

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

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

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

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.