On Refocusing, Gently, James R. Kelly

-by Joseph A. Varacalli

In the opening paragraph of James R. Kelly's important personal manifesto, "Retrieving Aristotle: The Journeyman Calling of the Sociologist," the author states that "...any serious concern with biography and intellectual work in social science must aim at a deepening commitment to truth and the realization of human solidarity." For Catholic scholars, Dr. Kelly's central theme is both profound and unassailable. It is central to Catholic social thought and perhaps no more fully developed than in the intellectual corpus of the present pontiff, His Holiness John Paul II. It is also consistent with the dual and related missions of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists to 1) bring the truth of Catholic social teaching into the vitals of the social science enterprise and 2) aid in the reconstruction of civilization along lines both consistent with, and derived from, Catholic social doctrine. As such, this reviewer shares a broad agreement and sympathy with the general thrust of Dr. Kelly's essay.¹

I am also in emphatic agreement with Dr. Kelly's devastating debunking critique of the positivistic claim that one approaches the desired goal of objectivity in research through implementing an alleged "value-freedom."² Indeed, as Dr. Kelly points out, this was one of the conceptual and methodological fallacies taught to him at the Harvard Graduate School of Sociology during the late 1960s that he has since "had to unlearn." As he states, during this period, "...I felt my Catholicism was treated as an impediment to objectivity . . . ." "Years later," he follows, "I faced up to the problem. You really can't write or speak or do anything with the mind unless you have a coherent and organizing point of view." For Dr. Kelly, this organizing point of view is found "prominently, but not exclusively, in the Roman Catholic tradition." On this score, both Dr. Kelly and this reviewer agree: objectivity is approximated by both utilizing and taking into account the impact of values in social scientific research, (although as I will subsequently argue, he is too fuzzy on precisely which values can be profitably utilized in the pursuit of truth.)

On many other specific issues, however, Dr. Kelly and I disagree, at least in emphasis and perhaps in substance. My general sympathy for Kelly's thesis is qualified in the area of the method and means by which he advocates the pursuit of truth and human solidarity; "the devil," as is often said, "is to be
found in the details." My major qualifications of Dr. Kelly's thesis are presented in the following five sub-sections.

**Translation Versus Evangelization**

Dr. Kelly and I are not of one mind over the issue of which audience Catholic social scientists should place their emphasis (cf. Kelly footnote number one). Should the emphasis be "outward," i.e., on translating the language of Catholic social doctrine into one more understandable to a non-Catholic (intellectual or otherwise) audience? Or should the emphasis be "inward," i.e., on trying to rebuild the internal network of Catholic institutions (or its "plausibility structure") devoted to both maintaining the faith and evangelizing it throughout nation and world, the academy included.³ Dr. Kelly clearly opts for the former:

My conviction is that Catholic social thought is a treasure that is received in order to be shared. My experience is that not many sociologists were (are?) waiting to share it; thus Catholic sociologists must constantly work on translations so that, in the classic Vatican II phrase, "men and women of good will" might pay attention. I take this Vatican II aspiration as normative. The world will never be "Catholic" in any majority way. We are a permanent minority. The gospels call this a "leaven." Translation remains a permanent task of the servant church.

I demur from Dr. Kelly here on two counts. First of all and at the level of foundational principle, if the Catholic Church is what she says she is, i.e., the fullest expression of Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, then it is incumbent for her members to attempt to evangelize, "to restore all things in Christ." This is the Catholic task even if it proves in one's lifetime to be an empirically impossible one to reach. However, secondly and on the level of strategy, I think Dr. Kelly grants too much to the present (unsatisfactory) state of affairs in the larger civilization, the academy, and the Catholic Church. Regarding the former, he overestimates both the extent and degree of a sound morality within, and the staying power of, an American civilization presently and quickly unraveling and descending into a "culture of death."⁴ Regarding the academy, he gives too much respect to and concern for associations and individuals who, on the whole, have deeply and willingly conformed to secular visions and ideologies that are based are assumptions irreconcilable to the Catholic faith.⁵ Derivatively, he overplays the degree to which most in the secularized academy are truly open to dialogue with even a diluted Catholic message;⁶ the most probable (although unintended) consequence of Dr. Kelly's strategy will be for the dominant secularist monopoly to selectively incorporate and abuse Catholic "translations" to actually further legitimize and strengthen its hold over public discourses.⁷ Regarding the Catholic Church, he underplays the potential of an internally unified and disciplined community making major inroads, initially in those large sectors of civil life that do not
accept completely the vision of the secularized cultural elite and, eventually, throughout the rest of society.⁸ In my judgement, the strategy toward the existing academy should be one of "neutralization," with the primary emphasis focusing on building up new scholarly communities. Put crudely, the goal should be to relegate the existing cultural elite to the proverbial dustbin of history. I do not think that Dr. Kelly's incrementalist strategy will bear much positive fruit.

**Journeyman Sociologist Versus Catholic Sociologist**

Dr. Kelly's decision to self-consciously refer to himself as a "journeyman" sociologist is a direct reflection of his perceived need for both Catholic social doctrine and social theory to be translated to the modern mind-set for the reasons previously referred to. As he clearly states in footnote number two, as will become clear (I hope), here I am trying to translate my commitments to an audience likely to be suspicious of any Catholic appropriation of the meaning of social science, both for the negative reason of residual prejudice and the positive (though mistaken) assumption that, somehow, social scientists have a calling to produce ideologically-free explanations of how social forces mold human behavior. *Journeyman* is my attempt to gain initial sympathy for a view of social science that is explicitly "traditioned" and which self-consciously views its methodologies as *phronetic* practices aiming at dialogic contributions towards the common good.

On the one hand, I have no problem accepting Dr. Kelly's claim that the journeyman designation "conveys great responsibility for craft and integrity," is decidedly and rightly opposed to the "hack" or shill, and is superior to the "master" label (with its elitist, Comtian-like, managerial connotation.) However, I find the term *journeyman* too existential and individualistic (despite its avowed claim to be "traditioned" and "communal") and tinged with the romanticism that infects at least one sector of contemporary American Catholic liberalism. A more simple, straight-forward, and realistic term is that of *Catholic sociologist*. Such a designation is desirable because I believe it makes clearer, or at least implies, 1) the nature and centrality of the intellectual commitment, 2) the existence of a social movement of like-minded individuals, 3) the missionary or evangelistic nature of the commitment and social movement, and 4) that the commitment and movement is in line with the Church's Magisterium. That such a term "turns off" an already religiously unmusical audience is an inconsequential price to pay for the gains accrued for clarity, honesty, and fidelity to a religious tradition devoted to truth, holiness, beauty, and the common good.

The disagreements that I have expressed with Dr. Kelly in the previous two subsections also play themselves out in the controversy over the changes that took place when the American Catholic Sociological Society, in the wake of Vatican II and the social upheavals of the 1960s, was transformed into the
Association for the Sociology of Religion. Not too surprisingly, Dr. Kelly was in favor of the change. As he states in footnote number twelve: "to me, working within the Association for the Sociology of Religion seems a necessary act of faith. The faith is that ASR might become . . . an authentically ecumenical-interfaith dialogue about the pilgrimage toward human solidarity . . . ." On the one hand, I do not doubt for one moment the integrity of Dr. Kelly. On the other hand, I do doubt the motivation of the majority of the Americanizers of the era. I have interpreted the move as basically a concession to the secularist and Americanist mindset and for reasons that do not exclude, in many cases, the promotion of a set of vested career and material interests. 

Metaphysical Underpinnings of Social Science

A relatively minor point of contention between Dr. Kelly and myself—perhaps more semantical than real—lies in his acceptance of the liberal Protestant, theologian-sociologist Ernest Troeltsch's claim that sociology "cannot create ultimate values and standards from within" and therefore it "is obliged to use institutions outside the borders of its own faculty." As I see it, given that all social science paradigms necessarily and constitutively contain metaphysical, philosophical, and theological assumptions and starting points, it is misleading to state that sociology/social science must borrow from other "institutions" or disciplines. There is no social science that doesn't necessarily contain a metaphysical dimension. The Troeltsch-Kelly position inadvertently suggests a division of labor between philosophy/theology and social science that, in actuality, is less sharp than is implied. Put another way, the "social sciences" are, in reality, more rooted fundamentally in the humanities than they are in the natural sciences, although they are empirically based and systematic in orientation. Understood my way, then, it is easier to grasp that a "Catholic sociology" is no more methodologically problematic than one based on Marxism, feminism, capitalism, or some other metaphysic.

Process Versus Permanence

While agreeing that all sociological/social scientific analysis necessarily assumes some distinctive philosophical point of view, Dr. Kelly argues that they are continually undergoing the process of review and change. As he states:

I explained . . . (to my Catholic students) . . . that Catholic social thought was not a catechism but a tradition of reasoned moral analysis on the crucial human issues of justice and personal integrity. What they read from these normative sources rose or fell with the reasoned arguments they found there. I made sure we never lost sight of the sociological integrity even at the cost of cherished positions. For in sociology there are no permanently "cherished" positions; the only permanence aspired to be the journeyman sociologist is the empirical eye and the heart open to the claims of solidarity.

32 Catholic Social Science Review
My response to Dr. Kelly here is that I suspect that he is confusing the fundamental distinction between basic, unchangeable, first principles (which *all* worldviews, including social science perspectives, contain) and the contextual or prudential applications of those principles which continually are in the process of change. To take but one example: it is a basic principle of Catholic social science that human beings are endowed with "free will." Mitigating circumstances, however, (e.g. the immaturity of youth, chemical imbalances in physical make-up, an oppressive physical and social environment) may affect the Catholic social scientist's evaluation of the degree of culpability assigned to an individual in performing an objectively definable morally evil and socially destructive act. The point, however, is that the principle of "free will" is precisely an example of a Catholic a priori or "cherished position" that is not on the table for negotiation. On this specific issue, I am in agreement with Gustavo Gutierrez when he states in his *A Theology of Liberation* that "Utopia . . . is neither opposed to nor outside of science." However, I am with Dr. Kelly and against Gutierrez in the requirement that the usefulness and utility of such "a priori" assumptions must be constantly evaluated and contextualized through empirical investigation.

### Dialogue Versus the Aristotelian Approach

In various points in his essay, Dr. Kelly makes the point that his version of a Catholicized sociology is both "dialogic" and "Aristotelian." In response, I am suggesting that, at least in in *many cases*, it can't be both.

Regarding the dialogic nature of his ideal sociology, Dr. Kelly states that:

> My Catholicism was importantly formed by the Second Vatican Council so, as good *journeyman*, my religious commitments must be ecumenical, interfaith, and humanistic . . . . The Catholic journeyman is anxious to learn better from *journeymen* and *women* from other traditions about how better to make his sociological practices better contribute to human solidarity.

Dr. Kelly follows:

> I became a *journeyman* when I explicitly came to view sociology as a partner in dialogue--with students, with normative disciplines, with the wider public. But especially with Catholicism . . . . On questions of social justice and peace I began incorporating the best I could find from the tradition of Catholic social thought. I knew this tradition best, and it was increasingly dialogic--with other world traditions, with social science.

Regarding the designation "Aristotelian," Dr. Kelly states that:

> I think "Aristotelian" is exactly the broad perspective by which the ecumenical and interfaith social science *journeymen-women* might wish to characterize their work . . . . Broadly conceived all social scientists who
associate themselves with the Aristotelian spirit share the conviction that any notion of the intellectual life that severs observation and analysis from the pursuit of the good society betrays intelligence and violates the integrity of the intellectual. Dialogically considered, Roman Catholic social thought is a thick, rich, and constantly renewed branch of the Aristotelian family tree. For myself, I consider Catholic social thought as its central, permanent, sturdy trunk nourishing the many branches mistakenly seeking and independent and momentarily prominent place in the day's sun.

Dr. Kelly follows:

All social science animated by convictions formed and nurtured by traditions with a strong sense of the good necessary for humans and humanity to flourish can be called Aristotelian. This characterization makes good scholarly and good ecumenical/interfaith sense, and thus carries and promotes the dialogic spirit carefully but joyously embraced by journeymen and women everywhere.

My departure from Dr. Kelly at this point is straightforward: his line of argumentation utilizes a method of "dialogue" too indiscriminate and, relatedly, a definition of "Aristotelian" too plastic and broad. Regarding the latter, an Aristotelian philosophy is a classical, pre-Enlightenment one assuming the existence of an objective moral order and the perennial reality and relevance of the natural law as later more clearly delineated by Cicero. Given that all post-modern philosophies deny the existence of the former and all post-Enlightenment philosophies deny the existence of the latter, Dr. Kelly is guilty of exaggerating the positive conversational possibilities derived from any exchange between moral visions that, at root, are incommensurate.

It is, of course, true that while most post-Enlightenment, pre-post-modern philosophies do have a conception of the "good society," their underlying philosophical anthropological vision of humankind is opposed to the Aristotelian-Catholic vision. The vision of Marxism, at base, is materialistic. Radical feminism assumes a non-existent androgyny that violates the reality and imperatives of nature. Freudianism posits as its ideal a therapeutic ceasefire in a meaningless world. Positivism posits an all-embracing scientism. Liberalism erroneously assumes that something good can come out of a "society" of unfettered atoms, of the widespread emergence of "autonomous" man.

Let me be perfectly clear: Dr. Kelly is not wrong-headed to seek dialogue. The Catholic Church, pre-Vatican II and as well as post-Vatican II, has always made the case to accept whatever is true, holy, beautiful, and good and from wherever its penultimate source may derive. Dr. Kelly, however, goes astray on at least one count and possibly on two, one more serious than the other. Less seriously, Dr. Kelly is (clearly in my opinion) mistaken in expecting too much from such dialogue. Potentially more serious, however, is the Habermasian-like methodology that he seems to flirt with in the pursuit of
dialogue. For one thing, it is a methodology that is indifferent to the claims of the natural law. For another, it is a method that downplays or ignores the truth content of irreconcilable and non-negotiable starting points in discourse and stresses the importance of approaching consensus or, at least, bringing about intellectual/moral ceasefires. These would be the criticisms that many serious Catholic intellectuals have with the neo-liberal "communitarian" tradition and with the "Catholic Common Ground Initiative" as started by the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. Simply put, a Catholic or perennial social science is constrained in its (profitable) intellectual exchanges to those claims that are rooted in reality.

Concluding Note

Underlying Dr. Kelly's and my own version of a Catholicized sociology are somewhat different conceptions of the scholarly discipline and, perhaps more so, of the nature of Catholicism. Both Dr. Kelly's paper and my response inadequately flush out these differences. They need to be more systematically addressed in larger monographs.

Let me end with the call for the membership of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists and the readership of the Catholic Social Science Review to perform their own independent, critical evaluations of the contributions of Dr. Kelly, Rev. Baxter, and myself to "Catholics and the Practice of Sociology and the Social Sciences." The symposium will be judged successful if it serves to spur on useful and sustained reflection on the important set of issues contained within it.

Notes


4. See my unpublished manuscript, Bright Promise, Failed Community: Catholics and the American Public Order.


6. See my essay, "Catholic Sociology in America: A Comment on the Fiftieth Anniversary
I argued in my Toward The Establishment of Liberal Catholicism in America (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1983) that a highly secularized Catholic elite was surprisingly successful at doing precisely this throughout the "Call to Action" Program and ten year Bicentennial Celebration.


13. I have criticized the communitarian tradition (and by implication, the "Catholic Common Ground Initiative") in my review essay, "The Contemporary Culture War in America: Whither Natural Law, Catholic Style?," Faith and Reason (Volume XXI, Number 4, Winter, 1995).