THE "PATIENT AND FRATERNAL DIALOGUE" ON PAPAL INFALLIBILITY: CONTRIBUTIONS OF A FREE-CHURCH THEOLOGIAN

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Typically, critical evaluations of doctrines of infallibility seek to highlight errors and contradictions in papal and conciliar teachings. Powell takes a different approach and examines the limitations of papal infallibility as a proposal in religious epistemology, that is, a proposal for how Christians determine and secure their beliefs. In light of this analysis, he outlines a constructive vision for religious epistemology, ecclesial authority, and ecumenical unity. The article concludes by interacting with John Ford's earlier reviews of this constructive vision.

SINCE PAPAL INFALLIBILITY DIVIDES Catholics from Orthodox, Protestant, and Free Church Christians in the ecumenical arena, "patient and fraternal dialogue" on papal infallibility is a worthwhile endeavor.[1] Papal infallibility is also one of several doctrines of infallibility and inerrancy, including doctrines of biblical inerrancy, that have become increasingly problematic for Catholics and conservative Protestants alike.[2] Instead of pitting Catholics and Protestants against one another, dialogue on papal infallibility could bring these groups together for critical reflection on the

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[1] The phrase "patient and fraternal dialogue" comes from Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical *Ut unum sint* (no. 96).
[2] Since papal infallibility from *Pastor aeternus* is a dogmatic definition rather than a doctrinal proposal like biblical inerrancy, it is difficult to speak accurately and concisely about these various statements. I use "doctrine" for all these statements, though I recognize the difference it makes and the challenges it raises that *Pastor aeternus* is a dogmatic definition.

meaning, similarities, and limitations of all doctrines of infallibility and inerrancy. Such dialogue could promote the emergence of new ways of conceiving religious epistemology, ecclesial authority, and Christian unity that would have significant implications for all Christians. At the very least, critical dialogue on papal infallibility could provide much needed clarity for us all.

In this article I critically examine the doctrine of papal infallibility in *Pastor aeternus* and in the interpretation of select Catholic theologians. In particular, I am interested in the limitations of the doctrine as a proposal in religious epistemology, that is, a proposal for how Christians determine and secure their beliefs. I do not pursue the traditional debates that submit papal teachings to historical scrutiny in order to highlight potential problems and contradictions, but rather I ask whether the doctrine makes good on its original promise to secure Catholic belief. Next, I offer a constructive proposal for conceiving religious epistemology and ecclesial authority. Finally, I compare the critical evaluation and constructive proposal to Catholic theologian John Ford's work on papal infallibility with the goal of highlighting possible areas of agreement and topics for future discussion.

PAPAL INFALLIBILITY AS RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY

Papal infallibility and biblical inerrancy have long histories with roots in the Protestant Reformation and the divide between Catholics and Protestants, as well as in Catholic and Protestant responses to modernity. While there are important differences between papal infallibility and biblical inerrancy, there are also noteworthy similarities. Both of these doctrines appeared in their mature form in the second half of the 19th century.[3] Both doctrines were formulated in light of a strong foundationalism that has been widely criticized in contemporary epistemology.[4] Both are supposed to secure the rest of our beliefs as Christians, Catholic and Protestant respectively. Both have been given numerous interpretations by their supporters, especially in regard to meaning and scope. And both, it appears,

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[3] While there are precursors to these doctrines, biblical inerrancy appears in mature form with the Old Princeton theologians Charles Hodge (1798–1878) and B. B. Warfield (1851–1921), and papal infallibility receives extensive attention just before, and definitely after, Vatican I (1869–1870).

[4] Strong foundationalists seek epistemic certainty by arguing deductively and inductively from secure foundational beliefs. For a more detailed discussion of strong foundationalism, see W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998) chap. 4; and Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003) chap. 7.

have become more problematic than the beliefs they are intended to secure, such as the incarnation and bodily resurrection of Jesus.[5]

My initial interest in papal infallibility did not arise from ecumenical dialogue, but from a growing frustration with and even indifference toward doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility. My sense is that this same frustration and indifference is shared by many theologians, yet given the theological and historical significance of doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility, it is difficult to see how they can be ignored.

The definition of papal infallibility in *Pastor aeternus* is a complex and subtle proposal. It reads:

Therefore, faithfully adhering to the tradition received from the beginning of the Christian faith, to the glory of God our Savior, for the exaltation of the Catholic religion and for the salvation of the Christian people, with the approval of the sacred council, we teach and define as a divinely revealed dogma that when the Roman pontiff speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole church, he possesses, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals. Therefore, such definitions of the Roman pontiff are of themselves, and not by the consent of the church, irreformable.[6]

According to *Pastor aeternus*, the pope enjoys the infallible assistance of the Holy Spirit when he speaks *ex cathedra*, or "from the chair [of Peter]." An exegetical clause explains that the pope speaks *ex cathedra* when, "in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole church." Therefore the pope does not exercise the charism of infallibility in all his statements. He may make a doctrinal error in his teaching as a private theologian or in his exercise of ordinary papal magisterium.[7] He may err in his judgment on issues outside

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[5] For example, Stephen T. Davis convincingly argues that differences in the Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus actually support the plausibility of the resurrection. See *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993) 180–85, especially his second argument on 181.

[6] *Pastor aeternus*, First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ, chap. 4, On the Infallible Teaching Authority of the Roman Pontiff, in *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, 4 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2003) 3:358.

[7] Catholic theologians distinguish "extraordinary papal magisterium" (when the pope exercises his infallible teaching authority to solemnly define a doctrine), and "ordinary papal magisterium" (when the pope teaches a doctrine authoritatively but not infallibly). A helpful glossary of terms is found in J. Robert Dionne, *The Papacy and the Church: A Study of Praxis and Reception in Ecumenical Perspective* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1987) 17–25.

the scope of "faith or morals," such as political and scientific matters. He is still susceptible to sin. But when the pope issues a solemn judgment on an issue of faith or morals for the whole church, he enjoys "the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals." Since the pope has the charism of infallibility, his *ex cathedra* definitions are "of themselves, and not by the consent of the church, irreformable."

It is important to clarify that the *ex cathedra* decisions of the pope are not viewed as new revelations, and that the charism the pope enjoys is not conceived as inspiration, even if papal definitions are not clearly found in Scripture and early church tradition. Rather, the charism is conceived as a negative one that keeps the pope and the church from error in interpreting and applying Scripture and tradition in each new generation. Further, the doctrine of papal infallibility is placed within the context of the infallibility and indefectibility of the church. The pope only shares in that "infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his church to enjoy," and the doctrine assumes that an infallible interpreter is needed for the church to maintain unity and remain faithful to the gospel.

Since Vatican I, Catholic theologians have interpreted the doctrine of papal infallibility in diverse ways. It is clear that the Ultramontanes, the proponents of papal infallibility at Vatican I, viewed the doctrine as a proposal in religious epistemology and were concerned with epistemic certainty in religious matters. For the Ultramontanes, papal infallibility was part of the solution to the problem of private judgment when interpreting Scripture and tradition. For example, Cardinal Henry Edward Manning (1808–1892), Archbishop of Westminster and an outspoken leader of the Ultramontanes, said, "Surely divine truth is susceptible, within the limits of revelation, of an expression and a proof as exact as the inductive sciences."[8] He further maintained: "Of two things one at least: either Christianity is divinely preserved, or it is not. If it be divinely preserved, we have a divine certainty of faith. If it be not divinely preserved, its custody and its certainty now are alike human, and we have no divine certainty that what we believe was divinely revealed."[9] Manning paints a stark contrast. Either God has preserved Christianity and we can have a "divine certainty of faith," or we do not have religious certainty and Christianity has not been preserved. He argues that epistemic certainty in religious matters cannot be attained by an inerrant Scripture or by a broader appeal to Scripture and tradition, for such proposals rest on private judgment. Rather, epistemic certainty

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[8] As quoted by Robert Gray in *Cardinal Manning: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985) 103.
[9] Henry Edward Manning, *The True Story of the Vatican Council* (London: Henry S. King, 1877) 181.

is attained by an infallible pope who is able to discern and apply the meaning of Scripture and tradition, in a clear and definitive way, for the church today.[10]

This vision of papal infallibility, which lives on in the popular mind, has fallen out of favor with moderate Catholic theologians who defend papal infallibility. By Vatican II the moderate position on papal infallibility had gained strength, and since then it has become the dominant position among Catholic theologians. However, the moderates were left with the epistemic vocabulary and concepts of the Ultramontanes who prevailed at Vatican I, and adequately dealing with the relevant vocabulary and concepts has proved to be difficult.

The late American Jesuit theologian Cardinal Avery Dulles is a good representative of the contemporary moderate position. Dulles is aware that Manning's desire for precise theological expression, modeled after scientific and mathematical statements, is no longer tenable. Science and mathematics, not to mention theology, are no longer viewed as providing absolute objectivity and certainty. So Dulles turns to the discipline of hermeneutics to provide insight into the nature of papal pronouncements:

Even infallible statements do not escape the limitations inherent in all human speech. Dogmatic statements, insofar as they bear upon the divine, contain an element of special obscurity. The formulations of faith necessarily fall short of capturing the full richness of the transcendent realities to which they refer. Furthermore, as already stated, dogmatic pronouncements are inevitably influenced by the presuppositions, concerns and thought-categories of those who utter them, as well as by the limitations in the available vocabulary. Without contradicting Vatican I's teaching on infallibility, therefore, one may admit that all papal and conciliar dogmas, including the dogma of papal infallibility, are subject to ongoing reinterpretation in the Church.[11]

The discipline of hermeneutics not only allows Dulles to better explain the nature of papal pronouncements; it also allows him to reinterpret doctrines that are no longer plausible, including papal infallibility.

However, even though Dulles recognizes the fluidity of Catholic doctrinal statements, he affirms some notion of the infallibility of the Catholic Church as taught at Vatican I and reaffirmed at Vatican II:

Minimalistically, or even strictly, interpreted, it [the definition of papal infallibility] is hardly more than an emphatic assertion that the pope's primacy, as defined in the first three chapters of *Pastor aeternus*, extends also to his teaching power. He is not only the first pastor but also the first teacher in the Church. In view of his special

[10] See James Pereiro, *Cardinal Manning: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) 68–69.
[11] Avery Dulles, "Papal Authority in Roman Catholicism," in *A Pope for All Christians: An Inquiry into the Role of Peter in the Modern Church*, ed. Peter J. McCord (New York: Paulist, 1976) 48–70, at 62.

responsibility for the unity of the whole Church in the faith of the apostles, it is antecedently credible that in him the infallibility of the whole Church may come to expression.[12]

Dulles begins by suggesting that papal infallibility is best understood as an "emphatic assertion" of papal primacy in teaching. In other words, he moves the focus away from the arena of epistemology and epistemic certainty to the arena of executive and teaching authority. The pope can serve as the final judge of doctrinal disputes in the Catholic Church, even without the epistemic charism of infallibility. However, Dulles concludes by maintaining that an infallible pope is a necessary part of an infallible church, thereby moving us back into the arena of epistemology and epistemic certainty. Dulles's carefully nuanced position highlights the difficulties that arise in seeking epistemic certainty in the infallibly defined and irreformable teachings of the Catholic Church, but his continued use of the epistemic vocabulary from *Pastor aeternus* blurs substantial conceptual issues and leads to more confusion than clarification.

It is clear that papal infallibility has shortcomings as a proposal in religious epistemology. One that was recognized early on by Protestant critics is the problem of interpreting papal pronouncements. While Scripture and tradition are preserved in texts and must be interpreted using private judgment, papal pronouncements are also preserved in texts that must be interpreted. W. E. Gladstone, the 19th-century British statesman and devout Anglican, observed: "These are written definitions. What are they but another Scripture? What right of interpreting this other Scripture is granted to the Church at large, more than of the real and greater Scripture? Here is surely, in its perfection, the petition for bread, answered by the gift of stone."[13] An example of the problem Gladstone highlights is seen in the fate of *Pastor aeternus* itself.

After Vatican I, the terms of *Pastor aeternus*, especially *ex cathedra* and "faith or morals," were given several interpretations by Catholic theologians. Some, like Manning, held a maximal interpretation of the doctrine that allowed for a large number of papal pronouncements to be held as infallibly defined. Historical difficulties with the maximal view led others, like the German Bishop Joseph Fessler, to propose a moderate interpretation of the doctrine that views infallibly defined pronouncements as rare.[14] Many contemporary Catholic theologians hold the moderate view that the pope has spoken infallibly on only two occasions, the definition of the

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[12] Ibid. 64.

[13] W. E. Gladstone, *Vaticanism: An Answer to Replies and Reproofs* (London: John Murray, 1875) 99.

[14] See Joseph Fessler, *The True and False Infallibility of the Pope: A Controversial Reply to Dr. Schulte* (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1875).

Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1854) and the definition of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1950). Again, the problem of interpreting *Pastor aeternus* itself was recognized by Gladstone:

There is no established or accepted definition of the phrase *ex cathedra* and [the Catholic individual] has no power to obtain one, and no guide to direct him in his choice among some twelve theories on the subject, which, it is said, are bandied to and fro among Roman theologians, except the despised and discarded agency of his private judgment.[15]

Gladstone makes an important point that should not be lost in his rhetorical banter. Instead of solving the problem of interpretation and private judgment, the doctrine of papal infallibility only pushes the problem one step back. Appeals to doctrinal development on the part of Catholic theologians and reluctance to admit doctrinal change only make the issue of doctrinal interpretation more pronounced.

A second problem with papal infallibility, which is related to the problem of interpretation and extends beyond *Pastor aeternus*, is that of identifying infallibly defined doctrines. The Catholic Church professes belief in a whole host of doctrines besides the two Marian dogmas that are secured under a moderate interpretation of *Pastor aeternus*. An important question, then, is how epistemic certainty is attained in these numerous other instances as well. Vatican II addressed this issue by affirming that the exercise of infallibility extends to the bishops in communion with the pope in two circumstances. The first, "ordinary universal magisterium," occurs when the bishops in communion with the pope, though ministering throughout the world, agree on a doctrine of faith or morals. The second, "extraordinary universal magisterium," occurs when bishops gather in ecumenical councils in communion with the pope and define a doctrine of faith or morals.[16] As can be imagined, questions often arise over whether a doctrine has been infallibly taught, either by means of extraordinary papal magisterium (when the pope defines a doctrine *ex cathedra*), ordinary universal magisterium, or extraordinary universal magisterium. One well-known example will suffice to demonstrate the confusion that can ensue.

In 1970 the controversial Catholic theologian Hans Küng published *Unfehlbar? Eine Anfrage*, which was translated into English the following year as *Infallible? An Inquiry*.[17] In this work Küng made a bold move, for

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[15] W. E. Gladstone, *The Vatican Decrees in Their Bearing on Civil Allegiance: A Political Expostulation* (London: John Murray, 1874) 34–35.

[16] See *Lumen gentium* no. 25 in *Creeds and Confessions* 596–98. See also Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority and the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1983) chaps. 5–7.

[17] Hans Küng, *Unfehlbar? Eine Anfrage* (Zurich: Benziger, 1970); ET, *Infallible? An Inquiry*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981).

which he would ultimately lose his canonical mission to teach: he challenged the Catholic doctrine of infallibility in all its forms. He highlighted numerous examples that, in his opinion, make the infallibility of the Catholic Church difficult to maintain, such as the condemnation of Pope Honorius I by an ecumenical council and several subsequent popes, and the more recent example of the ban on artificial contraception in *Humanae vitae*.[18] Küng focused on the latter, primarily because it occurred after Vatican I and is a pressing contemporary issue. He maintains that, even if *Humanae vitae* is not an infallible papal pronouncement, it still functions as infallibly defined. The restriction against artificial birth control has been taught by the bishops of the church scattered throughout the world, a condition that, according to Vatican II, makes a doctrine infallibly taught even when it is not defined by the pope. Küng's argument is that the immorality of artificial birth control is not accepted by the majority of the scientific community, non-Catholic Christians, and even Catholics. So Küng contends that he has a good, contemporary case where the teaching office of the Catholic Church has made a wrong decision. He suggests that the reason the Catholic Church continues to maintain the immorality of artificial birth control is not the material aspect of the doctrine, the immorality of artificial birth control, but the formal aspect of the doctrine, the infallibility of the Catholic Church.[19]

The fascinating thing about Küng's work is not so much the merits or demerits of his argument as the response his work elicited from Catholic theologians, especially regarding the example he chose to highlight.[20] For instance, Richard McBrien states: "I agree with Avery Dulles and others that Küng is mistaken when he argues that the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* and the doctrine of papal infallibility stand or fall together. . . . Küng certainly knows that this encyclical does not fulfill all the conditions for an infallible pronouncement as set down by Vatican I."[21] Actually there is nothing in *Pastor aeternus* that prevents *Humanae vitae* from being an infallibly defined pronouncement if one maintains a maximal interpretation of *Pastor aeternus*. However, Küng's primary contention is that, even if *Humanae vitae* is not infallibly defined by the pope, it still falls under doctrines of infallibility since it is taught by the bishops scattered throughout the world. Once again there is disagreement. Francis Sullivan notes: "Karl Rahner and most other Catholic theologians . . . do not agree that

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according to the official Catholic doctrine on the infallibility of the ordinary universal magisterium, the sinfulness of artificial contraception has been infallibly taught."[22] However, a number of conservative Catholic theologians believe the sinfulness of artificial contraception has been infallibly taught, and Küng and his supporters agree.[23] Again, we find ourselves in the midst of a disagreement among Catholic theologians over identifying the infallibly defined teachings of the ordinary universal magisterium.

The Catholic Church claims to have an infallibly defined and irreformable doctrine whenever the pope speaks *ex cathedra*, the bishops throughout the world teach a doctrine, or the bishops gather in council and pronounce a doctrine. However, there is disagreement on the identification and interpretation of *ex cathedra* pronouncements, as well as on the teachings of the ordinary universal magisterium and extraordinary universal magisterium. Further, Catholic theologians like Dulles are quick to point out that some doctrines develop and even change over time in light of new discoveries and more adequate ways of formulating beliefs. For these reasons and more, papal infallibility cannot bring the type of certainty in religious matters that was envisioned at Vatican I. More adequate ways of thinking about religious epistemology, ecclesial authority, and Christian unity are needed and could have important theological and ecumenical implications.

A CONSTRUCTIVE PROPOSAL

My constructive proposal follows the insights of William Abraham and can be summarized in three points: (1) the vision of God found in the canonical heritage of the undivided church should be the starting point for conceiving Christian identity and a loose ecumenical unity; (2) no single epistemology or theological method should be canonized in the ecumenical arena; and (3) ecclesial authorities like the papacy are better conceived in the arena of soteriology than epistemology.[24] Each of these points requires further explanation.

First, Christian identity and a loose ecumenical unity should be grounded in particular beliefs that Christians confess, not in epistemic doctrines like papal infallibility and biblical inerrancy that are intended to secure these

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[22] Sullivan, *Magisterium* 120.

[23] John C. Ford and Germain Grisez, in "Contraception and the Infallibility of the Ordinary Magisterium," *Theological Studies* 39 (1978) 258–312, maintain that the immorality of artificial contraception has been infallibly taught.

[24] William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); and William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk, eds., *Canonical Theism: A Proposal For Theology and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

beliefs. In fact Christians can agree on particular beliefs even while disagreeing on how exactly to arrive at and defend these beliefs. The particular beliefs I am interested in are what Abraham calls "canonical theism," or the basic vision of God and what God has done for our salvation that is articulated in the canonical heritage of the undivided church. By "canonical heritage" Abraham intends, in addition to a canon of Scripture, a canon of doctrine, saints, Fathers, theologians, liturgy, bishops, councils, ecclesial regulations, and icons. His proposal is not that, instead of "Scripture alone," we simply expand the number of inerrant or infallible canons to function as epistemic criteria. Rather, he is interested in a particular vision of God and salvation, "canonical theism," that is presented in these various canons. Canonical theism is first and foremost trinitarian and includes a rich picture of creation, redemption, and eschatology. This vision of God is, at the very least, implicit in the New Testament, more explicitly stated in the rules of faith of the second and third centuries, and receives classic articulation in the Nicene Creed of 381 and the Chalcedonian Definition of 451. Canonical theism is not the recommendation of an individual theologian or ecumenical committee, but is articulated in the public decisions of the undivided church and continues to enjoy widespread support, either formally or informally, in Catholicism, Orthodoxy, conservative Protestantism, and many Free Church traditions.

The trinitarian vision of God that is articulated in the canonical heritage of the church offers a substantial starting point for Christian identity and unity. When revisionist versions of the faith were making significant headway in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Catholics and conservative Protestants could have responded to these proposals by appealing to the trinitarian vision of God, instead of, or in addition to, doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility. As far as I can tell, this move was never made, most likely because the doctrine of the Trinity itself had been sidelined in both Catholic and Protestant theology due to rationalist attacks on the doctrine. Today, with the resurgence of trinitarian theology in the West, the strategy of the undivided church to secure its identity and unity can receive a fresh hearing. The church of the first millennium maintained a loose unity, not by acquiring adherence to an epistemology to secure its beliefs, but by its joint confession of a particular ontology, the trinitarian vision of God.

Second, epistemological questions are important and unavoidable, but they should be secondary in the life of the church. Adherence to a specific epistemology should not be required for unity in the ecumenical arena. Interestingly, one can affirm this constructive proposal and still maintain papal infallibility, biblical inerrancy, or other epistemic proposals such as the coherentism proposed by Karl Barth and contemporary postliberal theologians. Since no particular epistemology should be canonized in the ecumenical arena, one may argue for, and choose from, any number of

epistemologies, so long as adherence to epistemic doctrines is not required for ecumenical agreement.

Personally I find weak foundationalism most promising, and encourage us to move beyond epistemic doctrines like papal infallibility and biblical inerrancy that, originally at least, were grounded in strong foundationalism.[25] My sense is that most contemporary Catholic theologians find weak foundationalism attractive as well.[26] Weak and strong foundationalists are similar in that they carefully attend to logical and evidentialist arguments in favor of particular beliefs and whole belief systems. Weak foundationalists differ from strong foundationalists in that they view rationality not simply as a matter of objective and certain deduction, but also—and perhaps more importantly—as a matter of careful discernment, subjective judgment, and virtue. The actual process of discerning what Christians believe is always more complicated than appealing to an inerrant text, the definitions of an ecumenical council, or the teachings of a pope with the charism of infallibility. We should reflect carefully on the way Scripture, councils, and popes actually work in the process of theological discernment rather than make shortcut appeals to infallibility and inerrancy.

Third, the role of the pope and other ecclesial authorities is more fruitfully conceived in the arena of soteriology than that of epistemology. That is, ecclesial authorities are fundamentally used by God to teach us and lead us to salvation, not to guarantee certainty for all our beliefs. Ecclesial authorities are commissioned by God to protect their flock and make doctrinal decisions, but these decisions can be made and enforced without appeals to infallibility. Further, Christians can rest in the truth of the gospel that is secured by the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, and defend the vision of God found in the church's canonical heritage, without claims of infallibility and inerrancy.

It is important to stress that the pope can exercise teaching and executive authority in the Catholic Church without infallibility. Popes did so before Vatican I in 1870 and continue to do so today when not speaking *ex cathedra*. Many of the concerns that captivated the Ultramontanes at Vatican I, including the threat of modernity and the loss of the pope's temporal power, can be addressed by affirming the pope's teaching and executive authority in the Catholic Church. But teaching and executive authority do not require infallibility.

At least two options are available to Catholic theologians based on these suggestions. One option is to affirm papal infallibility as a "local epistemology"

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[25] See the works referenced in n. 4 above for more discussion on strong foundationalism and weak (or modest) foundationalism.
[26] In *Papal Infallibility* 100–104, 138–39, 180–81, I classify John Henry Newman, Avery Dulles, and Hans Küng as weak foundationalists and defend these classifications.

of the Catholic Church that is not binding on other Christians in the ecumenical arena. Other Christians who confess canonical theism could also be part of this ecumenical union, but would not be required to affirm papal infallibility. The second and more preferable option is to further interpret or develop the doctrine of papal infallibility in Catholic theology in light of the epistemic shortcomings of the doctrine. Theories of doctrinal development and Dulles's work in hermeneutics give Catholic theologians significant leeway in affirming past doctrinal statements while recognizing the philosophical limitations of those statements. Such moves make claims to infallibility and epistemic certainty look dubious, but these same moves could be used to relocate *Pastor aeternus* outside the field of epistemology. For instance, recall Dulles's suggestion that *Pastor aeternus* is primarily concerned with establishing the primacy of the pope in his teaching ministry in the Catholic Church. The pope could still serve as the final judge of doctrinal disputes in the Catholic Church without viewing teaching and organizational authority along epistemic lines.

DIALOGUE WITH JOHN FORD

Since John Ford has written extensively on infallibility and has reviewed my earlier work on the topic, he is a good Catholic dialogue partner.[27] There are also interesting similarities between Dulles's and Ford's constructive proposals. In his review of my work, Ford disagrees with my basic contention that papal infallibility is a proposal in religious epistemology and argues instead that the doctrine specifies "a canonical procedure" where "the pope is the court of last appeal" (3, 4). Before turning to areas of possible agreement, let me first respond to Ford's contention that papal infallibility is not a proposal in religious epistemology.

Honestly, I find it strange to be asked to defend that papal infallibility is a proposal in religious epistemology. First of all, Ford agrees that Manning, the main architect of *Pastor aeternus*, viewed the doctrine as a proposal in religious epistemology (4), and he agrees that "in the popular mind" many Catholics view it this way as well (1). At the very least, I am not dealing with a straw man. Second, viewing the papacy as an infallible epistemic authority is the vision I want to avoid, not one I want to defend. The primary issue here is a historical one, both of what was defined in *Pastor aeternus* and of how the definition subsequently has been viewed. The first section of this article

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[27] John T. Ford, "'Papal Infallibility' in Ecumenical Perspective," *Ecumenical Trends* 39.2 (February 2010) 1–5. References to Ford are to this article and are in parentheses in the text. Ford's more concise review is found in *Catholic Historical Review* 95 (2009) 773–74. As a representation of his extensive writings on the subject, see his "Infallibility—From Vatican I to the Present," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 8 (1971) 768–91.

provides support for my position. Furthermore, two phrases from *Pastor aeternus* support my reading of the definition as a proposal in religious epistemology, "infallible" and "irreformable definitions."

The term "infallibility" is an epistemic one that Ford says is commonly defined as "not liable to err" (1). However he suggests that "according to the two Vatican Councils, infallibility is a divinely given charism that will preserve the Church from fundamental error in teaching the Gospel" (4). For Ford, "infallibility" should not be interpreted to mean that the church or pope will not err, but rather that they will not err so far as to lose the truth of the gospel. Like most contemporary proponents of moderate infallibility, Ford subtly redefines "infallibility" as what traditionally has been reserved for "indefectibility." While in his other writings on the topic he seeks to distinguish "infallibility" and "indefectibility," he has a difficult time defining and differentiating these terms.[28] Clearly the term "infallibility" in *Pastor aeternus* has epistemic implications, especially when the doctrine is viewed from a historical perspective. The reason Ford questions these implications, though, is that he too wants to move the definition in *Pastor aeternus* away from the arena of epistemology.

The other phrase that supports my reading of *Pastor aeternus* as a proposal in religious epistemology is "irreformable definitions." An important question for consideration is exactly why *ex cathedra* definitions are irreformable. Interestingly, an early doctrine of papal infallibility was rejected by John XXII in the 14th century in favor of papal sovereignty, where the pope is not bound by the decisions of his predecessors.[29] Similarly in *Pastor aeternus*, *ex cathedra* papal definitions are "irreformable" in part because of the exercise of the epistemic charism of infallibility. Ford is right that *Pastor aeternus* is not simply a proposal in religious epistemology. A complex mix of concerns underlies the definition, including Gallicanism, the decline and loss of the pope's temporal power, and the threat of modernity. But issues of religious epistemology are part of this mix. In order to maintain that *Pastor aeternus* is not a proposal in religious epistemology, Ford must ignore how epistemic concerns influence the terms and implications of the definition. As a Catholic theologian, he wants to retain the terminology and formulations of the past, but to do so he must reinterpret these terms. I am proposing a clearer break from perceived shortcomings of past doctrinal formulations.

Far more interesting than our differences, in my opinion, are areas of apparent agreement. Recall that for Ford, *Pastor aeternus* specifies a

[28] See Ford, "Infallibility—From Vatican I to the Present" 781–84, 787–88. I have also reviewed Ford's extensive writings on the subject and have been unable to find a clear differentiation between "infallibility" and "indefectibility."

[29] Brian Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility, 1150–1350: A Study on the Concepts of Infallibility, Sovereignty, and Tradition in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 1972) 57.

canonical procedure where the pope is the court of last appeal. My work could be seen as supporting Ford in that I show the difficulty of viewing the papacy in the arena of epistemology. Rather, it is better to view the pope—and ecclesial authorities in general—as exercising executive and teaching authority rather than epistemic authority. Ecclesial authorities can make doctrinal decisions, even as a "court of last appeal," without claims of infallibility and epistemic certainty, and these doctrinal decisions can be open to ongoing development and revision.

Consider an analogy with legal courts. Courts make effective and binding interpretations of the law, which the state effectively enforces, without claims of infallibility and irreformability. Further, these laws are periodically revisited and amended in light of extended reflection or changing circumstances, in many instances for the good. Similarly, the pope can function as the final judge of Catholic doctrine, and his decisions can be open to ongoing revision, without claims of infallibility and epistemic certainty. While talk of "ongoing doctrinal revision" can be unsettling, in my constructive proposal such revision always takes place within the context of canonical theism, or the vision of God and what God has done for our salvation as articulated in the canonical heritage of the undivided church. Canonical theism, and not doctrines of infallibility and inerrancy, becomes the foundational doctrinal claim of the universal church, and this ontological commitment keeps the church rooted in its historic confession.

If the papacy and ecclesial authority can be successfully relocated outside the realm of epistemology, what issues remain? *Pastor aeternus* specifies a canonical procedure for the Catholic Church, but is adherence to canonical procedure a requirement for unity? Even if the answer to this question is no, the issue of papal primacy remains. However, the pope could exercise primacy in the Catholic Church while exercising a different role of leadership in any potential ecumenical union. As a Free Church theologian, I envision ecumenical unity as a loose one that can be maintained only by the Spirit of God. However, God's gift of the Spirit of unity, even in the midst of visible division, can be a far greater testimony to the gospel and far more enriching than a rigid institutional unity. Even if ecumenical unity is not a possibility, ecumenical dialogue on papal infallibility could offer viable resources for all Christian theologians in their conception of ecclesial authority.

The pope is the most important institutional leader in Christianity, and the actions of the pope reflect more on Christianity than do those of any other figure. We need a description and understanding of the papacy that accurately fits his function in Catholicism and the universal church. We also need a vision of unity that takes into account what God is doing among us, and what God has already given to us in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit. Patient and fraternal dialogue on these matters is crucial, and the results can be entrusted to the trinitarian God whom together we worship.