A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY IN THE KIMBERLEY

Reflections on a Catholic Identity

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CLASSICISM AND
ABORIGINAL CULTURE

Christianity is a religion that has been developing for over two millennia. Moreover, it has its antecedents in the Old Testament, and it has the mission of preaching to all nations.
- Bernard Lonergan, SJ, “Method in Theology”

Previous parts of this book have emphasised cultural engagement with Aboriginal culture. Harsh experience, however, has shown that this engagement has not occurred to the extent or depth that should have been expected. Relations between Catholic institutions and Aboriginal people have often been characterised by paternalism, triumphalism and a sense of cultural superiority that led not only to the alienation of Aboriginal people, but the Church’s cooperation in well-meaning, but nonetheless abominable actions, such as those that led to the Stolen Generations. In this chapter, I would like to address two questions. First, “Why has ‘listening to’ and giving a voice to Aboriginal tradition been so hard?” Secondly, “What does the Church say about this issue today?”

To answer the first question, I will draw upon Bernard Lonergan’s assessment of “classicism,” an unstated but prevalent ideology that afflicted Catholic theology well into the Twentieth Century. To answer the second question, I will focus on Church teaching but also bring in scholars such as
Lonergan. This work will draw upon and build on previous work that I have done (Ogilvie 2001) in a more abstract setting.

John Paul II (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n2) states that “there is only one culture: that of man, by man and for man.” Does such a statement mean an endorsement of the view, prevalent in Catholicism last century, that Catholic mission implies not only converting people to Christ and the Catholic faith, but also initiating people into a European or Anglo-Celtic culture? In the next paragraph of Ex Corde Ecclesiae (n6) we find some clarification when John Paul II writes, not of the Church imposing culture on peoples, but of Catholic universities instituting “an incomparably fertile dialogue with people of every culture.” Instead of indicating that Catholic universities should remove people from their own culture and indoctrinate them into another culture, John Paul II clearly states that Catholic universities should contribute to the life and well-being of people within the culture in which they live.

Unfortunately, though, Catholicism has been afflicted by a monoculturalist viewpoint that confuses the universal culture of all humans with the myriad cultures that express and nurture the values of that universal culture. Bernard Lonergan (1988, 241) lamented that Catholicism had fallen for an “arbitrary standardization” of people into one normative culture. That is, he identified the ideology of “classicism,” the viewpoint that identifies the universal culture of humanity with classical European culture. This ideology meant that, instead of conceiving classical culture as a high point in culture, it was believed to be the only way of expressing the culture of humanity.

Thus, Catholic mission and education adopted the “classicist” notion of one normative culture to which all others should aspire. It was widely assumed that educated discourse would occur within that one culture and that cultured people would communicate to “uncultured” people by making superficial accommodations, but without expecting uncultured people to fully understand. Lonergan (1994, xi, 326-27; 1974, 232) argued that the classicist viewpoint assumed that its culture was normative, that there was but one culture for all
times and all places, and that to this universal and uniform culture all should aspire. Thus, within this classicist horizon, a minister or university lecturer would feel obligated to evangelise or to teach with one’s culture firmly bound to one’s message, so that, “A classicist could feel that he conferred a double benefit on those to whom he preached if he not only taught them the Gospel but also let them partake in the riches of the one and only culture” (Lonergan 1974, 233).

As a philosopher-theologian, Lonergan was so dismayed by classicism’s effects on Catholicism, he labelled classicism the “shabby shell of Catholicism” and he described classicism’s faults at the very beginning of Method in Theology (1994, xi, 327). He did point out, though, that classicism was not a specifically religious point of view. After all, as he observes (Lonergan 1974, 5), classicism has “no foundation in the revealed word of God.”

While Lonergan was anxious over classicism’s effect on Catholic theology, he also noted that classicism isolated Catholicism from modern thought and cultures. He declared that, “The concern of the theologian is not just a set of propositions but a concrete religion as it has been lived, as it is being lived, and as it is to be lived” (Lonergan 1973, 56). Simultaneously, though, he deplored the classicist viewpoint that invariably isolated Catholic theology and theologians from concrete religion and from the concrete cultures in which religion is lived out. In 1968, he observed (1974, 94) that such isolation meant that Catholic theology had only “belatedly” acknowledged the classicist system’s end as an effective worldview. In catching up with the modern world, Catholic theology, and Catholics in general, suffered gravely from their isolation from modernity:

... from the present situation Catholics are suffering more keenly than others, not indeed because their plight is worse, but because up to Vatican II they were sheltered against the modern world and since Vatican II they have been exposed
more and more to the chill winds of modernity (Lonergan 1974, 93).

Its long isolation from modern thought made Catholicism experience modernity as “chill winds,” rather than a refreshing breeze. Lonergan (1974, 93) argued that, without an adequate methodology that allowed them to constructively interact with modernity, Catholics were left in a state of confusion, with numerous voices, “many of them shrill, and most of them contradictory,” vying for support.

Lonergan’s account of Catholicism’s difficulties in coming to terms with modernity also explains why Catholic educators had so much difficulty in engaging with and tapping the richness of Aboriginal thought and culture through which core Catholic faith and values could be expressed. With the underlying assumption that there was one normative culture to which all should aspire, Catholic mission and education did not seek to affirm and protect the culture of Aboriginal people and to enhance that culture with Catholic faith and values. Instead, Aboriginal people were expected to become civilised through an adaptation of “classical” culture. The great irony is that what is generally called “classical culture” is less than one-twentieth of the age of Aboriginal culture. The tragedy is that Aboriginal people were expected to pray (or be prayed for) in Latin, those chosen for ministry were formed in European scholastic philosophy and education was carried out with the same philosophy, methods, and aims as Europe or North America. Even when cultural awareness came to Catholicism, the lack of transcultural foundations meant that efforts to constructively engage Aboriginal culture were often not as successful as they should have been.

With regards to Catholicism’s late-arriving engagement of modernity, Lonergan (1973, 57) notes that Catholicism’s lack of a transcultural base, and a philosophy that could not go beyond classicism, meant that when people finally rejected classicist philosophy and theology, they also rejected the more authentic tenets of the Catholic faith. Moreover, with Catholic theology’s lack of a firm
methodological foundation, Lonergan (1988, 245) foresaw the formation of one party in Catholicism who held onto the classicist framework against the reality of the modern world, while another party would form in an attempt to embrace modernity, but which lacked adequate methodological foundations on which to do so.

Classical culture cannot be jettisoned without being replaced; and what replaces it cannot but run counter to classical expectations. There is bound to be formed a solid right that is determined to live in a world that no longer exists. There is bound to be formed a scattered left, captivated by now this, now that new development, exploring now this and now that new possibility. But what will count is perhaps a not too numerous center, big enough to be at home in both the old and the new, painstaking enough to work out one by one the transitions to be made, strong enough to refuse half measures and insist on complete solutions even though it has to wait.

I would raise the suggestion that what happened with Catholicism’s engagement of modernity has also occurred with its engagement of Aboriginal cultures. A solid “right” of ultraconservative theology rejects engagement with Aboriginal culture; expecting that Catholic education should “liberate” Aboriginal people from their traditional culture and initiate them into the benefits of classical culture. A well-intentioned but scattered religious “left” seems to flit between this or that aspect of Aboriginal culture, without perhaps understanding either their own base culture or, for that matter, Aboriginal culture.

With respect to the problems with classicism, the implications for a Catholic university in the Kimberley are obvious for theology and by implication for philosophy, ethics and other subjects. If a critical academic humanities subject engages “objective truth” and culture, then there is a responsibility to express that knowledge in a culturally-appropriate way, that can be understood within
that culture and which, ultimately, is expressed from within that culture, by its own people. The question at hand is, “How can or should that be done?”

In the first place, I would refer to TH112 (The Spirituality and Challenges of Reconciliation), which is a Core Curriculum unit at the University of Notre Dame’s Broome campus (2017a). For many years, that course was taught by well-meaning non-Indigenous faculty. Yet, despite the best efforts of those involved, including this writer, the course could only present an “outside” perspective on Aboriginal issues. The course became far more effective and informative when it was later taught by Professor (now Senator) Patrick Dodson. Under his leadership, the language, symbols, history and teaching methodology of that course became distinctly Aboriginal. At the same time, the leadership of the campus was entrusted to Deputy Vice Chancellor Professor Lyn Henderson-Yates, herself an Aboriginal woman from Derby. The campus is now under the leadership of another Aboriginal woman, Professor Julianne (Juli) Coffin. It would seem almost obvious then, that having Aboriginal faculty and leaders has been, and will continue to be, a crucial element in ensuring that Aboriginal culture is properly respected and promoted by the University’s campus.

If a Catholic university is to cast off the shackles of classicism, and move forward to a constructive embrace and engagement of Aboriginal culture, what is the way forward? Russell-Mundine and Mundine (2014, 98) note that even at the same time that Australia was burdened by the “White Australia” policy, though social attitudes were shifting from protectionism to assimilation, the Second Vatican Council (Ad Gentes, 15) made a significant statement that, “This congregation of the faithful, endowed with the richness of its own nation’s culture, should be deeply rooted in the people.” The meaning of that text may not be immediately clear, but it makes eminent sense in the light of the point that the Church realised that it was no longer appropriate to force an alien culture onto people. Instead, as Ad Gentes makes clear (n11) Catholic missionaries were not only to engage the people to whom they were reaching out, but they were to identify with the people. In the Council’s words, to
“acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of men among whom they live; let them share in cultural and social life by the various undertakings and enterprises of human living; let them be familiar with their national and religious traditions; let them gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows” (Russell-Mundine and Mundine 2014, 98).

That is, Catholic mission was reconceived, not to initiate people into European classical culture, but to bring the message of Christ to people, and through “sincere and patient dialogue” with their culture, to discover the richness of that culture and to use the Christian faith not to crush other cultures, but instead to “set them free,” protect and nourish those cultures (Vatican II, Ad Gentes, n11; Russell-Mundine and Mundine 2014, 98).

The Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes, n58) also reinforces these points. It states clearly that the Church is “not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, any particular way of life or any customary way of life recent or ancient.” That is, it sees the Church as reaching out to multiple cultures, which means not only serving those cultures but also seeing the wider Church being enriched by those cultures.

The Church has thus set down some key principles on culture that should be followed by a Catholic university in the Kimberley. I would like to turn now to some theoretical foundations that will foster such intercultural engagement.

First, as Lonergan writes, the way forward is not to treat culture normatively, but empirically. An empirical conception of culture holds that cultures can be manifold, can develop and decline, grasp new meanings and accept new values, give to and receive from other existing cultures. Cultures are thus many and changing (Lonergan 1974, 232-33). If an empirical conception of culture is embraced, then theology specifically and Catholic education generally can change and develop by being conceived as an ongoing process, not as a static system (Lonergan 1994, xi). In other words, under an empirical concept of
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culture, a Catholic university does not have to resort to answering the questions of the 21st century Kimberley with the answers of 16th century Europe (cf. Lonergan 1973, 15).

To achieve this goal, Lonergan proposed (1985a, 16) that an academic pursuit would need to be sufficiently removed from the contingencies of current issues. That is, one would argue that in seeking an academic foundation and an approach to scholarship that is not limited by classicism, one needs to acknowledge the limits of one’s own culture and time, and find foundations and a methodology that are beyond the contingencies of academic discourse at any one time. In Lonergan’s words:

What is required is a point of vantage outside the temporal dialectic, a matrix or system of thought that at once is as pertinent and as indifferent to historical events as is the science of mathematics to quantitative phenomena.

For theology, Lonergan thus sought a method removed from the “current dialectic.” He thus sought a transcultural theology that would be intelligible in contemporary terms. In Method in Theology (1994, 282), he later expressed this need, writing that,

... Christianity is a religion that has been developing for over two millennia. Moreover, it has its antecedents in the Old Testament, and it has the mission of preaching to all nations. Plainly, a theology that is to reflect on such a religion and that is to direct its efforts at universal communication must have a transcultural base.

The idea of a transcultural base is vital to the role of a Catholic university in the Kimberley which will inevitably straddle two, or more, cultures. What sort of transcultural base is needed? Lonergan (1994, 276) argued that what was needed was a method that could address the plurality of scholarship resulting from different brands of common sense existing over different languages, times, places, social and cultural situations. We find Lonergan’s concern reflected in
Macquarrie’s point (1977, vii, 13) that to be intelligible, a theology must use the language of a culture within which theology finds itself. Such an approach has its attendant risks, and many consider it impossible for theologians to meet the standards of modern thought without betraying their faith. Barth (1975, 72), for example, held that “A proclamation that accepts responsibilities along these lines spells treachery to the Church and to Christ Himself.” Barth’s concern, though, seems more related to the scattered left, to which Lonergan’s earlier quote referred. To resolve such concerns, Lonergan argued for a method that was historical, critical and empirical, while simultaneously upholding the authentic truths of his tradition.

Strangely, some might consider a transcultural approach to faith, values, and scholarship to be new. Yet even within classical Catholic scholarship, reconceiving scholarship in the face of new cultures is not a novelty. Lonergan (1974, 45, 49, 62) cites the example of Thomas Aquinas, who renewed Catholic scholarship by taking the Arabic and Greek thought dominant in Thomas’ culture and fitting these “pagan sciences” into a Christian context. This enabled Thomas to become proficient in the Greek and Arabic philosophies and use these philosophies to present Christian doctrine. The *Summa Contra Gentiles* presents a prime example of Thomas’ achievement. Lonergan argues (1974, 45) that in his *Summa* Thomas effectively made a presentation of Christian doctrine that was coherent, up-to-date, and persuasive.

One may suggest then, that if Thomas Aquinas were alive and working in the Kimberley today, he would not be content to simply repeat Christian doctrine as it has been stated in years past. Instead, he would immerse himself thoroughly in the culture of the Kimberley, learn its wisdom, and use that wisdom to reconceive and re-present Catholic knowledge in a way that made sense within Kimberley culture, engaged people and sustained both Catholic faith and values and the culture of the Kimberley.

Lonergan’s reflections upon theology and culture have serious implications for a Catholic university in the Kimberley. Scholarship never occurs in a cultural
vacuum; it occurs within a scholar’s own cultural and social horizons. Questions are raised within a culture, and a good scholar would answer those questions in a manner intelligible within that culture. A classicist would presume the scholar’s work to be intelligible within the contexts of all other peoples, who should aspire to the successful scholar’s dominant culture. However, the empirically-minded scholar would wish to communicate one’s message to others, just as Christianity, in the spirit of Matthew 28:19, intends its message for “all nations.” Those who bear that message with an empirical notion of culture need to broaden their own horizons to embrace also a reliable, familiar, and sympathetic understanding of the culture to which they are addressing that message. Lonergan insists (1994, 362) that such a broadening of one’s horizons should not be superficial, but that communicators use the cultural resources and language of a people creatively, and sincerely. We say “sincerely,” because if one uses the resources of a culture in a patronising, paternalistic or merely utilitarian way, a communicator will interfere with a culture. Lonergan’s vision, however, is for communications to take advantage of, and embrace, a culture so that one’s message is not disruptive, but simply a “line of development within the culture.”

To conclude this section, classicism is, “the insistence that there is but one culture, and is very apt to issue in insistence on uniformity of expression” (Meynell 1978, 407). The answer to classicism is where a non-classicist theology can discern and therefore accept a unity of belief in a wide variety of forms of expression. That is, instead of employing a classicist approach to scholarship, a Catholic university should embrace cultures as manifold, ongoing and developing. If culture is conceived along classicist lines, university scholarship will be seen as a permanent and universal attainment. When culture is conceived empirically, scholarship, whether theology, philosophy or any other subject, faces the substantial challenge of adapting itself to the manifold needs of different cultures.
I should clarify, though, that the Kimberley has benefitted greatly from Catholic missionaries who have appreciated and affirmed Aboriginal culture. For example, the Pallotine Fathers and Sisters of St John of God have long-standing reputations for their deep respect of Aboriginal culture. The Pallotines took care to learn the culture and languages of the Kimberley people (Mills 2006). The Sisters of St John of God conceived their mission not as an imposition of European values upon Aboriginal people, but a mission of relationship between the Sisters and Aboriginal people (SSJG 2016). The Sisters were noted for their charitable work that was done in a way that, “achieved a unique bond with the region’s multicultural groups and in particular with Aboriginal communities” (Cordingley 2015). Having said that, while at a practical level the Sisters and Fathers worked with respect and a spirit of partnership with Aboriginal people, Catholic theology, which labored under classicist assumptions until the 1960s, generally did not do enough to sustain the pioneering and visionary work of the missionaries.

What has just been said about classicism and empirical conceptions of culture means that a Catholic academic mission in the Kimberley cannot be a matter of white mission to Aboriginal people, baptising them, as it were, into the Euro-Australian academic tradition. While engagement with “white” scholarship may be an important part of the university’s mission; ultimately the mission should be about sharing the resources of a modern university to help Aboriginal people have a voice, to articulate, critique and advance their own tradition and ultimately to engage in mission towards those who are newcomers to this ancient country.
The Church and Aboriginal Culture

I have written of the ideology behind classicism, which has hampered Catholic efforts to engage Aboriginal culture and an empirical notion of culture that allows a way forward. But what has been said by the Church on this issue?

First, Pope Paul VI (Kampala Homily) made it clear as early as 1969 that even though the Catholic faith is one and united, “the language and mode of manifesting this one Faith, may be manifold; hence, it may be original, suited to the tongue, the style, the character, the genius, and the culture, of the one who professes this one Faith.” He then endorsed as “desirable” a certain pluralism that adapted Christian faith to local cultures. To the African community, he said, “… you possess human values and characteristic forms of culture which can rise up to perfection such as to find in Christianity, and for Christianity, a true superior fullness [sic], and prove to be capable of a richness of expression all its own, and genuinely African.” Pope Paul VI then outlined how the Catholic Church did not just give to the African community, but “the Church of the West” as he calls it, used the scholarship and resources of a number of Africans. He cites those of Patristic times such as Tertullian, Origen and St Augustine. Thus, what Paul VI envisaged was not a monologue from the West to Africa, but instead an “exchange” in which the African community could give its richness to the wider Church and at the same time, “be able to remain sincerely African even in your own interpretation of the Christian life; you will be able to formulate Catholicism in terms congenial to your own culture; you will be capable of bringing to the Catholic Church the precious and original contribution … which she needs particularly in this historic hour.”

Closer to our time, John Paul II (Redemptoris Missio, n52) also argues that in its outreach to all peoples, the Church must be involved in inculturation, the process of adapting the Christian message and practice to the cultures of various peoples. In John Paul II’s words, “Through inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community.”
Importantly, John Paul II does not see inculturation as a process of initiating people into another culture. Instead, Christian mission is meant to be a matter of taking the good elements of a culture and renewing that culture from within by the Christian message. “She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within” (*Redemptoris Missio*, n52).

This means, in short, that the Church is no longer bound to the ideology of classicism. While classical culture is valuable and a vital part of the Church’s history and tradition, its mission now is not to impose an alien culture on the world’s people, but instead for the Church to be enriched by the myriad cultures of the world. As if the value of such statements may be doubted, John Paul II reminded readers that these ideas are clearly present in the statements of the Second Vatican Council and the Church’s magisterium since then (*Redemptoris Missio*, n52).

The spirit of the Church’s approach to culture can be seen in the words of Aboriginal elder and Catholic Deacon, Boniface Perdjert (MSC Australia, 2016):

God did not begin to take an interest in people
with the incarnation of his Son,
nor with Abraham.
My people existed here in Australia thousands of years before Abraham.
In all that time God was with my people.
He worked through their culture.
He was saving us despite human weakness.
He was preparing us for the day
when he would see the features of Aboriginals
in the image of his Son.
So I must recognise,
I must use the things of God that are in my culture.
I must use them in his service.
If I do not do this,  
my faith and my service are shallow.  
They are a pretending.  
They belong to some one else, not to me.  
God has asked us to love him with whole mind, heart and soul.  
So I must give myself to God as an Aboriginal.

Russell-Mundine and Mundine (2014, 101) also cite Deacon Boniface Perdjert as stating that when he reads Christian Scriptures, he reads them through Aboriginal eyes. He sees the Christian message not as alien to Aboriginal culture but he celebrates his Aboriginal identity because “I think we have a good start.” He sees in Jesus Christ a great Dreamtime figure who gives law and ceremony and who teaches the way to “reach our true country.”

The challenge for a Catholic university in the Kimberley is whether we can embrace Aboriginal culture and inculturate the Christian message and mission within Aboriginal culture. Some Catholics, lay, clerical and scholarly may not be comfortable with such an approach, yet it is not without precedent. After all, even in the 1800s, Pope Leo XIII (Aeterni Patris 24) acknowledged that the Catholic way is not to be satisfied only with that which was familiar, but that we should engage discerningly in vetera novis augere et perficere; to enlarge and perfect the old by means of the new. In that light, the role of a Catholic University in the Kimberley should not be to de-culture Aboriginal people but to build upon, raise and nourish Aboriginal culture with the new, and to likewise “augment and perfect” the Catholic Intellectual Tradition with the culture of Aboriginal people.

The last words on this issue will be left to Pope John Paul II. In the first place, Aboriginal people and their culture are not merely tolerated from a paternalistic, Euro-normative stance. Instead, John Paul II (Alice Springs Address, Intro.) greets Aboriginal people with “esteem” and “love.”

Importantly, John Paul II argues that God’s truth, beauty, and goodness has been revealed through Aboriginal culture. John Paul’s argument is subtle, but
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substantial. He states that God has put into the hearts of Aboriginal people gifts—abilities and powers. But these gifts did not come with white settlement. Instead, John Paul II states clearly (Alice Springs Address, n1) that God gave to Aboriginal people these gifts “at the beginning of time.” Aboriginal culture is thus, according to the Pope, given by God and therefore worthy of every respect and esteem by those of other cultures.

As part of that respect, John Paul II (Alice Springs Address, n2) states that the Spirit of God has been with Aboriginal people and their culture for “thousands of years.” That culture is so important, it is Aboriginal people’s “only way of touching the mystery of God’s Spirit in you and in creation.”

Against what we would call the classicist mindset, John Paul II (Alice Springs Address, n3) affirmed the full value and dignity of Aboriginal culture. He referred to the “genius and dignity” of Aboriginal culture, and declared, in union with Pope Paul VI, that the Church does not want Aboriginal people to renounce their culture. Instead, this culture “must not be allowed to disappear.”

Moreover, in a clear rejection of classicism, or monoculturalist ideology, John Paul II states that, “The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ speaks all languages. It esteems and embraces all cultures. ... Always and everywhere the Gospel uplifts and enriches cultures with the revealed message of a loving and merciful God” (Alice Springs Address, n12).

So the mission of a Catholic university in the Kimberley, to echo the sentiments of John Paul II, is not to educate people by deculturing them or to creating graduates who are divided between cultures. Instead, the university’s mission is to inculturate the values of Jesus Christ from within Aboriginal culture. That is, the University’s mission is not to relocate Aboriginal people to another culture, but to educate them in such a way as to make them “more than ever truly Aboriginal” (Alice Springs Address, n12).