



September 2013

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Recommended Citation

Hanchin, T. (2013). Beyond Obedience and Abandonment: Toward a Theory of Dissent in Catholic Education. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 17 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1701132014>

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Beyond Obedience and Abandonment: Toward a Theory of Dissent in Catholic Education

Graham P. McDonough

Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012

307 pages, \$34.95

Reviewed by Timothy Hanchin, Boston College, Massachusetts

That dissent is alive and well in North American Catholic education is difficult to dispute. The pedagogical implications of dissent, however, have remained largely unexamined, and therefore obscure. Graham P. McDonough's *Beyond Obedience and Abandonment* attempts to remedy this situation by proposing a theory and pedagogy of dissent that will aid believers in working out intellectual disagreements in a more fruitful way. As the title indicates, the author means to propose an alternative to the false option of either blind obedience or knee-jerk abandonment that appears when institutional coherence is reduced to doctrinal unity. This project is pertinent and welcomed at a time when ecclesial and theological discourse is as partisan as state politics.

McDonough's work is exemplary in addressing an eminently practical question with the theoretical and philosophical resources that solutions to complex problems require. How can Catholic students learn to express their disagreement with certain Catholic teachings "in a pedagogically and religiously meaningful way?" (p. 3). This question is equally relevant for their teachers. The second chapter's nuanced theoretical presentation of the theological and ecclesial issues permeating the key concepts of education, Magisterium, conscience, and dissent paves the way for the heart of the book: a theory of dissent. The proposed seven criteria that comprise a theory of dissent in Chapter 5 underscore the distinction between a self-referential critical rejectionist and the protesting loyalist, like Socrates, whose dissent is exercised as solidarity in the name of the community's common good. The middle of *Beyond Obedience and Abandonment* showcases the author's interdisciplinary competence by drawing upon leading voices such as Groome

and Moran in religious education, Schillebeeck and Dulles in theology, and Plato and Dewey in philosophy, among many others.

The withdrawal into theory prepares the reader for McDonough's discussion of dissent in contemporary educational contexts. The quest for a pedagogy of dissent introduced by three contemporary case studies in the introduction, and contextualized within Canadian Catholic education in Chapter 3, culminates in Chapter 7, with a pedagogy of dissent. The pedagogy outlines seven pillars that act as guidelines for fostering open, honest, and reasoned conversation when divergent viewpoints persist. The concrete, ready-made suggestions are practical, for the most part. The third pillar, adopting the place of amateur theologians, raises developmental questions, even as a heuristic, as it recommends placing a student

in a position where he or she interacts with, contests, and creates opinions based upon his or her learned experience with biblical and theological scholarship, moral philosophy, church history, ecclesiology, science, and cultural studies, along with his or her experience of prayer and Church community. (p. 235)

That is a tall order for graduate students, let alone undergraduate or high school students. The existential thrust of the proposed pedagogy reflects the author's perceived shift in the Catholic Church at Vatican II from instruction to conversation. Correspondingly, the pedagogy of dissent emphasizes the process of Catholic thinking over the content of Catholic thought.

McDonough's theological contribution invites further exploration. It is often noted, as the author does, that Thomas Aquinas's welcome of Aristotle and Arabic philosophers was the cause of great suspicion during his own age. In addition to serving as a prime example of the vindicated dissenter, we learn from Aquinas a spirituality of pedagogy. The *Summa* teaches us that the believing scholar practices radical hospitality by inviting adversaries into the conversation in order to illuminate their valuable and noble contribution. A practical gain is to be had in how contrasting positions bring one's own view into sharper focus. There is also the theological insistence of goodness in the fact that something or someone exists, in as much as creation participates in the likeness of its creator. We learn from Aquinas that we are conversational and that our God is conversational—three persons mutually mediating knowing and loving.

McDonough rightly cautions against merely hoisting a theology of dissent upon a school, but wading out into deeper theological waters may enrich his case for a conversational pedagogy. Foundations, in the line of Augustine, Aquinas, and Newman, are not a matter of deduction but begin with an invitation for self-examination. Foundations regard horizons, conversion, and authenticity; they emerge out of the context interpersonal situations. McDonough's discussion of the theoretical issues of classroom pedagogy in Chapter 4 may benefit from striking closer to the root.

Beyond Obedience and Abandonment is praiseworthy most of all as a work of practical theology that takes interdisciplinary scholarship seriously and recognizes the value of theoretical and philosophical thinking in service of a practical solution to a complex problem. This effort is all the more laudable in our age when the field of religious education tends toward a bent stick remedy that champions praxis over and against theory in a way that undermines the reciprocal relationship between them. The author reminds us that abstraction can enrich and that, contrary to a dominant culture of pre-conception, judgment properly follows understanding. Catholic educators will benefit from taking the time to think more deeply about the pedagogical implications of dissent. McDonough is a very capable guide.

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