Is There Really a Catholic Intellectual Tradition?

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Summary

The existence of a Catholic Intellectual Tradition (CIT) is not a given, as arguments *contra* are in balance with arguments *pro*. An intellectual tradition consists of a style of thought and of a worldview, as its formal and material modes. The former defines the way knowledge is appropriated, processed, and passed on whereas the latter amounts to its applications to various regions of reality – God, man, morality, society, the Church, etc. A model of the CIT is proposed that consists of principles differentiated by the degree of centrality they have in a topological structure. The paper asserts the existence of a CIT because a non-stipulative, non-trivial, and non-circular case can be made for it.

1.   Introduction

The existence of a Catholic Intellectual Tradition (CIT) is often taken for granted. However, there are reasons for questioning its usefulness as an explanatory concept. It is in any case not an unproblematic assumption, and one that is of rather recent vintage. In order for a CIT to be assumed in an unambiguous way that is not based on triviality, mere stipulation, or circular reasoning, it needs to undergo rational reconstruction. The CIT shares this, of course, with other classificatory concepts of intellectual and cultural history such as Gnosticism, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, or Romanticism.

In the following the reasons for doubting the existence of a CIT shall first be considered, both as a useful explanatory concept and a real historical structure (2.). Conditions for an intellectual and cultural tradition will then be presented that are grounded in the philosophy of science and the sociology of knowledge (3.). This model will be applied to the CIT to reveal its structure, both in a static (synchronic) and a dynamic (diachronic) perspective (4). Lastly, the question of the existence of a CIT can be answered with more authority than by mere fiat (5).

The reasoning presents a summary of a larger work in progress that seeks to spell out the principles on which the CIT rests and to investigate its structure (Grassl 2010). It should be clear that in this discourse, as in intellectual history in general, ideal types are sometimes unavoidable even though an attempt at precision by necessary and sufficient conditions is made. Since ideas are ontologically fuzzier than chemical compounds or biological species, any axiomatization of intellectual traditions has so far proven elusive. Although recent work on the scientific status of theology leads in this direction (McGrath 2004), theology as a discipline defies precision (as do philology, sociology, or geology) whereas particular traditions within theology might be understood as theories that have developed out of religious visions and then been refined over time. Whereas the philosophy of science has produced a very comprehensive literature on the structure of scientific theories, the structure of intellectual traditions, which are much less circumscript and well-defined, has received little clarification. But this should not serve as an excuse not to abide by Quine's dictum, "There is no entity without identity." Claiming the existence of an object makes sense "only insofar as we have an acceptable principle of individuation for that sort of object" (Quine 1981: 102). If this is understood as requiring that criteria can be defined for counting an entity towards the class or type of entities to which it is assumed to belong, the existence of a CIT depends on how an intellectual tradition is understood.

2.   Why There May Not Be a Catholic Intellectual Tradition

It is easy to find reasons against the assumption that a CIT really exists or can be readily defined:

(1) The term itself is of recent vintage. It has been coined no earlier than in the late 1980's in the United States (with only a few unrelated occurrences before that), where Catholic colleges and universities were engaged in searches of their identity. For this purpose, American Catholics alleged – and perhaps hypostatized – the existence of an intellectual tradition, as a historical construct on which to build identity claims. The CIT was in a diffuse sense to be broader than Catholic dogmatics or any particular system such as Thomism though no attempt has been made to delineate the necessary and sufficient conditions for applying the term.

(2) The term has remained limited to intra-American usage. Searches in major library catalogs and in twenty-one major languages on the Internet using the search engines Google, Google Scholar, and Google Books have revealed nearly no results that were not in English and particularly not from the United States. No document issued by a pope or a dicastery of the Roman Curia, including the numerous pronouncements on philosophy or education, has ever used the phrase in Latin or in translation.

(3) The *terminus a quo* of a CIT is unclear. Did it start with the Great Schism (1054) or the Protestant Reformation (1517), before which it may have been identical with the more general Christian tradition? Is it then a product of the Council of Trent, or of the Counterreformation? Jaroslav Pelikan entitled the first volume of his five-volume series on *The Christian Tradition*, for the period 100-600 AD, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (1971). While he emphasized the development of the Church Catholic, he certainly did not regard 600 AD as its *terminus ad quem*. Might the concept be so unhistorical, because it refers to a set of intellectual dispositions, that it can apply to thinkers of any era, location, and perhaps faith?

(4) Definition by members seems impossible. The mere fact of membership in the Catholic Church is not a sufficient and may not even be a necessary condition. Intellectual traditions such as Romanticism or expressionism can all be defined by shared beliefs rather than adherents.

(5) Lastly, its part-whole structure may be the greatest challenge. In what sense is the CIT different from the deposit of faith as formulated by the Magisterium? How does the CIT relate to other "regional" traditions such as the Catholic Dogmatic Tradition, the Catholic Social Tradition, the Catholic Moral Tradition, and the Catholic Liturgical Tradition? How do partial intra-Catholic traditions such as those of Augustinianism, Thomism, Suarezianism, or the intellectual traditions of various religious orders, fit into a coherent picture? And is a definition of the CIT strong enough to

account for the possible existence of a "Catholic philosophy," "Catholic art," or "Catholic literature" defined by material criteria rather than by the faith of their creators?

These issues suggest that, even if a CIT can be claimed to exist, its mode of existence is far from clear. It has not been defined with sufficient precision to be a useful term in academic discourse. Most research on Catholicism finds the term dispensable, and eschews equally ambiguous synonyms such as "Catholic thought" (Dawson) or "Catholic imagination" (Tracy, Greeley). Invocation of "standing in the CIT," particularly by colleges or universities, seems to facilitate avoiding commitment to being Catholic *tout court*. The term may then be understood as simply an American mental fiction, a constructed tradition like Thanksgiving or the supposedly continuous "liberal arts" tradition invented by American educators (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 279f.). And it has indeed been regarded as invented (Tilley 2000). Countries where Catholics are in the majority and culture has been strongly impregnated by the religion despite recent secularization simply take a Catholic style of thought for granted. In the Protestant cultural sphere, however, and specifically in the United States, a CIT has been hypostatized as a counterproposal to the Protestant intellectual majority to which Catholic thought has yet willingly assimilated. The primary use of the term seems to be apologetic, as convenient shorthand for something one cannot quite define, and often as a substitute for "Catholic."

These arguments amount to a case for deconstructing the CIT. The alternative to it is undertaking an attempt at rational reconstruction.

3.   What Intellectual Traditions Are

Intellectual (and cultural) traditions share a number of features: (1) They are more *comprehensive* than a theory, since they may themselves contain theories. (2) They are *abstract systems* of propositions embodied in concrete individuals constituting a society or culture. (3) They have a *holistic* (or at least "molecular") structure, i.e., no proposition stands in isolation from any other; whereas the degree of centrality of propositions within a tradition may vary, adherents must accept a tradition as a whole or else reject it. (4) Their boundaries (and often even the existence) of a tradition are only known *ex post facto*. (5) Their boundaries are generally fuzzy rather than well-defined. (6) They are inherently of a social nature, with its bearers being an integral part of the tradition. (7) They have institutions for their own correction and propagation. (8) They are wholes that allow for different parts as sub-traditions. (9) If they are based on religion, they comprise not

only propositional content but also practical and tacit knowledge (such as liturgical practices and religious customs) (Geiselmann 1966: 84-90).

These conditions on intellectual traditions derive from various sources, but there is a surprising agreement on them across historical and epistemological divides. Thus Lovejoy, Guardini, Pieper, and Quine have sustained the holistic, network-like structure of theories and traditions. Michael Polányi, Wittgenstein, MacIntyre, and Lovejoy have emphasized that they rely on implicit assumptions, unconscious mental habits, or tacit knowledge, operating in the thought of individuals or groups. Wittgenstein, Lovejoy, Guardini, Pieper, Mannheim, and most sociologists of knowledge, have claimed their comprehensive reach, i.e. a power "to influence the course of man's reflections on almost any subject" (Lovejoy 1936: 10).

In formal notation, an intellectual tradition may then be represented as a quintuple

$$\mathcal{T} = <\mathcal{C}, \mathcal{H}, \mathcal{P}, <\mathcal{S} \Mapsto \mathcal{W}>>$$

where $\mathcal{C}$ = the community of knowers of $\mathcal{T}$; $\mathcal{H}$ = the host society or culture for $\mathcal{T}$; $\mathcal{P}$ = the practices admissible in $\mathcal{T}$; $\mathcal{S}$ = the style of thought employed in $\mathcal{T}$; and $\mathcal{W}$ = the worldview underlying $\mathcal{T}$. $\mathcal{C}$ accounts for the "embodiment" of the tradition in its propagators, including its institutional structures such as the visible Church, and $\mathcal{H}$ for its enculturation, explaining why certain cultures are more receptive to a tradition than others. It has been suggested that traditions are as much prescriptions for practices and actions as they are sets of propositions (Gracia 2003). In the arts, this means a style of painting or of composing. In traditions based on a religion, this means a style of worshipping. $\mathcal{P}$ is therefore particularly important for religious traditions, for it comprises liturgy, rituals, and symbolism, which have been regarded an integral part of the CIT. Since a tradition is represented as an ordered set of components, there is an internal structure to it. For example, a refined version of $\mathcal{T}$ could account for the higher propensity by a particular society or culture to develop or accept a particular style of thought or worldview.

The pair $<\mathcal{S} \Mapsto \mathcal{W}>$ may be understood as the core of $\mathcal{T}$, where this core consists of propositions (here called "principles") that define the historical identity of $\mathcal{T}$. This means that an intellectual tradition consists of a *style of thought* and of a *worldview*, as the formal and material modes of its existence. A style of thought, as a mental model, defines the way knowledge is appropriated, processed, and passed on whereas a worldview is constituted by the set of applications of a style of thought to various regions of reality such as God, man, morality, society, the Church, etc. A style of thought comprises the principles of *how* Catholics typically think, a worldview the principles of *what* they think. $\mathcal{W}$ is largely the deposit of faith (παραθήκη) that is repeatedly referenced in

scripture (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:12, 14). $\mathcal{S}$ can exist independently, but $\mathcal{W}$ cannot; it depends on the application of formal principles to a material domain. The traditions of Catholic moral theology or of Catholic social thought are the applications to material domains of the principles of the Catholic style of thought: $\{\mathcal{S}\} \mapsto$ moral decisions; $\{\mathcal{S}\} \mapsto$ social decisions. For the continuity of a tradition, a coherent style of thought is more crucial than a particular worldview. In the language of intellectual history, a *traditio* itself is represented by the quintuple whereas the *tradita* are the style of thought and how the community applies them to form a worldview. But constitutive of *traditio* is the mode of *how* Catholics typically see the world, for example in terms of integrated structures rather than individual parts, and from this it follows *that* they tend to see society as an organic whole.

The component of a tradition that can most readily be compared to a theory in a scientific sense, i.e. to a logically consistent and interconnected set of propositions about one domain, is $\mathcal{S}$. Some philosophers and theologians have indeed regarded Catholicism as a kind of theory (McGrath 2003: 24ff.; Haldane 2004: 48). Not all theories, for example in mathematics, computer science, cosmology, or rational mechanics, have an empirical content. Distinguishing an abstract structure from its intended applications is a conception of theories that (under the name "non-statement view") is now widely used in the philosophy of science (Ruttkamp 2002: ch. 4). It does not view theories as deductively closed axiomatized sets of statements but as abstract mathematical structures that find their empirical instantiation in intended applications. Reality is not imported into the theory through its theoretical language, but the abstract structure is applied to regions of reality much as the formal principles of Catholic thought ($\mathcal{S}$) are applied, for example, to the social domain to produce the principles of Catholic Social Thought. Theories refer to outside reality and explain it through models (Giere 1988: 82ff.). In this view, the core of a theory remains constant over time; its structure is invariant but the regions of reality to which it is applied – its intended applications $\mathcal{W}$ – may certainly expand. The Catholic style of thought can be applied to education, art history, international relations, or plant genetics, among other fields. But its principles, which are lastly grounded in religious truth, have been remarkably constant over history. The understanding of what persons are, and when actions are morally justified, has not changed much in the course of the CIT; but *in vitro* fertilization or physician-assisted suicide are issues that have arisen only recently, and the application of the same principles to new instances is then a case of developing the tradition through expanding on the Catholic worldview (Grassl 2009).

The trend in the philosophy of science, under the structuralist paradigm (or the "non-statement view"), to regard theories as abstract mathematical structures seeking empirical applications had its precursor in Aquinas' claim that in every science one can distinguish between the things themselves

which are studied – the raw material of the science (or its "material object") – and the point of view, or aspect from which they are considered (or its "formal object"). For Aquinas, the diversity of the sciences is established by the diversity of aspects under which things can be known, or by their formal objects: *diversa ratio cognoscibilis diversitatem scientiarum inducit* (*ST* I, q.1, a.1). Furthermore, "the unity of a faculty or habit is to be gauged by its object, not in its material aspect, but as regards the precise formality under which it is an object" (*ST* I-II, q.1, a.3). Based on this distinction, in Christian theology, a formal principle is the authority which forms or shapes the doctrinal system of a religion or tradition. Thus the Catholic style of thought logically precedes a Catholic worldview (Scheffczyk 2008). Even partial Catholic traditions – such as Augustinianism and Thomism – are differentiated more by their underlying ontology and epistemology, particularly their different views on the sources of faith, than by their dogmatic or moral theologies. But the style of thought would hardly have been passed on over two millennia had it not been applied to an understanding of the world and its history; it is a mistake to reduce the CIT to it (Miller 2002).
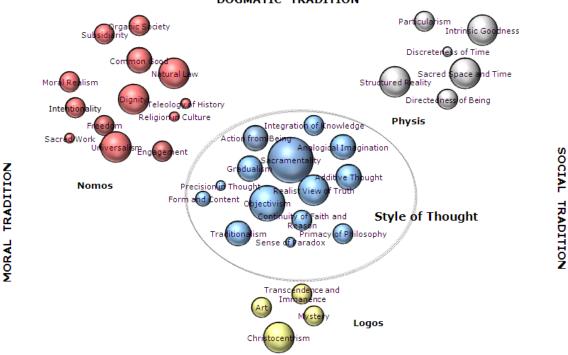
4.   The Catholic Intellectual Tradition

The style of thought typical of the CIT comprises principles such as the following (where this list of nine principles is certainly non-exhaustive) (Grassl 2010):

Designation	Explanation	Implications
Vita sacra	Reality is ordered towards God, who lets us participate in His reality.	Signs do not only signify but also bring about real change.
Ordo rerum	Objectivism and realism: "sovereignty of the object" (Kolnai).	All domains of reality have an intrinsic order; anti-reductionism.
Gradatio	Gradualism: both physical and moral reality is continuous rather than discrete.	There are degrees of reality; intermediate structures; multi-layered ontology.
Agere sequitur esse	Practical reasoning is determined by the nature of things, not by volition alone.	There is no "is-ought problem"; positive and normative science are not separate.
Analogia entis	Ability to infer the nature of the creator from the structure of creation.	"Grace perfects nature; it does not destroy it" (Aquinas). Embrace of the imperfect.
Adaequatio rei et intellectus	Realist understanding of truth as a correspondence between mind and reality.	The human mind is capable of attaining truth; anti-relativism.
Sic et non	Coexistence of apparently opposing positions: "additive thought" (Newman).	Avoids apodictic oppositions (contradictories) in favor of contraries or synthesis.
Integratio	All knowledge (and faith) is a single and integrated whole.	Denies departmentalization of knowledge; epistemological holism.
Fides et ratio	Continuity of faith and reason: rational apprehension of faith.	Natural ability to know God; faith is not only a function of grace.

These principles were selected through content analysis of the writings of twenty Catholic theologians (Grassl 2010). At the center of the Catholic style of thought, one may see the principle of sacramentality – the propensity to see God in all things (St. Ignatius) and to understand specific signs as vehicles of grace. All other principles are corollaries required by a realist understanding of sacramentality – three ontological assumptions and five epistemological assumptions. Sacraments are only conceivable in a realistic sense if physical signs and performances not only point toward a transcendent reality but bring it to bear upon humans through grace. There must then exist an ordered reality independently of any human subjectivity, and any human action in the world must be made with a view to the structure of this reality. And knowledge of this structure is, in principle, possible, since the human mind is attuned to its cognition. The distinction if not division between ontological and epistemological claims is itself a trait of the philosophical realism that is characteristic of the CIT – the priority of ontology over epistemology (Grassl 2010).

In a synchronic model, the CIT can then be envisaged as a topological structure, or as a network of principles with a core $< S \mapsto W >$ consisting of the Catholic style of thought and its worldview. The principle of sacramentality will be at the center of the style of thought:
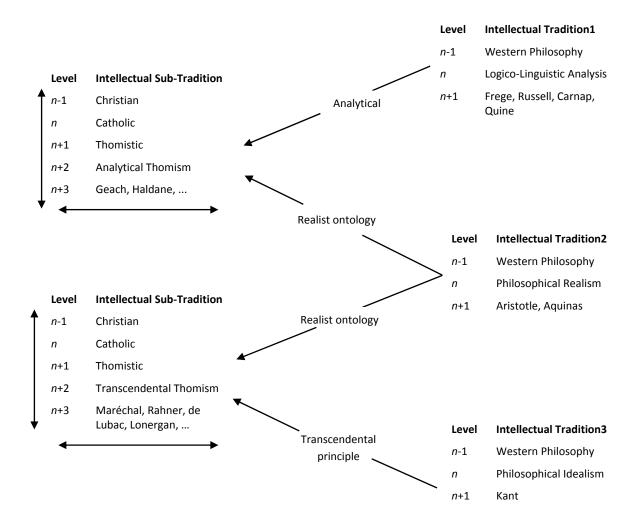

9

Christian thought has derived from Greek philosophy a distinction between different dimensions of reality. The Catholic style of thought here applies to the domain of the natural (*Physis*), of the social and cultural (*Nomos*), and of the spiritual and religious (*Logos*). Other classifications could of course be chosen. These applications are the interfaces to various Catholic traditions for which this distinctive style of thought of the CIT is the core, for example traditions in ethics, social thought, dogmatic theology, or liturgy. They all add up to the CIT.

Representation of the CIT as a network structure has several advantages: (1) Relations between propositions (e.g., one-sided or two-sided dependence, or implication) can be shown; some will be closer to certain others. (2) The relative importance of propositions can be represented by the size of nodes. (3) If propositions can be described by parametric data, topological notions such as centrality, homogeneity, compactness, connectedness, integration, or closure can be applied to describe the structure of the core. For example, it should be possible to determine whether, as has been argued, Augustinian thought from St. Augustine to Balthasar is indeed a more integrated intellectual body that works with fewer postulates than is Thomistic thought, which is fraught with assumptions derived from Aristotelian metaphysics about being, existence, form, substance, potency, act, etc.

The synchronic representation can then be extended to a diachronic one by showing which principles change over time, either through growth in relative importance, or through a semantic merger or separation. Network representations of intellectual traditions have of course become commonplace in the history of thought (Collins 1998); but they have at their nodes individual thinkers, not their thoughts. Congar has argued that a tradition may be developed, but not altered, and this is certainly the view of the Magisterium (Congar 1966). Since the intellectual style of the CIT is highly path-dependent, and can at most be nuanced, development occurs in the worldview, by applying the same principles to an understanding of new domains of reality, or by adding to these principles others imported from outside the CIT. By drawing on theory dynamics in science and in other intellectual enterprises such as the arts, the conditions explaining the coexistence of stability and change can be worked out.

As a merely partial example, consider the development of Analytical Thomism and Transcendental Thomism. The latter stands in the lines of two others, theologically and philosophically in that of Thomistic thought and philosophically in that of philosophical idealism. However, the level at which borrowing occurs is of crucial importance. From Aquinas a basically realistic ontology was inherited, and from the tradition of idealist philosophy an epistemological approach, viz. Kant's

transcendental principle. Borrowing occurs always from a lower level (*n-x*) of another tradition, and the borrowed elements are then integrated into a higher level (*n+x*):

Level	Intellectual Tradition1
n-1	Western Philosophy
n	Logico-Linguistic Analysis
n+1	Frege, Russell, Carnap, Quine

Level	Intellectual Sub-Tradition
n-1	Christian
n	Catholic
n+1	Thomistic
n+2	Analytical Thomism
n+3	Geach, Haldane, …

Analytical

Realist ontology

Level	Intellectual Tradition2
n-1	Western Philosophy
n	Philosophical Realism
n+1	Aristotle, Aquinas

Level	Intellectual Sub-Tradition
n-1	Christian
n	Catholic
n+1	Thomistic
n+2	Transcendental Thomism
n+3	Maréchal, Rahner, de Lubac, Lonergan, …

Realist ontology

Transcendental principle

Level	Intellectual Tradition3
n-1	Western Philosophy
n	Philosophical Idealism
n+1	Kant

The Catholic style of thought sees the world as a structured and multi-layered whole. But there also appears to be structure and regularity in the development of the CIT. An account of its dynamics rich in explanatory power must of course not only consider its core of principles but also the community of knowers, the societies and cultures facilitating and supporting it, and lastly its non-propositional content, particularly the practices and customs correlated with it. It must explain why, for example, the CIT could thrive in some cultures more than in others, regardless of the number of Catholics. And it must explain why religious orders of a particular theological pedigree have developed differently in some societies than in others, even where all had Catholic population majorities (Grassl 2010a).

5.   Conclusion

Much talk about a CIT is ambiguous, confusing, or simply stipulative. In many cases it involves reification, particularly when inferring from the thought of individuals connected by faith to the existence of an intellectual tradition. But a rational reconstruction of what the CIT is that avoids these pitfalls appears possible. Instead of attempting to define it by enumeration of representatives, it can be defined by a set of formal principles the application of which is necessary (and perhaps sufficient) for someone to count not as a Catholic but as a Catholic thinker. Such persons will apply this style of thought to all areas of reality they seriously consider, and thus develop a Catholic worldview. Formally, the style of thought, together with its specific applications, is a network of principles which may be envisaged as a topological structure in which each has a particular location, stands in relations to others, and upholds the robustness of the whole. Such principles and their relative weight can be ascertained by using quantitative and qualitative research tools. Thus the CIT has become "quantized" while still being an interconnected web.

The conclusion is that a CIT actually exists, has been handed down, and has a particular structure. It need not, and indeed could not, be "constructed" (Tilley 2000). One can trace the genealogy of its principles – "unit-ideas" in Lovejoy's sense – and show their consistency and continuity over time. The model presented rests of course on certain essentialist assumptions, for the widely acknowledged stability of the Catholic style of thought could not be explained if not through the reasonableness, coherence, and practical usefulness of its principles. The CIT is therefore not a "narrative" that could be "spun" in any direction one chooses. It is rather the core of that "hermeneutic of continuity" which Benedict XVI has repeatedly presented as constitutive of Catholic tradition (*Caritas in Veritate*, c. 12).

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