matter of reason. This idea is strong in some forms of Protestantism, but even many Catholics think it too, and in doing so, they reflect widely accepted ideas in modern society. Consider a 2018 article in the *Irish Times*. It was entitled 'A Scientist's view of the pope's visit' and it was written by Cormac O'Raifeartaigh, a lecturer in physics in Waterford DIT and also a fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society. In it, the author sees religion and science as being very different (to the detriment of religion): 'One obvious clash is the central issue of faith—the manner in which almost all religions assume the existence of a supernatural deity in the absence of any supporting evidence. Such a belief system may arise from an instinctive human need to believe in something larger than ourselves, but it is in marked contrast with the practice of modern science, where everything we assume about the world is based upon thousands of observations' [*Irish Times*, 30th August 2018 p. 10]. O'Raifeartaigh assumes that science is a matter of reason, and perhaps philosophy is too, but religion and theology are matters entirely of 'faith', and not of reason. Faith and reason are seen as very much separate and opposed. Faith is presented as thinking something is so without having any evidence for it. Faith happens perhaps because of some need to believe in something that has been caused by evolution and is now part of human instinct. Faith, in other words, is a kind of instinctive wishful thinking, and nothing more than that. This implies that it is only as a matter of 'faith' that someone might believe that there is a God who is the Creator and Lord.

O'Raifeartaigh's views and assumptions are that it could be argued are broadly representative of the views and assumptions of many people and institutions in Ireland and the West. But it should be noted how different his position is from that taught by Vatican I. This Council taught as a dogma that God's existence, as Creator and Lord, can be known by reason. A logical follow-on from this conciliar dogma is that *it is an error to consider the existence of God to be a matter exclusively of faith alone*. Following on from that, it would be wrong to consider Catholicism to be exclusively a matter of faith alone. Even though the Catholic faith (and Christian faith more generally) considers living faith to be essential for one's knowledge of God and one's salvation, that does not entail that religion is *exclusively* and entirely a matter of faith. This is particularly the case when 'faith' is defined inaccurately

and reductively, as O’Raifeartaigh defines it, as mere wishful thinking due to a brute instinct or a human need for comfort and meaning. But even if we define faith more adequately, following Vatican I’s account of it, it is still the direct implication of the teaching of Vatican I that knowledge of God and his will is not a matter exclusively of faith. And so it is entailed by this council that religion is, albeit partially, a matter of reason. So too ought to be Catholic education and Religious Education in Catholic schools.

Though I do not present any empirical evidence here of the claim, it could be suggested that Vatican I’s dogma and its implications contradict not only the views and assumptions of agnostic or atheistic scientists like O’Raifeartaigh, but also the views and assumptions of many Catholics, including many in delivering Religious Education in Catholic schools. Whilst it is possible to take a *benign* view of faith as wishful thinking and as human instinct or need, presumably most Catholics would hesitate to describe their understanding of faith as ‘wishful thinking’, but perhaps this is an accurate description of exactly how they understand it? If asked, ‘Is there a God?’, many people would reply, ‘Well, I *believe* that there is a God, but you know of course that there’s no real proof.’ This kind of answer seems to suggest that theism is not a matter of confident human reason at all. It displays a rather negative attitude towards reason’s role in theism, and thus in religion. It would be interesting to speculate if this kind of attitude is widespread even among Religious Education teachers in Catholic schools. These teachers might be very committed to ‘faith development’ as an important aspect of Religious Education in Catholic schools, but this approach is one that fails to consider that ‘reason development’, so to speak, is another important aspect of it, not excluding the foundational matter of our rational confidence in God’s revealing his existence through his creation. And, given the close, mutually supportive relationship between faith and reason, the development of one necessarily goes hand in hand with the development of the other.²

The Implications for Religious Education in Catholic Schools

Given the truth of the *de fide* teaching of Vatican I, Religious Education in Catholic schools ought not consider ‘religion’, including the centrally important point about God’s existence as Creator and Lord, as exclusively a matter of faith. It should also give due consideration to the role of reason in coming to know of God ‘with certainty’. But perhaps it is these two final words, ‘with certainty’, that cause trouble for many in a modern liberal society. There is a widespread assumption that it is wrong, not only intellectually but morally, to be certain about God and religious matters. Religious certainty (or dogma or dogmatism) leads, according to this assumption, to religious fanaticism, and thus to intolerance, divisions, segregation, exclusion, oppression, hatred, and even to violence and killing. We are far better to extoll and promote the superiority of humble *uncertainty* in religious matters, and to any matters of morality that depend on religion too, of course. If one is to be ‘certain’ about God, let it be

a purely personal and subjective ‘certainty’. Or, if it has a social dimension, in that it is a ‘faith’ shared with others, in a church or congregation, for example, then let that ‘faith’ be a matter entirely for the private sphere of the individual believer and congregation. People should be free to engage in wishful thinking about God and religion, but only in private, only as private individuals and groups of private individuals gathered into private corporations. Such seems to be the logic of the liberal fear of religious certainty. One may be allowed to ‘believe’ in God, but only as long as it is not too strong or serious a belief. In fact, one very radical version of this liberal and modern approach (perhaps ‘postmodern approach’ is the better term here) is to claim that it is wrong to identify closely with any belief or belief system, or with a family or communal religious identity. Within this wider cultural context, it could be argued that Religious Education teachers in Catholic schools have a role to play in helping their students engage with a richer theologically informed understanding of faith in God.

An important insight from Vatican I is that it allows you to argue that one does not only ‘believe’ in God but one also holds God’s existence as Creator and Lord to be a matter of reason, and to hold this idea as itself a matter of *de fide* belief directly and rather shockingly challenges the idea of faith being merely a private and subjective matter. Once you start to speak of God’s existence as a matter of human reason, a ‘tidy’ privatisation of religion is no longer possible. Perhaps this is a reason why we would not want to overlook this aspect of Vatican I. It has the potential to help us challenge some widely held assumptions about the supposedly private or subjective character of faith.

So in Religious Education in Catholic schools, it is important to avoid the temptation of opting for a much ‘safer’, socially and politically, stance of considering God’s existence to be a matter of faith *only*, a personal matter for each student (and one’s ‘private’ community of faith). If Religious Education teachers in Catholic schools did give into this temptation, it would mean encouraging a distorted sort of faith development.

It is interesting to speculate how best to engage with the ‘God question’. There is a danger with answering it with ‘No one can really know, one just has to believe’, because the question of the truth about God and life’s purpose is bracketed off, and faith is restricted to the private sphere of the individual’s life, family or congregation/parish. In contrast, school is considered to be the public sphere, and thus the sphere of science and reason, and not of faith as such. In schools, therefore, there is a risk of considering faith in essentially private and personal terms—even if expressed and celebrated socially. So pupils may discuss how they personally think and how this might affect their lives, and how other people’s religious thinking has affected them and society, but these pupils may not discuss whether their thinking is metaphysically true, reflecting accurately an objective transcendent reality. Or, if they do discuss the existence of God and his will for us, this discussion will tend to see this matter as one of ‘faith’ (not reason), and thus merely a matter of personal preference, with no view to be judged as superior or inferior to other sincerely held views. Sincerity and clarity of expression, and perhaps also creativity, are the allowed standards of assessment; whereas the soundness of the arguments and conclusions is ignored—at least where

the existence and nature of the Transcendent is concerned. This is not to suggest that sincerity, clarity, and creativity are not important standards in education—of course they are. Nor is it to promote a Religious Education and faith development that is focused only on discursive reason(ing) and arguments—that would be too narrow. It is not necessary for Catholic teachers, not to mention students, to become professional philosophers. But there is surely a place for some serious attention to be given to the various ways that we can come to know of God's existence by reason, whilst not ignoring the importance of religious experience and the emotional aspects of our religious and spiritual development.

Conclusion

One of the strengths of Catholic education is that is grounded on theism. Crucially, it should consider this theism to not be exclusively a matter of faith, and of a narrowly conceived 'faith development', but a matter of reason too, and of reason development integrated with faith development. The challenge is to have a richer theologically and ecclesially informed account of Religious Education in Catholic schools, and in particular, of faith development. This would be an account that champions the complementary role of reason in our coming to know God as Creator and Lord, revealed naturally in God's creation. This knowledge of God can prepare us for the Father's invitation to a deeper relationship with him through faith in his further, supernatural revelation in Christ and his gospel, shared with us through the Spirit and the Church.

Notes

1. Note that although we cannot know God in his own nature, which is utter a mystery, we *can* know of him in his relationship to us, as Creator and Lord.
2. John Paul II is of course the author of the most recent authoritative Church document on the close relationship between faith and reason, and on how Catholic faith defends reason, in his (1998) encyclical *Fides et Ratio*.

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