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Résumé de l'article

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# “I do have to represent the faith:” An Account of an Ecclesiological Problem When Teaching Philosophy in Ontario’s Catholic High Schools

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## **Abstract**

The Canadian province of Ontario introduced philosophy as a secondary school subject in 1995 (Pinto, McDonough, & Boyd, 2009). Since publicly-funded Catholic schools teach approximately 32% of all students in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022), the question arises regarding how teachers in those schools coordinate philosophy and Catholic teachings. This study employs a secondary analysis of interviews with six teachers from Ontario’s Catholic schools, and employs two of Avery Dulles’ (2002) conceptions of *church* (institution and mystical communion) to determine how they consider the choices available within their own tradition that could answer this question. Rather than looking only at the shortcomings of treating magisterial teaching as philosophy, this paper argues that there are also conceptual problems that these courses must address in order to improve their *ecclesiological* adequacy, and illustrates how an apparent null curriculum privileges the institutional ecclesiology.

**Keywords:** Catholic education, Catholic school, philosophy, ecclesiology, null curriculum, high school philosophy

## **« Je dois représenter la foi » : compte rendu d'un problème ecclésiologique lors de l'enseignement de la philosophie dans les écoles secondaires catholiques de l'Ontario**

### **Résumé**

La province canadienne de l'Ontario a introduit la philosophie comme matière au secondaire en 1995. Étant donné que les écoles catholiques financées par l'État enseignent à environ 32 % de tous les élèves ontariens, la question se pose de savoir comment les enseignants coordonnent la philosophie et l'enseignement catholique. Cet article utilise une analyse secondaire d'entrevues avec six enseignants des écoles catholiques de l'Ontario ainsi que deux des conceptions de l'Église (institution et communion mystique) d'Avery Dulles (2002) afin de déterminer le point de vue de ces enseignants sur les choix disponibles dans leur propre tradition qui pourraient répondre à cette question. Plutôt que d'examiner uniquement les lacunes liées au traitement de l'enseignement magistral en tant que philosophie, cet article soutient qu'il existe également des problèmes conceptuels que ces cours doivent résoudre afin d'améliorer leur adéquation ecclésiologique, et démontre comment un programme apparemment nul privilégie l'ecclésiologie institutionnelle.

Mots-clés : éducation catholique; école catholique; philosophie; ecclésiologie; curriculum nul; philosophie de l'école secondaire

## **“Tengo que representar la fe”: relato de un problema eclesiológico en la enseñanza de la filosofía en las escuelas secundarias católicas de Ontario**

### **Resumen**

La provincia canadiense de Ontario introdujo la filosofía como asignatura de secundaria en 1995 (Autores, 2009). Dado que las escuelas católicas financiadas con fondos públicos enseñan aproximadamente al 32% de todos los estudiantes en Ontario (Ministerio de Educación de Ontario, 2020), surge la pregunta sobre cómo los maestros organizan la enseñanza de la filosofía y las enseñanzas católicas. El estudio emplea un análisis secundario de entrevistas con seis maestros de escuelas católicas de Ontario y emplea dos de las concepciones de iglesia de Avery Dulles (2002) (institución y comunión mística) para determinar cómo consideran las opciones disponibles dentro de su propia tradición que podrían responder esta pregunta. En lugar de mirar solo las deficiencias de tratar la enseñanza magisterial como filosofía, este artículo argumenta que también hay problemas conceptuales que estos cursos deben abordar para mejorar su adecuación eclesiológica e ilustra cómo un currículo aparentemente nulo privilegia la eclesiología institucional.

Palabras clave : Educación católica, escuela católica, filosofía, eclesiología, currículo nulo, filosofía de bachillerato

## Introduction

The Canadian province of Ontario introduced philosophy as a secondary school subject in 1995 (Pinto, McDonough, & Boyd, 2009, 2011). This offering makes Ontario unique among English-speaking North American jurisdictions. Ontario also shares a distinction with two other provinces and two territories in Canada, whose publicly-funded schooling options include both secular and Roman Catholic systems. Catholic schools account for approximately 653,450 students, or 32% of all enrollment in Ontario’s publicly-funded schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022), and so make a distinctive contribution to teaching philosophy in that province. While Ontario’s Catholic schools teach mainly the same mandated curricula as secular public schools, they also offer religious education courses and aim to permeate their social atmospheres with Catholic teaching. Furthermore, they integrate Catholic content into courses where possible, and philosophy contains topics like metaphysics and ethics that enable this integration. In some places students may also study philosophy as a religious education credit (see for example, Ottawa Catholic Schools, 2020; Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board, 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Given this context, one might wonder how teaching philosophy in Ontario’s Catholic schools aligns with the Catholic magisterium’s theological teachings. For example, Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain states that, “as a superior science, theology judges philosophy and exercises guidance or government over it ... which consists in rejecting as false any philosophic affirmation which contradicts a theological truth” (Maritain, 1937, as cited in Joseph, 2001, p. 31). For Catholic educational theorist Ellis Joseph, this epistemic ordering grounds the Catholic school’s identity and purpose: “What makes Catholic schools Catholic are the theological truths which govern and give guidance to both philosophy and to persons of Catholic faith” (2001, p. 31). Any Catholic school philosophy course, within the scope of considering the relationship between philosophy, theology, and magisterial teaching, must therefore consider whether to distinguish between those concepts by degree (as Maritain does), or by kind. In our opinion, any tension between philosophy and theologically-informed magisterial teaching becomes amplified when they are epistemically ranked. Additionally, not all theology is reducible to magisterial teaching, and may also critique it. While it is simplistic to suggest that philosophy and theology are mutually opposed, or that philosophy cannot be done in a way that is receptive to considering Catholic magisterial teachings, such acknowledgments do not justify instances where claims like Maritain’s

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<sup>1</sup> One participant in this study explicitly mentions that this is the case in their school, but this study was not able to determine empirically if this is the case in all Ontario Catholic schools. We infer that places that employ this practice do so with the local bishop’s permission. As Catholic Canon Law states, concerning religious education in Catholic schools, “It is for the Episcopal Conference to issue general norms concerning this field of activity and for the diocesan Bishop to regulate and watch over it” (no. 804),

might be overworked to suggest that magisterial teaching is immune from philosophical scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> Thus while a “Catholic approach to teaching philosophy” may exist, the meanings of that phrase cannot be taken for granted, and ought to be scrutinised for its philosophical and theological adequacy. To our knowledge, the research literature to date has paid little if any attention to how philosophy teachers in Catholic high schools respond to the tensions in those relationships.

The purposes of this article are to examine: (1) how teachers conceive of these relationships and respond to the tensions identified above; and (2) offer an evaluation of both the philosophical and theological adequacy of the kinds of replies that they may make in their contexts. It incorporates data from the secondary analysis of teacher interviews, which were drawn from a multi-methods study of philosophy courses in Ontario (Bialystok, Norris, & Pinto, 2019). We analyzed the data by considering two related questions.

The first question asks how the teachers we interviewed uphold both their school’s commitment to Catholic teaching and philosophy’s disciplinary norms. While these self-reported responses are informative, we also propose that presenting them alone is unsatisfactory because they emerge from environments that have definite views on the relationships between faith and reason (Institute for Catholic Education, 1996). As these tensions manifest themselves in debates over religious schooling, they appear to be ongoing and irresolvable. Therefore, any normative claims we might make about these tensions would presuppose our own methodological choice, and possibly only be persuasive to a limited audience. It would be more helpful if we could assist researchers, professional teachers, policymakers, parents, and students with their efforts to engage differently with these topics, rather than only confirming any previously held opinions. How might we do more than simply identify these tensions, and in doing so offer an original contribution that all Catholic education stakeholders might find useful?

Our second question asks how well these schools respond to the range of conceptual choices available within their own tradition, rather than an externally imposed standard. We therefore employ Avery Dulles’ (2002) conceptions of *church*<sup>3</sup> in order to determine how teachers consider Catholic Church teaching in their philosophy courses. Dulles’ work is important here because it argues that “church” must be understood in multiple, irreducible conceptions. We employ two of those conceptions—church as institution and church as mystical communion—to examine how well that multiplicity is reflected in the sample of six teachers’ comprehensions of the philosophy course’s aims. We employ the institutional model to describe any pedagogical emphasis on magisterial authority, and the mystical communion model to describe any (lack of) emphasis on philosophy in the Catholic tradition, which is broader in scope than the magisterial tradition. Our

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, earlier efforts to include philosophy in the Ontario curriculum had been thwarted by critics who worried “it could undermine religion and morality” (Jopling, 2000, p. 132).

<sup>3</sup> We use “church” to refer to the concept, and “Church” as a proper noun to refer to the Roman Catholic Church.

analysis of the whole sample converges upon one participant’s statement, “I do have to represent,” as the focal point for how teachers reconcile philosophical methods with the Catholic magisterium’s institutional norms. So rather than looking only at how these philosophy courses engage with any magisterial-theological premises, this paper argues that these courses must also improve their ecclesiological adequacy. It also illustrates how an apparent null curriculum privileges the institutional ecclesiology. Following Elliott Eisner (1985, p. 107), Frederick Erickson describes null curriculum as the “nonrandomly structured absence” of information, and so “a means by which ideological content is enacted in society; certain voices and perspectives of participants in daily life are made legitimate and salient or are systematically silenced” (Erickson, 1987, p. 20). Our effort to exceed the simple identification of a faith-reason tension in Catholic schools thus informs our choice to examine the data through a conceptual framework from within Catholic ecclesiology. This choice enables our argument to avoid alienating itself from any serious discussions of Catholic education reform.

## Frameworks

We read the data by coordinating concepts from three domains. First, we relate how religious education norms are imagined to permeate Ontario’s Catholic schools, and how teachers are encouraged and expected to integrate religious content into their curricula. These concepts establish the contexts where these participants make professional decisions about coordinating the theological norms, and the Catholic teaching they inform, with philosophical norms. Second, we distinguish between Catholic teaching and philosophy in the Catholic tradition. Finally, our exposition of Dulles’ models of church shares the concepts we use to analyze how participants conceive of the ecclesiological outcomes of students’ learning. That analysis attends especially to how the integration and permeation aims are successful or not in aligning theologically-informed Church teaching with philosophy, and how the realization of these aims in philosophy courses positions students as ecclesial subjects.

### *Ontario’s Catholic Religious Education Norms*

Teachers have some professional autonomy in their classrooms, but local school boards and provincial ministries of education in Canada condition its scope. An organization called the Institute for Catholic Education (ICE)—a partnership of several Catholic education organizations in Ontario—exercises some share of this influence over Ontario’s Catholic schools, including their professional teacher education, and, in coordination with the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, its religious education curriculum (ICE, 2020).

One ICE publication, *Curriculum Matters* (1996), is helpful for understanding the social-institutional framework within which our participants work. It proposes how Catholic teaching could be imagined to both permeate the school experience and be integrated within the curriculum. It considers permeation as the presence of Catholic content across both the school’s formal curriculum and socio-religious atmosphere,

hence being “a school-wide task” (p. 24). Integration, by contrast, is “a cross-curricular task” (p. 24) that aims to “bring about a critical perspective on social and global issues,” informed by Catholic teaching, so that the “[c]urriculum now functions in a transformative way, as a vehicle for personal and social change based on the principles of justice and the view of learner as agent-of-change” (p. 25). The premise is that “there is no need for understanding or thinking to be at odds with faith” because “the Catholic vision of human knowledge proclaims that all truth leads ultimately to the knowledge of God” and “that Christian intelligence is necessary for both faith and cognitive skill development” (p. 25). We interpret participants’ comments with a view that permeation and integration have some normative weight that informs their professional disposition “to represent” magisterial teaching. For this analysis, we focused mainly on integration as it is relevant to teachers for realizing courses that coordinate Catholic content with the discipline of philosophy. Specifically, we focused on what content teachers were integrating and how they presented that integration to students.

### *Distinguishing Catholic Teaching From Philosophy in The Catholic Tradition*

One possible source of Catholic content is Church teaching—which can be found in documentary sources like the Second Vatican Council’s constitutions, decrees, and declarations; canon law; papal encyclicals, catechisms, and so forth—and so it is useful here to distinguish between Catholic teaching and philosophy in the Catholic tradition on the bases of their functions and epistemology. The magisterium authors Catholic teaching. It functions as a normative reference for expressing beliefs, governing the Church, and expressing magisterial views on worldwide phenomena. While its authors would rightly state that it refers to philosophers within the Catholic tradition, we maintain that its declarative function and concurrent basis in theology do not reflect philosophical methods. Where philosophy proposes its statements for the purpose of ongoing argument, Church teaching does not.<sup>4</sup> In its canon law iterations, Church teaching does not contemplate criticisms—a feature that civil law also maintains. By contrast, philosophy in the Catholic tradition is the contemplative act of considering philosophical questions of relevance to the Church.<sup>5</sup> In theory, and because anyone may practice it, whether or not they have formal standing in a Catholic institution, it is not constrained by the magisterium, and so may reflect a wider variety of views. It therefore may just as easily support the magisterium as it might also provide an insider’s critique of Church teaching. Church teaching, just like civil law, may therefore be the outcome of philosophical thought and the object of philosophical study, but is not philosophy in

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Pope John Paul II states: “that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful” (1994, no. 4)

<sup>5</sup> Whittle remarks: “There has even been a tendency to refer to ‘Catholic philosophy’ as if there is a Catholic version of philosophy, as opposed to Catholics who have engaged in philosophy or sought to use philosophy to frame theological arguments and beliefs. Part of this is regarding philosophy as the handmaid or prerequisite to being able to engage in theology” (2015, pp. 598-99; see also p. 605, nos. 10 & 11).

itself. We employed this distinction as we analyzed how participants in this study realized their integration aims.

### *What is church/Church? Who is church/Church?*

According to Dulles (2002), church is a complex concept that has many irreducible and conceptions, or in his terminology, models. His most comprehensive formulation lists six: church as institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, servant, and community of disciples. It is useful to recognize their irreducibility because each model emphasizes “certain aspects of the Church that are less clearly brought out by the other models” (2002, p. 2), which supports his view that “Catholics today should not wish to defend a primarily institutional view of the Church” (p. 2). Both these points inform our analysis, as we use them to ask how the teachers we interviewed conceived of church in their statements about how Catholic teaching arises in their courses. Specifically, do they reduce church to institution, and what or who is excluded if they do?

It is only necessary to employ two conceptions of church to make this analysis. The institutional model is helpful because it encapsulates the meaning of church as an entity defined “primarily in terms of its visible structures, especially the rights and powers of its officers” (Dulles, 2002, p. 27). The primacy this model gives to externally observable elements thus emphasizes the roles and rules that descend from these structures, including its “recognized ministers, accepted confessional formulas, and prescribed forms of public worship” (2002, p. 27). Those ministers include especially the magisterium, and its formulas and prescriptions include the documentary expression of magisterial teaching, including Catholic school religion curriculum. Dulles clearly states that while the institution is necessary, over-emphasizing it as the church’s primary feature distorts its “true nature” (p. 27). Our analysis looks for this conception’s presence in how teachers spoke about their courses.

By contrast, Dulles proposes that the mystical communion model conceives of the Church as having a basis in the primary social group, which is less formally structured than the institution. He follows Charles Cooley’s characterization of “primary groups” as having “(1) face-to-face association; (2) unspecialized character of that association; (3) relative permanence; (4) small number of persons involved; [and] (5) the relative intimacy among the participants” (p. 40). Rather than considering membership by quantitative criteria like parish enrolment or attendance at Mass, this model understands it “in an organic, spiritual, or mystical sense, referring to the Church as a communion of grace” (pp. 49-50). This model thus considers the informal, affective, and interpersonal relationships among its members as prior to any formalized roles, offices, rules, and documents within their association. It thus resonates with images of Church as “Body of Christ and the People of God” (p. 42).

These models draw us to ask how the curriculum and its teachers understand the Church, whether as an institution or as the people themselves. When ecclesiological norms are transposed into philosophy courses, they therefore imply how the curriculum and school imagine its purpose in promoting student agency in the Church (see McDonough, 2011). The institutional model privileges Church authorities and their



teachings as normative. If those teachings are philosophical, they are only so to the degree that they may employ philosophical content or methods to support the institution, but not self-reflexively critique it. Catholic institutional authority is also limited to ordained men, or those who act as their agents. So while some students may assent to and choose to support this model, and within the scope of a philosophy course consider institutional teaching as the object of their study, it remains a narrow basis from which to consider both what the Church is, and who contributes to its philosophical tradition. By contrast, the mystical communion model is sociologically more inclusive, and therefore has greater openness to more philosophical contributors in the Catholic tradition. The contrast between these two conceptions is therefore important for this study because it reveals how we might ask what, and very importantly, whom teachers include and exclude in their statements about representing the Church.

## Methods

The interview data we analyze here are derived from a larger study of teaching and learning philosophy in Ontario high schools. The purpose of that study was to collect wide-ranging data about how the philosophy curriculum is implemented across Ontario's diverse schools—public (secular), publicly-funded Catholic, and private; French and English;<sup>6</sup> and urban, suburban, and rural (Bialystok, Norris, & Pinto, 2019). The research employed qualitative inquiry. In the spirit of this research paradigm, our project not only reveals individual teachers' and students' experiences, but also puts “meanings in motion” (Bochner, 2018, p. 366) when teachers and students express their understandings of philosophy within their curricular contexts. That larger study used three data collection methods to gather cross-sectional information about each philosophy class: (a) in-depth semi-structured interviews with philosophy teachers, (b) focus groups with students from these teachers' classes, and (c) classroom observations, where two researchers simultaneously observed each class. The research team developed protocols through an iterative process. Our colleagues reviewed the protocols, we piloted them, and trained our research team members in their use before fieldwork began. The research ethics boards of the principal investigator's institution (at the time Norris was at University of Toronto) and of the participating school districts approved all instruments. Between 2012 and 2014 we visited 16 schools throughout southern Ontario, interviewing 19 teachers, holding focus groups with a total of 216 students, and conducting 142 classroom observations of approximately 60-75 minutes each.

This paper relies on secondary data analysis (Ruggiano & Perry 2019) of the six Catholic school teacher interviews in our data set. Five of the Catholic schools were English, one was French, and most were suburban (see Table 1). We opted to delve into secondary data analysis of this subset to gain insight into the very unique course and curricular circumstances that Catholic teachers face when a philosophy course is

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<sup>6</sup> Ontario has four kinds of publicly funded schools: English (secular), English Catholic, French (secular), and French Catholic, with the vast majority being English (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021).

overtly tied to the aim of integrating religious teaching, and sometimes earning a religious education credit. The secondary analysis allows us to explore questions in depth that were not a part of the primary analysis (Ruggiano & Perry 2019), and it focuses on the interviews as they informed the question of how teachers understand the relationships between philosophy, theology, and magisterial teaching.

Participants (n=6)			Catholic Schools (n=6)		
Pseudonym	Sex	Philosophy Courses Taught	Pseudonym	Language	Location
<i>Participant A</i>	M	Grade 12	School 1	English	Suburban
<i>Participant B</i>	M	Grade 12	School 2	French	Rural
<i>Participant C</i>	M	Grade 12	School 3	English	Suburban
<i>Participant D</i>	M	Grade 12	School 4	English	Urban
<i>Participant E</i>	F	Grade 12	School 5	English	Suburban
<i>Participant F</i>	M	Grade 11 Grade 12	School 6	English	Suburban

Table 1: Participant and school pseudonyms, with demographic features.

We used purposive sampling to recruit our teacher participants (Palys, 2008) through the researchers' existing contacts with professional teachers. We also used snowball sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) to recruit participants from among the colleagues the original teacher participants recommended to us. After we identified potential school sites and received ethics review approval from the school districts, we confirmed these teachers' participation. Our recruitment process also aimed to ensure gender diversity. We anonymized the data and assigned pseudonyms to both the teachers and schools.

We entered the interview transcripts into NVIVO software, and multiple members of the research team coded each document. The team followed Bogdan and Biklen's (1998) inductive analysis, including process coding that reflects both common and various emergent themes. This inductive approach to the data enabled the team to identify patterns, themes, and categories that “emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (Patton, 1990, p. 390). The researchers compared, discussed, and revised new themes as they emerged to reflect a consensus view. Tesch (1990) describes this process of identifying themes and coding categories as “de-contextualization,” and their reformulation to present a unified and coherent picture as “recontextualization.”

The research employed generally accepted methods for qualitative validation in order to establish evidence that data and analysis are as accurate as possible (Cresswell, 2012). This included expert review and piloting of data collection instruments, member-

checking of data collected, triangulation of data through multiple sources (interviews, observations, and focus groups), and finally by multiple researcher participation in data analysis. This research carries limitations often associated with qualitative inquiry. First, findings are limited to the knowledge, perceptions and honesty of each participant. Some may give an answer they feel will be appreciated by the researcher or be a “right answer.” Triangulation of data (especially through classroom observation) addresses this. Second, in describing educational, cultural, institutional contexts, participants and researchers are also subject to them. We addressed this limitation by collecting multiple data sources, and involving the research team in every step of the process. Finally, though our data sets are extensive, we do not purport to have achieved a “representative sample”. Rather, they are illustrative of the presence of conceptual problems within Catholic school philosophy courses, and even though they do not make claims as to the frequency or intensity of these problems within classrooms, the fact of their conceptual presence also illustrates how they lead to teachers and students encountering practical problems as a result. Our presentation of findings, below, also proposes that the emergence of these illustrations from distinct locations suggests that each participant’s contribution independently confirms the presence of these problems within Ontario’s Catholic schools.

The teacher interview protocol (validated expert review and pilot testing) included eight general questions about the nature of philosophy and the benefits and challenges of teaching it in high school. Follow-up questions were chosen to probe promising areas of discussion. The final question asked whether issues of faith surfaced in the philosophy classroom and, if so, to what effect. Religion emerged in teachers’ answers to other questions as well, including those about the aims and scope of teaching philosophy, and their experiences with controversy in the classroom. The secondary analysis read the data to determine what conceptions of church participants used, and how they integrated Catholic content into their courses. This secondary analysis is instructive for revealing what ecclesiological assumptions teachers take for granted in their work because none of the Catholic teachers were asked specifically about their conception of Church, or whether they explore the relationship between a Catholic philosophical tradition and Church teaching in their courses.

In the next section we analyze how participants’ references to church signal their responses to the intersection of Church teaching with philosophy’s disciplinary norms. We analyzed their references to church according to the following questions:

1. To what conception of church does it refer?
2. What are the implications of this conception?

Our consideration of implications focused on how the ecclesiological conceptions coordinated or signaled difficulties with both the participants’ illustration of the relationship between philosophy, theology, and Church teaching and the aims of permeation and integration.

## Findings

The findings illustrate two distinct ways in which the participants understand the relationship between philosophy and magisterial teaching, and hence how it applies to the ways that they think about their professional practice and its responsibilities. As such, the data illustrate how teachers have varying understandings of that relationship, ranging from perceptions that it is smoothly coordinated to those that find it is constraining and problematic.

Our presentation reflects these differences. The first part relates comments that signal teachers' full endorsement of the status quo, where the main ecclesiological focus is institutional, and integration of Catholic content refers to magisterial Catholic teaching, rather than philosophy within the Catholic tradition. These illustrations show a tendency towards teachers' perceptions of a smooth integration of Church teaching and philosophy, without troubling the distinction between them. The second part illustrates evidence of teachers' discomfort with including Church teaching in philosophy courses and shows instances of how they struggle with how to think about integration. Across both parts, however, the primary conception of institution notably remains the same, coordinated with an understanding that integration means use of magisterial teaching, rather than philosophy in the Catholic tradition. Since this study's data were collected from teachers in six different schools, across varied geographic and demographic contexts, each teacher's contribution stands as independent confirmation of institutionalism's possibly hegemonic presence throughout the province.

### *Smooth Integrations of Philosophy and Church Teaching*

Participants A, B, and C illustrate Catholic teaching's smooth integration into their courses. Participant A's comments characterize it as a foundational perspective, where “we say right from the beginning, ‘this is a philosophy course looked at through a Catholic Christian lens’” and “I always as a Catholic teacher, always have to talk about Catholic Church teaching, OK, that's always the lens.” The expectation is that students will receive and engage with this teaching, but not necessarily believe or follow it. Both Participant A's and B's comments are consistent with Church teaching on intellectual freedom, where Participant A informs them of their obligation “to follow what your conscience is telling you” (Vatican Council II 1964, no. 36; 1965, nos. 1 & 3), and Participant B assures them that, while “I believe in what I'm teaching here,” they “can challenge anything [they] like,” and are free to “make up their own minds” (Vatican Council II 1965, no. 4). Participant A thus presents magisterial statements as prompts to students' thinking, with the formula: “This is what the Church teaches and this is why it teaches it, what do you think?”

Both Participants A's and B's interviews suggest that they limit their presentation of church to this institutional conception, and that they present magisterial teaching as philosophy in itself. If this is what integration looks like in their courses, then analyzing it for the influence of thinkers like Augustine or Thomas Aquinas, and evaluating it within the scope of contemporary philosophers in the Catholic tradition, would be another way

to consider integration. If the participants do in fact structure their courses this way, their statements indicate something different. Participant A’s quickly stepping to the “what do you think?” question suggests that soliciting student opinion on the teaching is the usual method, rather than examining how a Catholic philosophical tradition informs or critiques it. Participant A does in fact state that Church teaching is “always the lens,” not a Catholic philosophical tradition. Like Participant A, Participant B’s reference to his belief in Church teaching and students’ intellectual freedom primarily concerns their religious or affective relationship with Church teaching rather than how they respond to a philosopher’s contribution to the Catholic tradition or commentary on that teaching. Presumably, neither Participants A nor B would explicitly teach students how to evaluate any weaknesses in Church teaching, either. The structure of integration in these illustrations therefore appears to be less philosophical and less oriented toward the mystical communion model, but rather theological and oriented toward presenting the institutional model. Its conception of student agency is also limited in this regard. As a result, the philosophical quality of these courses is potentially diminished.

Participant C strongly implies that philosophy in the Catholic tradition is coterminous with Church teaching. He begins his course by stating a commitment to intellectual freedom that is similar to what Participants A and B promote: “When we start the course, I tell the kids that one of the things I love about our faith is that we don’t check our brains at the door,” and that students’ “thoughts and discussions go—are free to go wherever they wish. Or wherever logic takes it.” As Participants A’s and B’s comments offer a more open-ended vision of their course’s outcomes, in Participant C’s view, a Catholic philosophical outlook also accepts magisterial authority, which makes intellectual freedom an ideal means of finding congruence with that authority on one’s own, rather than through external imposition. He states:

My vision of being Catholic is that it belongs to the Catholic faith because it’s true. The Catholic faith does not make it true, it just discovers the truth that is in our universe. So I see the two [philosophy and religion] working really well together.” (see ICE, 1996, p. 25)

This statement seems to indicate that teachers like Participant C aim to re-synthesize Catholic students’ relationships with reason and faith so that they continue to hold Catholic beliefs, except now supported by more autonomous and rigorous philosophical reasoning. Like with Participants A and B, for Participant C integration also seems to mean integrating magisterial teaching, rather than philosophy in the Catholic tradition.

### *Problematic Relationships Between Philosophy And Church Teaching*

For other teachers, though, integrating Catholic teaching produces some internal dissonance. Participant D states that “the only discomfort that I’ve ever experienced,” when teaching philosophy “is more given from a systematic place. The fact that I do teach in the Catholic system.” Part of this discomfort leads him to limit the teaching of certain topics, and he shares that he is “cautious more than conflicted” about teaching philosophical topics that intersect with religious faith, for even though he “really [wants to] help students develop their own opinions,” he perceives that, “I do have to be careful

and so around faith-based issues I definitely sometimes have to bite my tongue, for sure.” Similarly, Participant E’s comments indicate that students’ prior learning of Catholic teaching clashes with what and how he teaches:

They’ve been schooled ... to believe X, Y, or, Z dogmatically ... we don’t teach them to be critical of the resurrected body of Christ, for example.<sup>7</sup> It’s ... how would you say ... [an] article of faith, so to speak. So yeah, you do see the conflict creep up in the ethical discussions.

Integration appears here to be difficult and problematic.

From both Participants D’s and E’s comments it appears that the norms of permeating and integrating magisterial teaching limit critical thinking on religious topics, and so condition pedagogical choices. Participant D’s reference to a “systematic” structure and Participant E’s inferring dogmatism suggest that institutional authority strongly conditions their work. The “discomfort” and “conflict” it produces thus indicates the absence of an ecclesiological foundation that would enable Catholic students to think critically of themselves being the Church. Instead, they mainly receive and respond to its institutional expression. The hesitations to critique magisterial teaching, and observation that ongoing religious education tends toward dogmatism, suggest that a null curriculum that excludes some critical philosophical, historical, and theological thinking practices permeates the school. The integration aim, as these two teachers illustrate, seems to be achieved through accepting this null curriculum.

Participant F’s answers share some of the features of other participants’ reflections, but are also unique within the sample for relating how he intentionally works to minimize the integration task, and how coordinating faith and philosophy sits simultaneously as both seamlessly natural and a challenge. As he offers a statement similar to his peers: “I try and bring in as much as I can. And I say it to the kids right from the get go that I’m teaching philosophy from a Christian perspective because I’m Christian and it’s my perspective,” his next statement presents a remarkable departure from them: “But I try and leave the faith part out of it and try and bring the critical thinking in more.” It is not precisely clear what Participant F means here by “the faith.” If it refers to magisterial teaching, then his distinguishing it from critical thinking suggests the difference between teaching students to accept a proposition based on external authority versus thinking for themselves. Participant F would thus be positioning “the faith” as a minimum religious requirement he must meet before moving along with teaching philosophy. However, “faith” could also refer to how one affectively encounters the supernatural, thus indicating ways of knowing that are distinct from philosophy’s cognitive emphases. If this is Participant F’s meaning, then it would make sense that he distinguishes between these two ways of knowing. Both readings, however, show that Participant F does his best to diminish integration of faith and suggest that he actively struggles to work within the school’s conception of how philosophy, theology, and magisterial teaching coordinate.

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<sup>7</sup> Participant E may be speaking hypothetically, but a historical argument supports this critique (Ehrman, 2014).

Participant F also finds himself working to disrupt students’ habits of uncritically accepting external authority on religious matters:

Surprisingly, I have a couple of kids that are really, really religious<sup>8</sup> and they had a very hard time with the idea of philosophy because they took it as a religion credit and they’re very much, ‘I believe what I believe because this is what I’ve been taught and this is my faith and this is the way that it is,’ and were almost offended because I asked them to critically think about why they believe what they believe. So they’ve come a long way and they have—they’re realizing I’m not trying to destroy their opinions and destroy their faith but if you’re going to hold an opinion know why you hold it and know why—why it’s a valid opinion ... They’re doing much better at that now than in the beginning.

On this point Participant F’s approach may be congruent with Participant C’s encouraging his students to support their faith with (more) autonomous philosophical thinking. The tension between philosophical thinking and religious faith does not resolve so simply, however. At the same time as he is asking those students to reconsider how they hold their beliefs, Participant F also must apparently contend with a requirement to act as a magisterial agent, which precludes his offering (Catholic) philosophical critiques of Church teaching. His comments on teaching critical thinking, for example, suggest that he has much more to offer than these conditions permit:

I do feel sometimes I’m limited in what I can say. Because I do have to represent the faith. Like I can’t—I might agree with gay marriage but I can’t come out and say, ‘oh no the Church definitely needs to get with the times,’ because it would be contradicting—I have to represent.

The null curriculum that permeates the school narrows the possibilities of integration to the point of his professional discomfort, and indicates a problematic relationship between philosophy, theology, and the magisterium in this context. A distinctively Catholic form of critical thinking<sup>9</sup> thus seems to be bounded by what the magisterium privileges. Participant F may encourage his students to think deeply about why they hold their religious beliefs, but at the same time may not critique the structures of Church teaching. The norms of integration seem to rule this possibility out.

Participant F’s use of the verb “to represent” is interesting when considering how philosophical thinking works in his classroom. From a pedagogical perspective, the procedure of a teacher representing Church teaching implies a student comprehending it as the intended learning outcome. That kind of learning is essential for accurate philosophical work, and may also lead to students’ evaluation of these teachings. But students’ intellectual freedom in that regard is limited to the degree that the teacher

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<sup>8</sup> Participant F’s use of this term is accurate because he knows religion is important in these students’ lives and they apparently hold their religious beliefs with great strength. The “really religious” construction needs to be interpreted cautiously, however, to avoid evoking binary caricatures where all meanings of religious reduce to “uncritical dogmatism,” against a foil of “critical secular rationality.” Participant F’s portrait of these students, while indisputably credible, should not be over-extended to exhaust all meanings and experiences of that phenomenon.

<sup>9</sup> Recall ICE, 1996, p. 25, quoted above.

cannot also model to them procedures for moving from comprehension to evaluation of Catholic teachings. Consequently, both permeation and integration practices privilege the institutional over the mystical communion model. We infer that these limitations reflect an ecclesiological assumption that the magisterium does the real philosophical work first, for lay Catholics to receive and imitate.

From the conception of church as mystical communion, Participant F’s formulation also suggests an ecclesiological circularity: he is asked to represent the Catholic students to themselves, because they constitute the Church as “Body of Christ” and “People of God.” It is therefore more likely that Participant F means that he represents the magisterial, institutional church to lay Catholic (and all) students. If that is the case, then the tacit acceptance of this institutional conception in these formulations is both philosophically and especially theologically problematic. It is philosophically problematic because it does not model to students the habit of questioning the premises of an argument; particularly, it does not promote their considering how some concepts contain irreducible conceptions, rather than tidy unity. It is theologically problematic because the premise of an institutional ecclesiology presents students with only a limited conception of what church is, and more significantly, diminishes their own agency within it.

## Discussion

This study illustrates how Ontario’s Catholic school philosophy courses signify the presence of null curriculum in their religious education. That null curriculum is the non-engagement with Maritain’s claim that theology trumps philosophy: congruent with the privilege that these philosophy classes give to magisterial teaching. To the degree that this privilege blocks (Catholic) philosophical critiques of that teaching, it diminishes their ability to enable students to think philosophically for themselves about it.

These courses appear to be proceeding with an unspoken and limited understanding of the place of philosophy, and surprisingly, theology in the Catholic school. It is remarkable that teacher comments reveal how the questions, “What is Church?” and “Who is church?” go unasked, thus showing a conceptual weakness in their enactment of the church’s constitution. There is seemingly little engagement with philosophy in the Catholic tradition, let alone critiques of that tradition and the magisterium. The philosophy courses thus reveal an important consequence of this null curriculum, which is that they establish church as something that is done to the students, rather than something that the students do for themselves. This structure echoes Lakeland’s (2002) observation of a wider phenomenon within Catholic culture, where a passive laity “[has], for too long, failed to voice their concerns for what is, after all, their church” (2002, p. 266). Students are not encouraged to imagine how their philosophical study, in coordination with religious education, could lead them to participate in Catholic life beyond receiving what their teachers represent.

“To represent” does the minimal work of meeting the requirements to count philosophy as equivalent to a religion course. The teachers do not relate how representation leads to more intense philosophical work, beyond simply soliciting student opinion. The teachers do not state whether they explore how the Catholic



philosophical tradition supports, partially supports, or disagrees with Church teaching; nor do they state whether they explore the history of this relationship. Consequently, their classes seem to best support students by providing them with a forum to interact generically with the institutional Church through its theological teaching, but not to engage with the Catholic philosophical tradition as contributors to Catholic intellectual life.

What might take the place of Catholic teaching in philosophy courses in a way that both satisfies claims of Catholic distinctiveness and a hope to sustain a high level of academic philosophical work? One option for the school could be to study philosophers in the Catholic tradition, including both those who inform the magisterium and those who present internal critiques of it.<sup>10</sup> The aim would be to lead students toward disciplined philosophical thinking within the tradition, rather than toward theological beliefs. No less, the course would also have to engage directly with the conceptual distinction between philosophy and theology, and claims like Maritain’s about the latter’s superiority. Schools could definitely continue using Church teaching to analyze its philosophical features, with the qualification that students would need to know clearly that this purpose is not catechetical. In realizing this objective, students would also require exposure to a sufficient range of scholarship—including philosophers within and outside the Catholic tradition—that would enable them to perform this analysis well.

It is not our purpose to argue that Catholic schools’ philosophy courses should concentrate on philosophy in the Catholic tradition. Rather, we only suggest it as a possible solution to the problems that arise when Catholic teaching is presented as philosophy. It is our view that continuing this practice undermines both the philosophical aims of the course and any claim that there is a distinctive Catholic philosophical tradition. Moreover, the institutional conception of Church embedded within that practice enables degrees of deferential adherence to the magisterium that at the very least limit critical thinking about Church itself. Thus, the overriding obligation to “represent” the faith puts these teachers in a compromised position vis-à-vis (non-Catholic) philosophy writ large. How can students really “do” philosophy and question everything, when there are already rigid constraints on what truth is and who is allowed to philosophize?

## Conclusion

This paper began by asking how Ontario Catholic teachers negotiate Catholic teaching in the context of philosophy’s disciplinary norms. Our findings are relevant for researchers, professional teachers, policymakers, parents, and students in that they suggest how the relationships between philosophy, theology, and magisterial teaching could be approached differently in Catholic education. The epistemic concerns we find among the participants about how they conceive of these relationships in philosophy

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<sup>10</sup> While our findings illustrate the use of Church teaching as philosophical content in these participants’ courses, we are aware that some, but not all Ontario Catholic schools include reference to Catholic philosophers in their philosophy course descriptions.

courses lead to (or reveal) a broader ecclesiological problem within the school regarding how students are imagined and positioned as agents within the Church.

While representing the magisterium is a valid way of understanding a singular, institutional conception of Church, this task does not enable Catholic students to recognize themselves as constituting the Church (by virtue of their baptism: see Vatican Council II, 1964, nos. 7, 10, & 11) and as philosophical contributors to it (by virtue of their Catholic school education). In summary, no matter how much or little they struggle with integrating Catholic content across the curriculum, these teachers' comments indicate that they are all working within a context that emphasizes presenting the institutional church ahead of imagining students' philosophical contributions to it. The findings show an apparent ecclesiological limitation in how Catholic schools imagine integration in the philosophy classroom. The apparent conceptual ease with which some teachers adopt aims to integrate curricula with representations of the institutional Church's teaching here correlates with neglecting how the students themselves constitute the Church, and with accepting philosophy's subordination to the theological norms in those teachings. Furthermore, the acceptance that Church teaching is philosophy in its own right overshadows or even precludes the study of philosophers in the Catholic tradition, including internal (Catholic) critiques of Catholic teaching. In our view, the combination of these conditions forms a null curriculum that impoverishes the religious dimension of philosophy courses in Catholic schools, and so perpetuates ecclesiological passivity among its Catholic students.

Our analysis prompts all stakeholders in Catholic schooling to re-think the teacher's role past the limitations of representing the magisterial Church, and instead as promoting a wider range of thinking within the whole association of Catholic persons – those in the “People of God” for example, who do philosophy from a critical Catholic perspective. For instance, our data suggest that Catholic teachers face challenges in modeling critical approaches that would encourage students to think for themselves about Catholic teaching. Individual teachers and policy makers might consider revisions to curriculum policy and teaching materials that offer ways to approach that tension. The noticeable absence of the question “Who is church?” also points to an important aspect of the null curriculum that might also be addressed in policy and curriculum revisions. It appears that teachers currently cannot “do” philosophy with students within this tradition, but rather must treat them as its receivers and maybe at best defenders. Structuring the course in this way happens at the cost of contributing philosophically to the communal expression of the Church and (ironically) studying philosophy in the Catholic tradition, including critiques of that tradition. Imagining how students might use their philosophical knowledge as offering a more broadly critical contribution to the Church, beyond promoting critical assent to its teachings, aligns with the spirit of the ICE's aims, quoted above, that one purpose of integrating religious learning within the curriculum is to positively transform the world (1996, 25). If the ICE's intent is to encourage students to respond to endemic social problems like poverty and violence, it is our view that extending it to consider moral challenges to Catholic norms on internally controversial topics like ordination and contraception places no greater burden upon

students. If teachers can be imagined as supporting critical philosophical thinking within the Catholic tradition, it would go some way to remedying the observed limitations of imagining them as merely “representing” the party line. This conclusion thus signals the need for a theoretical discussion of what it means to philosophize—including to teach philosophy—from a Catholic perspective.

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