

Obedience of Faith and the Danger of Dissent

Since the 1960s many Catholic scholars—especially theologians—have claimed an alleged right to dissent from “official Church teaching,” and on the basis of this right they have proposed that many Catholic doctrines are subject to questioning and possible revision by properly qualified scholars. The basis for this alleged right is a conception of academic freedom and personal autonomy which locates the criteria of truth primarily in the intellect of the individual thinker. Critics of this alleged right have pointed to its inconsistency with Church discipline and to the harm that dissent may do to the young and to the theologically untrained. In this paper I propose to examine the harm that accrues to the dissenting scholar himself. Although the focus will be on the theologian, the central point of the paper applies to other Christian scholars, as well.

The thesis of the paper is that dissent endangers the dissenter’s relationship with God by undermining faith. Two aspects of faith are decisively important. First, faith rests on the testimony of the witness, the primary among whom is Christ himself. Because the object of faith is God as he is in himself, only Christ can witness to the truth about this. This very fact necessitates a *correspondence account of truth*, for in the context of faith the only sense we can make of the revealed proposition is that it corresponds to the unseen reality to which it refers. Second, faith is a spiritual condition of the soul, mystical in nature. By faith the soul (including the intellect) is conformed to God in a way that is, strictly speaking, imperceptible. For this reason one cannot form his own faith, but only cooperate with it. In this is John of the Cross’s “dark night of the spirit”. One can, however, undermine it by ‘deforming’ the intellect, and one does this by embracing the right to dissent from revealed truth. Therefore to choose to dissent

is to cut oneself off from God himself who reveals and from Jesus Christ, who is his witness. And this constitutes a grave danger to the faith itself of the scholar who chooses to dissent.

The tone of the paper will be of one colleague to his fellows: “Here is what I have discovered that we should all take to heart.” I intend neither to condemn nor to scold—only to warn my others like me.

Sources for the paper will include Thomas Aquinas’s *De Veritate* q. 14, Karol Wojtyła’s *The Doctrine of Faith in St. John of the Cross*, and John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio*. I will no doubt cite the Gospel of John and one or two other Scriptural sources.

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