

## Book Review

### *The Structure of Theological Revolutions:* *How the Fight Over Birth Control Transformed American Catholicism* by Mark S. Massa, S. J.

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*Abstract:* Mark S. Massa argues that the history of natural law discourse in American Catholic moral theology, since the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, is marked more by discontinuity, rupture, and revolution than has been appreciated.

*Keywords:* American Catholic Church, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Charles Curran, Germain Grisez, *Humanae Vitae*, Thomas Kuhn, Moral Theology, Natural Law, Paul VI, Jean Porter

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HISTORIANS HAVE LONG CHRONICLED the impact of *Humanae Vitae* upon American Catholicism. The 1968 encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the regulation of birth sparked fierce debates not only within Roman Catholic sex ethics but also (and especially) about the approach to moral theology that undergirded the encyclical's claims: the natural law. Fifty years after the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae*, Mark Massa's *The Structure of Theological Revolutions: How the Fight Over Birth Control Transformed American Catholicism* (Oxford University Press, 2018) does not simply offer another history of Catholic moral theology or American Catholic approaches to natural law. Rather, the focus and major contribution of this text is: 1) to provide a schema for understanding why and precisely *how* the story of the natural law tradition—or traditions, to more accurately capture Massa's argument—has played out in American Catholicism since *Humanae Vitae*; and 2) to argue that this story is characterized more by “rupture and disjunction” than by a continuous, “linear” development as is often presumed (9).

Massa's argument unfolds in four parts. Part I recounts how and why the “Catholic Nineteenth Century”—that is, the era in which neo-scholastic natural law functioned as the undisputable reigning paradigm in Catholic moral theology—met its swift demise with the release of *Humanae Vitae*. Massa contends that the encyclical's claim, “Each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life” (Paragraph 10), as well as the assertion that there is an “inseparable connection” between the unitive and

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procreative dimensions of the marriage act that artificial contraception wrongfully violates (Paragraph 12) and that reason confirms the veracity of these claims because they belong to God's unchanging moral order (Paragraph 12), reflected an approach to the natural law that was no longer convincing to modern-day observers. Indeed, given the rise of historical consciousness and its increased acceptance within Catholic moral theology, the idea that an inwardly-perceived "natural law," discernable through reason and intuition, was simply no longer practical or viable in today's world.

Although the rise of historical consciousness may help to explain the critiques that Catholic moral theologians made of *Humanae Vitae* in the immediate aftermath of its publication, Massa argues that it does not adequately elucidate the debates about natural law that have persisted in the fifty years since 1968. To expound on these debates, Chapter Two provides an overview of Thomas Kuhn's landmark 1962 work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. There, the historian of science debunked the assumption that scientific insights about the physical world generally build upon each other in a seamless, unified way such that, for example, Isaac Newton's project developed Galileo's ideas while Galileo furthered Aristotle's insights. Kuhn argued that this assumption obscured how humans had, in fact, gained a greater understanding of the physical world, precisely because the relationships between scientific paradigms throughout history are marked more by replacement, discontinuity, and reconstruction than by cumulative progress toward a common objective.

For Kuhn, any paradigm (i.e. "an overarching model of how the universe actually operated") could only be provisional at best, at least in part because some dimension of the universe would always remain beyond any one paradigm's comprehensive grasp (36). Inevitably, scientific observations will confound the reigning paradigm. Kuhn called these discrepancies "anomalies" and reasoned that the reigning paradigm would successfully resist them until the inconsistencies grow so numerous that they threaten the paradigm's basic understanding of the universe. Kuhn called this point "the period of crisis" because it produced an uncertainty within the given discipline that would prompt its leaders to reconsider the philosophical and epistemological foundation inherent to the discipline's quest for knowledge and truth. Further, upon reaching a period of crisis, Kuhn maintained that the discipline's leaders would divide into those who remain loyal to the reigning paradigm and those who would seek to revise or jettison it.

Once challenged in this way, a paradigm would eventually be replaced following the emergence of an alternative explanation that is deemed

more comprehensive of the physical world. For Kuhn these paradigm shifts were “not cumulative and gradual” but “sudden and revolutionary” (43). For Kuhn, because “nature” was a human construct, the viability of any paradigm could not be measured against “nature” as such but only against other paradigms, which remain incommensurable—largely because they utilize different understandings of the same vocabulary.

Having sketched Kuhn’s argument, Massa then builds the heart of his argument: namely, Kuhn’s understanding of paradigm shifts can helpfully illuminate the debate about natural law in American Catholic moral theology that came to the fore following the release of *Humanae Vitae*. In 1968, the reigning paradigm in Catholic moral theology was neo-scholastic natural law. However, its failure to make sense of the lived human experiences of too many couples became the preponderance of anomalies that led moralists to question this reigning paradigm. Thereafter, a period of crisis about how natural law ought to function in Catholic moral theology was already underway because alternative approaches to the natural law—including those that were more inductive, less physicalist, and more shaped by historical consciousness—had already begun to win adherents.

After tracing different approaches to the natural law that surfaced in the Majority Report and Minority Report of the Pontifical Commission on Birth Control, Massa then explores in Part III four paradigms that sought to fill the vacuum that resulted from discrediting neo-scholasticism’s natural law. Chapter Four profiles one of the earliest critics of *Humanae Vitae*, the “loyal dissenter” Charles Curran. Massa highlights the major influences on Curran’s thinking (i.e. the personalist approach to moral theology that he learned from Bernard Häring and the openness to the world that characterized the Second Vatican Council). Massa shows how Curran’s attention to religious pluralism and respect for the natural sciences led him to eschew *Humanae Vitae*’s classicist, ahistorical, deductive natural law in favor of one that began with lived human experiences (i.e. not moral propositions) and understood humans as: 1) shapers of nature, not merely shaped by it; 2) constructors of natural law throughout history, not only discoverers of it; and 3) beings in whom rationality and animality are integrated.

Chapter Five examines the “New Natural Law” or “Basic Goods” theory of Germain Grisez. Massa relays Grisez’s goal to ground *Humanae Vitae*’s condemnation of artificial contraception in a theory of natural law that he believed offered a more stable foundation than did the encyclical’s neo-scholastic paradigm. He then illustrates Grisez’s line of reasoning: from his

fear that neo-scholastic natural lawyers misread Thomas Aquinas when they argued that he rooted natural law in speculative reason, to his criticism that neo-scholastic natural law failed because it relied too much upon an unhelpful teleological metaphysics, to his rejection of speculative reason and grounding of natural law in practical reason, and finally to his belief that this modification strengthened Catholic moral theology because it allowed natural law to claim its conclusions were objective precisely because they were perspicacious. The chapter concludes with a defense of Grisez's theory from Robert George and others, as well as the critiques of Russell Hittinger (and others), who argued that removing speculative reason from moral theology transformed Grisez's theory into a Kantian intuitionist account of the natural law that eliminates consideration of nature altogether.

Chapter Six explores Jean Porter's "historical project of robust realism." Massa notes Porter's worries that "New Natural Law" theories such as Grisez's erred in failing to understand Aquinas's context (i.e. medieval scholasticism) and that they fail to appreciate the differences between his context and the twentieth century. As a result, these theories presented an eisegetical misreading of Aquinas's work. Massa demonstrates how Porter's critical engagement with medieval scholasticism led her to recover an Aquinas that was less rationalistic and an understanding of nature and reason as more continuous and constructed than previously recognized. By showing how Porter balanced this Thomistic recovery with a deep respect for the contributions of the physical and social sciences to understandings of human flourishing, Massa details the main contours of Porter's natural law paradigm. In other words, natural law 1) ought to be developed by drawing upon a wide array of sources; 2) can be discerned using a wide array of methodologies, including cultural analysis and the positive sciences; and 3) offers a reliable (though not totalistic) grasp of nature (i.e. "robust realism") that allows humans to "interpret and order the sheer randomness of lived reality" (135). After illustrating how Porter employed her own natural law paradigm to reassess contemporary Catholic moral evaluations of marriage and contraception, Chapter Six concludes with the debate between Porter and Lisa Sowle Cahill in the early 2000s about the possibility of using natural law to ground universally applicable ethical claims.

Chapter Seven attends to Cahill's "functionalist" paradigm. Massa explains the twin concerns that motivated her work: 1) the need of a global ethics for the common good that could ground claims for protections and goods across different cultures in an age of rapid globalization; and 2) the intuition that Porter's historicism rendered such cross-cultural work less

possible, intelligible, and desirable. Massa then clarifies Cahill's line of reasoning, arguing that Aquinas's thinking about human inclinations were based upon human experience (not reason) and, therefore, natural law ought to begin with lived human experience as it unfolds in local contexts. Likewise, Cahill rejects both objectivist foundationalism, which was too static, deductive, and often imperialist, as well as relativistic non-foundationalism, which was too thin to protect the world's most vulnerable (especially women). Finally, Cahill employs a more pragmatic, interactive, and provisional model of practical reason (as she insists Aquinas himself had done) to generate universal yet revisable claims that could generate a tentative, workable moral consensus on the practical issues of the day.

Massa then further clarifies what distinguishes Cahill from Porter so as to not invalidate his own discontinuity thesis. Porter found the provisional, historically-contingent character of moral truth to be an impediment to global ethics, whereas Cahill still finds it to be a secure enough basis for morality. Moreover, Porter deems pluralism to be too diverse to offer a global ethics, but Cahill deems it to be what makes global ethics viable and indispensable. Next, Porter's paradigm engages primarily Catholic agents and actors, whereas Cahill's paradigm expands to include an ever-diversifying set of stakeholders. Finally, Porter largely privileged moral claims themselves, yet Cahill privileged moral action as the ultimate criterion for natural law.

Chapter Eight goes on to reiterate Massa's main argument and gestures toward the ways in which Kuhn's discontinuity thesis might continue to offer a helpful conceptual tool to other disciplines under the umbrella of theology and religious studies. To do so, Massa points to similarities between Kuhn's understanding of scientific revolutions, his own claims about revolutions in American natural law theories, and John Meier's assessment that New Testament Christologies did not build upon each other in a linear fashion, as biblical scholars previously assumed.

There is much to commend in Massa's work. His attempt to move the story about how and why understandings of natural law have changed since the 1960s beyond the usual tidiness with which it is presented is admirable. Even more impressive is that he succeeds in his attempt to complicate this narrative. Massa successfully convinces his readers that Kuhn's schema of paradigm revolution elucidates remarkably well the past fifty years of American Catholic natural law theorizing. By bringing together Kuhn and the history of American Catholic moral theology, Massa protects the latter from oversimplification and validates the former as a helpful conceptual framework

in the charting of intellectual histories outside of the physical sciences. In this way, Massa contributes much to scholarship about American Catholic history, as well as intellectual history more generally.

The selection of the four natural law theories in Part III helpfully conveys the work of major figures who represent a spectrum of positions across multiple debates concerning natural law and *Humanae Vitae*. The result is a thorough, though not overwhelming, survey of five decades of American Catholic moral paradigms. Massa's parsing of the debates and distinctions between Porter and Cahill is especially interesting and effective. Because it is easy for studies of American Catholic natural law to focus almost exclusively on fights about *Humanae Vitae* itself or to become bogged down in the wider, polarizing, unproductive debates of the culture wars, it is a credit to the book that it takes readers beyond these disputes. Indeed, it exposes the reality that there exists more to natural law today than the question of the moral permissibility of contraception, however important that question may be.

Relatedly, the sequence of and transitions between Chapters Four through Seven are smooth. With a master storyteller's touch, Massa weaves together paradigms, critiques, proposals, reconstructions and, crucially, does so in a way that does not compromise his own discontinuity thesis. Chapter Eight's inquiry into the helpfulness of Kuhn's work for other disciplines is especially thought-provoking. For example, Massa's work on Kuhn may very well inspire Christian theologians to employ Kuhn's framework to shed light upon why and how different models of sin emerged in the twentieth century.

One struggles to find anything worth objecting to in this book. Perhaps the closest Massa comes to inviting critique relates to his use of Curran, and yet this complaint is at best a minor worry. After devoting the final part of Chapter Seven to distinguishing Porter and Cahill, in order to preempt the objection that the latter actually builds upon the former in such a way as to invalidate his own discontinuity thesis, Massa does not offer the same focused elucidation of the distinctions between Curran and Cahill. Thus, a critic might wonder whether Cahill's natural law paradigm does, in fact, evolve out of Curran's paradigm in a continuous manner. Massa merely writes in Chapter Eight about Porter's conclusion, "Thomistic natural law language is finally *tribal* and historically and culturally bounded offers a very different understanding of its utility than that of the models offered by Fr. Charles Curran and Lisa Sowle Cahill, for both of whom it was essential to its very purpose that natural law discourse be ecumenical, interreligious, and indeed 'global' in a way close to that posited by Aristotle" (183; emphasis in

original). Nonetheless, the careful reader will find enough throughout their respective chapters to allay apprehension on this point.

This book evinces Massa's trademark style: the ability to combine intellectual rigor with a clear, engaging, and sympathetic style of writing. As such, it is versatile enough to spur serious thinking by experts who study natural law, Catholic moral theology, American religion, and intellectual history, as well as to introduce novices to the debates surrounding *Humanae Vitae*. Any one of the chapters in Part III could be used to teach undergraduates about prominent natural law models of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, provided that instructors offer some background about Kuhn as detailed in Chapter Two.

Although, at present, none of the natural law paradigms explored in Part III have attained the same status as neo-scholastic paradigms did, Massa seems to suggest that Porter and Cahill's paradigms have endured more—or are more likely to endure—than Curran and Grisez's theories. Readers of this highly recommended and eminently readable book will be hard pressed to doubt Massa's conclusion that American Catholic natural law since the 1960s is a tale of discontinuity, rupture, and revolution. Moreover, they will find it equally difficult to avoid wondering with excitement about when, where, why, and how anomalies to these paradigms might emerge and who will be the next to reconstruct a new natural law paradigm. Finally, they will leave this text with gratitude for what Massa has given them: a more nuanced reading of history and a sharper appreciation for how moral theology changes over time.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Peter K. Fay](#) is a doctoral candidate in theological ethics at Boston College. His dissertation draws from Scripture, Thomas Aquinas, and Catholic Social Teaching to explore the possibility and contours of the flourishing of people with schizophrenia in the United States. Prior to pursuing graduate studies in theological ethics, he taught United States History and World History at Digital Harbor High School in Baltimore, Maryland through Teach For America.