

## My Xaverian Education

*The following is reworked from an email posted to a discussion list in 2000.*

*It has been edited sufficiently to make it stand alone, but no more. The tenor of the whole original message, in context, will not be apparent; but it is of no long term importance, a response to flaming by a bigot who made an ad hominem attack rather than argue his supposed point. I had previously referred to my having had an R.C. education and the bigot sought to attribute all my views that he didn't like to that in the light of what he thought he knew about the R.C. church.*

*Previously I had been negative; but here it seemed appropriate to emphasise what I had learned at school, things my attacker had seemingly resisted learning everywhere.*

*I have forgotten what the disagreement we had was about; but I offer my reply here for the use of anyone interested enough in what I do to have got this far. I have no great interest in winning you over to any particular opinion that I hold now.*

I went to a Xavarian Brothers school which had a mixture of Xaverian and lay teachers.

I was taught when to question and how to reason there, despite their attempts to undermine the unwanted effects of that.

Hoist on their own petar, they taught me and the others who were awake so well that I thought my way quite easily out of the RC church before my 14th year.

In their endeavours to prepare us to resist the intellectual wiles of The Tempter, the Xaverians I suffered, despite their sometimes routinely violent and boorish behaviour, taught me - I believe (!) - to spot specious arguments; special pleading; irrelevance and ground-shifting; and cant. And a little Kant. They demonstrated a methodology of analysis. I learned some elementary logic there - I mean the formal thing, not the "common sense" variety - and so well that I was able to build upon it, I like to think, with private study

In the senior school, they introduced us to comparative religion. Their aim was, of course, to demolish intellectually all other faiths; but they didn't know what I was studying

They taught how to abstract. They taught how to seek potential and camouflaged syllogisms in a set of facts, to identify such sets, to find alternative sets.

It seems to me now, possibly falsely, they taught the difference - or more likely the way to teach ourselves the difference - between understanding based on knowledge and the knowledge itself & between knowledge and an accumulation of facts.

It was there that I met the concept of negative capability, one of the most useful ideas I have ever come across; and I remember distinctly that being picked up from

literature lessons and recommended to us as a useful approach to everything - to hold possibilities in one's head; to induce as well as deduce, where possible and necessary; to question. I find it astonishing that they did so; it was not particularly liberal there - they refused to enter me for the O-level (state exam) Logic because, they told my parents, I was already in danger of losing my faith intellectually... but I still learned; I bought text books myself and carried on. That's not my wonderfulness, but an implicit assumption that these things matter in themselves, an assumption which seemed to speak to me and the fruits of which gave me results in a way that almost nothing else I studied, except poetry and history, ever did.

Their aim, as I recall it, was to emphasise the importance of faith based on guided intellectual team work and the unreliability of personal cogitation. But by then, I had lost my faith without ever trying it on; and was already busy testing every idea I could find with the tools they had given us. (I did a lot of damage, particularly to my parents' peace of mind. I was like an untrained apprentice given a set of power tools; and it took me a long time to realise it isn't necessary to drill holes in everything because you can)

As I recall, we weren't bothered much by thoughts of the Vatican. I think that's to do with the circumstances of the RC church in England, but I am not sure. I left too early to get a full grasp on such things, but recently a nun called Lavinia Byrne left her order after being bullied, by whatever they call the inquisition now, for wanting to discuss birth control and the gendered priesthood

I do not remember my schooling with pleasure. It was bearable. I am against single sex schooling - which this was. I am against church schooling. But I would salvage from that outrageous system the essence of what I have just described.

Lawrence Upton

2000 - 2014

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