

Interview with Christopher Kelly

On the Life and Teaching of Ernest L. Fortin, A.A.

Interviewed by Peini Feng

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Editorial note: This transcript has been lightly edited for punctuation, capitalization, repetition, and readability while preserving the substance and character of the speaker's remarks. The recording itself is not published; this transcript is prepared for the Ernest Fortin Society's public archive.



Peini Feng

Good—now I can hear you, Professor. As I mentioned, we started the Ernest Fortin Society because we want to learn from Father Fortin's thought and example. You told us that you met Father Fortin, read nearly all of his work, and were invited by him to speak at Boston College several times.

Could you begin by telling us how you first met Father Fortin?

Christopher Kelly

Yes, I was in graduate school at the University of Toronto, where I was a student of Allan Bloom, among other people, and one thing that Bloom did was regularly have visitors come in, sometimes as speakers to give lectures, the way it happens at Boston College occasionally, but also just people would come and visit him, and he would arrange to have his students come and meet them. I had just begun working on my dissertation, so this would have been probably something like 1975 or 1976, and Father Fortin came to Toronto to visit Bloom, I don't know whether he had some other occasion to be there, but he was staying with Bloom, and Bloom had me come over with a couple of other people, and we talked about the relationship between Rousseau (because I was working on *Rousseau's Confessions*) and St. Augustine, and of course, Father Fortin was a great expert on St. Augustine. I mentioned that there was very little secondary literature on Rousseau and Augustine, and one thing was a very short section of a book by a French scholar named Pierre Courcelle, who was a famous scholar of Augustine, and it turned out he was one of Father Fortin's teachers.

We got along well and had a very good conversation. He made some suggestions for things I could read, and told me some of the things I had been reading weren't worth the trouble of reading, and so we got to know each other a little bit on that visit, and then after that, I would run into him occasionally at conventions and things. We both got up early and we would have breakfast together occasionally, and so I got to know him better. You mentioned that you read the essays on Augustine and Aquinas in the *History of Political Philosophy*, but those appeared in the second edition, so he had not published those at the time I met him. There was also the *Medieval Political Philosophy Reader*, and he again was one of the editorial staff of that for the second edition, so he had not yet done that. At the time that I met him, he had published I think his dissertation, the book on Neoplatonism and so on in French, which I read at the time, and some essays, but not the things that really established his reputation, and I had the good fortune of seeing them as they came out, and so we would have talks about what we were working on, and I would ask him about the latest essay of his that I had read, because that's the period in which he became really I think most active, from the mid-70s and into the 90s really, so a period of 15 or 20 years, in which he was publishing a lot, and wonderful things, and editing things, and recruiting people to do translations, and so on.

So some of that took place when I was still in graduate school, and some of it took place after I had gotten jobs.

Then in 1988 I was visiting at Dartmouth, and he got in touch with me and invited me to come and give a lecture at Boston College. At that time there was a series called the Bradley Lectures, funded by the Bradley Foundation, so you've heard about these, and so he was often the master of ceremonies, the person who would introduce the lecturer, and then run the discussion after the lecture, and so he invited me to come. When we discussed the topic of my lecture I suggested giving something on Rousseau, but he said, well, this is theology department, and political science department, and philosophy department, it would be better if you could talk about religion. At that point I was working on Tocqueville, and specifically on Tocqueville on Hinduism and Islam, and he was very interested in that topic, and encouraged me to come and talk about that. So that's what I did, and it was a strange visit in a way, because I ended up staying in the Jesuit residence, St. Mary's here, rather than a hotel, and got to go out to dinner just with Father Fortin, and again have a very good conversation into the night, and so that's really the sort of acquaintance I had with him.

By the time I arrived in Boston College ten years later in 1998, he had started his health problems, and he would be on campus occasionally, usually for the Bradley lectures, and so we would see each other then, but it was more informal conversation.

So I would say really from 1975 until 1995, we would run into each other every couple of years, have a meal together, and it was very important in a way that he invited me to come and give a lecture at Boston College, because that was when I met Chris Bruell and Robert Faulkner. The only person I had known at BC before that was Susan Shell. Nasser Behnegar wasn't there yet when I arrived, and so I got to meet them, and that I think is what started the process that led to me coming here later. So in a way, I owe that to his invitation, at least the beginning. If I hadn't known those people, I might not have been invited to apply for the job.

Peini Feng

Yes. It reminds me of Father Fortin's statement that the mission of a Catholic college lies in charity and community. I can see both charity and community reflected in this story.

Christopher Kelly

I can tell a story about his generosity with his time, because I mentioned that we would run into each other at conferences and get together for breakfast or some other meal, and one conference I ran into him in the hallway, and it was 8:30 in the morning, and I said, would you like to go to breakfast? And he hesitated for a moment, and then he said yes, and then we went to breakfast, and then at the end of breakfast, I learned that he had been planning on going to a panel and hearing speakers and dropped that in order to meet with me, and I think it wasn't because he preferred my company to hearing the papers, but it's just that I had invited him, and he liked me and wanted to encourage me and didn't want to say no, so he gave up something that he would have liked to do in order to spend time with me even though I wasn't a student of his, I wasn't a colleague of his. I was someone he had met and he had friendly relations with, but I think that many people would have said, well, it would be nice to do it, but I'm going to this panel, and maybe we can get together sometime later, and then maybe you do, maybe you don't, but in his case, he hesitated for only a moment, and then we went, and he threw himself into the conversation.

Peini Feng

That was very kind. Through these interviews, I have heard a great deal about the relationship between Allan Bloom and Ernest Fortin, and about comparisons between them. A few days ago, Professor Kerry Cronin told me that Professor Frederick Lawrence had recalled Allan Bloom once saying, "Even though I'm an atheist, Ernie is my way to God."

Father McNellis also contrasted their styles of dress. He said that Allan Bloom dressed to impress, while Father Fortin dressed for comfort. Bloom always wore the best suits; Father Fortin, even when lecturing on Dante, wore what Father McNellis called “ugly running shoes” because they were comfortable.

Since you knew both men—Bloom as your teacher and Fortin as a friend—how would you describe their relationship and compare them?

Christopher Kelly

Yes, well, I believe they met in Paris when Allan Bloom was there on a postdoctoral fellowship, and so at that time, they were young. They were not as young as you are, but they were not that much older than you, because Bloom had entered college when he was 15 and graduated when he was 19, got his PhD when he was 25, so this was not that long after that. They both had a very strong interest in political philosophy, and there were things that Father Fortin knew that were things that Bloom just had never studied, and he sort of knew about them, and he was fairly widely read so he could discuss them intelligently, but I think he was extraordinarily impressed with Father Fortin's learning.

But then the other thing, I think, there can be people that you're extremely impressed with, but you don't necessarily become friendly with, that you might admire them and have cordial relations, but there's something about friendship which is different. One of the things that made them fast friends was that they were both very funny. It was not just that they had good senses of humor, but they were very quick and witty and could come up with remarks instantly, and in the case of Bloom, he was just extraordinarily humorous, but sometimes people would take offense at what he said because he was so quick to say something, he wouldn't censor himself and think, is this person going to be irritated by this, and I think that Father Fortin was someone who had a very great tolerance. If something was funny, he thought it was funny. He didn't stop to think, should I be offended at this? He would just enjoy the humor of the moment and then would come back with his own remark. So they were both very witty people, very sharp, very quick, and I'm sure that had a lot to do with their friendship, because seeing them together, this was true with a few people with Bloom. This is not really about Father Fortin, but Bloom, near the end of his life, when he was teaching in Chicago, he would teach with Saul Bellow, the novelist; they would teach together, and one year I was doing research in Chicago and went to their classes, and it was really like a comedy routine, the two of them going back and forth with remarks toward each other, and I think there was something of that with Father Fortin as well.

Each one was likely to say that the other was among the most humorous people and most appreciative of the humor that they had.

Peini Feng

That is indeed a virtue. You mentioned that both Bloom and Father Fortin were interested in political philosophy when they were studying in Paris. Father Fortin also wrote that Bloom sometimes teased him for knowing so little about politics. To some extent, the remark seems to have inspired Father Fortin to think more deeply about politics, especially from a Christian perspective.

In what sense do you think Father Fortin was already interested in political philosophy while he and Bloom were in Paris?

Christopher Kelly

It's a good question because it is true that as his career developed, so after the point that I met him and when he was writing, many of the things that he would write that were not, that were sort of half scholarly and half for a different audience would be things about bishops' statements, about policy questions and so on. And that's very different from his very earliest writings, the things on Neoplatonism and Christianity and so on. So I think there clearly is a change of emphasis that took place and I'm sure that his relations with Bloom and perhaps other Straussians played a role in stimulating that interest.

So I would expect that the beginning point of interest for the two of them was the relationship between reason and revelation simply, and then Bloom may have been helpful for getting him to see how that related to political questions these issues were. But, you know, he had been interested in St. Augustine and St. Augustine is certainly relevant to political questions from a Christian perspective, so I don't think it was a complete change of orientation of his views, but a sort of development of one side of something which he had already known something about.

Peini Feng

That is very interesting. It reminds me of another similarity between Bloom and Fortin: their interest in the human soul. As you know, *The Closing of the American Mind* was originally titled *Souls Without Longing*, so the soul is central to the book.

Father Fortin's dissertation in Paris also concerned the human soul in fifth-century Christianity. From their years in Paris onward, both men seem to have shared a passion for understanding the human soul. Other interviewees have also described Father Fortin's gift for bringing things down to earth—another reflection of his concern for what truly matters to the human soul and a gift that Bloom also possessed.

I also want to ask more specifically about the Bradley Lecture Series. You mentioned that Father Fortin invited you to speak at Boston College and that you first considered talking about Rousseau. But he observed that the lecture involved the theology, philosophy, and political science departments and suggested a topic more directly related to religion.

I would have thought Rousseau was quite relevant to religion.

Christopher Kelly

Yes, but it's really a question of what I was working on at the time. At that time I was working on, I was beginning to work editing the collected writings of Rousseau. The first volume was the book, *The Dialogues*. I now know how much this work has to do with religion, but at that time I was focusing on the translation and the relation of the work to Rousseau's political writings. I happened to have been also reading a lot in Tocqueville, but specifically in Tocqueville about religious questions. There is a lot of literature on Tocqueville and Christianity, but he wrote lengthy things about French policy in Algeria, and a lot of them were about Islam.

And then he also began writing a work that he only wrote, I think, between 50 and 100 pages of, which was about India, and a lot of that was about Hinduism. And it seemed to me that there were connections among these treatments that scholars hadn't noticed yet. When I said I was working on that Father Fortin became very interested, but you know, I think if I had said, I prefer to do something on Rousseau, he would have said fine.

But once I mentioned that, he got very interested in it.

Peini Feng

I see.

Christopher Kelly

At that point, I wasn't sure whether I was going to write something on it or not. But since he invited me to do the lecture, I wrote something, and in the end it got, it did get published.

Peini Feng

Yes, I remember seeing that.

Christopher Kelly

It was called *Civil and Uncivil Religions: Tocqueville on Hinduism and Islam*.

Peini Feng

Yes, I have a vague memory of it. I also bought your book on Tocqueville's travels and have read parts of it. What do you remember about the atmosphere of the Bradley Lecture Series? I have heard many good things about it: students from across departments attended, and Father Fortin introduced the speakers in a memorable way.

Do you remember how Father Fortin introduced you?

Christopher Kelly

I don't remember. It was a long time ago. I don't remember how he introduced me.

I know something about his introductions that he did with other people. I know every several years he would introduce someone and say, this person is a great expert. You know what an expert is.

An expert is someone from out of town.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Christopher Kelly

And he didn't do that with me. He could have, right? But he didn't.

No, the atmosphere, you know, when I went, and then the Bradley Lectures continued for quite a long time. But it was in the big lecture hall in this building downstairs. And I would say that typically the attendance would be 70 or 80 people, maybe more.

And, of course, the format was to have the lecture at about 4 o'clock, followed by brief discussion, and then go over to the faculty dining hall for dinner. Not everyone would go to the dinner, but usually there were a lot of those. And you mentioned there were students from numerous departments, but there were also people from the general community.

Peini Feng

Oh, wow.

Christopher Kelly

There were lots of, and by that I mean both graduate students and faculty members from other schools in the Boston area, and sometimes farther away would come if they were interested in it. But also there would be sometimes, you know, elderly people who lived in Newton who somehow heard about these, and if there was something that interested them, they would come and they would then go to the dinner and participate in the discussion afterwards.

So, I mean, I remember it was a very long day because the lecture was at 4 o'clock, and that went until 4:50, then there were 15 or 20 minutes of discussion, then there was the dinner, and then there was someone who was the commentator on the lecture, in my case it was Delba Mansfield. Then I gave a response and this was followed by general discussion. It went on until about 8:30. So that's already four and a half hours with dinner in the middle of it. But I think that I was the first one for whom the graduate students held a party.

Afterwards they asked if I would be willing to come and talk to them more. And so I don't know if you've heard about the Strauss House. Have you heard about this?

Peini Feng

I have heard of it, but I have never known exactly what it was.

Christopher Kelly

Okay, well, there's a house. If you go out the entrance to Boston College that goes onto Commonwealth Avenue, so through St. Mary's, if you turn right, there's a house just down the street that is not quite on the campus, but it sort of touches the campus. And it's a house that an elderly woman lived downstairs, and then she rented two floors above, and there were perhaps four bedrooms, and a bunch of political science graduate students rented it. And then what would happen is one of them would leave and the others would find someone else to go in, and she was happy to keep the same renters and not have to look or advertise, and people would come. This went on for more than twenty years. They had a nice large living room, a kitchen, and I think there were four bedrooms. I was invited to this party, and this went on until 2 o'clock in the morning or perhaps even later, but that was when I left.

Peini Feng

Wow.

Christopher Kelly

And there were probably 30 or 35 people there. There were graduate students from different departments, their friends, and a couple of faculty went to it, but they didn't stay that late. And then I had to have someone show me how to get back to where I was staying at the Jesuit residence. And that became a tradition as part of the Bradley lectures. I think the person who invited me to the party was Devin Stauffer, who teaches at the University of Texas. He was a graduate student here at the time, and he was one of the people who lived in that house. And so I don't know how long the Bradley Lectures had been going on before that, how many years, when it started, but this would have been 1988 is when I went for the first time.

Peini Feng

I see. That is fascinating. Does the Strauss House still exist?

Christopher Kelly

Well, what happened is that something like between 2005 and 2010, the woman decided she was going to sell the house.

Peini Feng

Oh, I see.

Christopher Kelly

And so I don't know what happened to it after that, but she told them at the end of this year you have to get out. All along it had only been male students in the house, because the woman who owned it did not want women.

Peini Feng

That is unfortunate.

Wow. It sounds almost like a brotherhood—which Boston College is not allowed to have. Do you also recall the atmosphere among the faculty in the Political Science Department and their relationship with Father Fortin?

A few weeks ago I interviewed Professor B. J. Dobski, who now teaches at Assumption University. He told me that when he arrived at Boston College, he was in the Classics Department. While he and the other Classics students were reading Homer and studying Greek, students from Political Science would often read Greek with them and talk with him about the courses they were taking in Political Science. Professor Dobski came to realize that these were excellent courses and began taking classes in the Political Science Department.

Professors Susan Shell and Christopher Bruell also encouraged him to take classes with a certain priest in the Theology Department—Father Fortin. There seems to have been a very friendly atmosphere among the departments, especially between members of the Political Science Department and Father Fortin. What was that relationship like in your time?

Christopher Kelly

Well, in fact, when I was in graduate school, the first connection that I had with Boston College was made during my first year. The first student I met at Toronto was Wayne Ambler, who at the time was a graduate student at Boston College, and he was studying mainly with Bruell, but Bruell was on sabbatical. So Ambler came to Toronto for a year to study with Bloom. He had studied with Bloom some when he was an undergraduate at Cornell, but then came back to Boston College. Wayne Ambler was probably the first person to tell me about Father Fortin. I had never heard of him before, because as I said, he had not yet really done the work with the history of political philosophy and the medieval reader. I got the impression from him, I don't really know whether this is true, that some of the courses that Fortin taught would be cross-listed with Political Science.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Christopher Kelly

You could take them as political science course, or you could take them as a theology class.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Christopher Kelly

It was easy for people from political science to take courses with him, because with the rules normally allow you to take only two courses outside the department. but when they were cross-listed, you could then just count them as a political science courses. And there was an undergraduate at Toronto who ended up coming to Boston College, whom I met named Michael Palmer, who then went on to teach at the University of Maine. He would come back to Toronto and talk with me about his experience at Boston College with me, and he also took some of these cross-listed courses.

The courses could be on a very wide variety of subjects. I remember Michael Palmer telling me that he'd taken a course on Nietzsche with Father Fortin, and so it wasn't just that he did St. Augustine and Aquinas, it wasn't that he simply did the things that he had started doing research on, but he did a wide range of courses. And it's true that I think everyone I knew who was a graduate student in political science at Boston College took some courses with him. They would take as many courses with him as they would take, say, with Susan Shell or Robert Faulkner, and they would have the one person who was going to end up being their dissertation supervisor, they would take every course the person taught, others they would be more selective, and it was so, from their perspective, it was as if Father Fortin was a member of the department.

Peini Feng

Yes, that is very interesting.

Christopher Kelly

And I think that in terms of friendships, he had very close friendships with people who were in the department here, and I'm sure he got along well with many of his colleagues in theology as well, but of course he was an Assumptionist at a Jesuit school, and so he was in a way a little bit of an outsider already when he came, and so he was ready to embrace the political science community.

Peini Feng

Yes. As you know, we have collected many of Father Fortin's syllabi and course descriptions, and I did see many cross-listed courses. Father Fortin often noted that a course would also be of interest to students in the Political Science Department. There was a question I wanted to ask, but it has just escaped me.

Christopher Kelly

Well, let me say something else about his influence on me. Because, as I mentioned, when I met him was at the period that he was just beginning to write a lot.

I mean, a lot of the things he wrote were after that, and the first tenure track job I got was at a campus in the University of Maryland, and I was the one person in the department who taught political philosophy. So, in a way, I was responsible for covering everything, and as you know, my specialty is really Rousseau, but I taught a course that was political philosophy before 1600, and so that was a lot of Plato and Aristotle and up to Machiavelli, but I also included a lot of medieval things in that over the years, and in order to educate myself in that, what I would do is read what he had written.

So, when the second edition of the Strauss-Cropsey *History of Political Philosophy* came out, there were two wonderful essays, and then when he did the second edition of the medieval reader that Lerner and Mahdi had started, then there were Christian writers as well as the Jewish and Islamic ones that he was responsible for including, so it gave me a wonderful textbook to have to use in the course. And so, both for teaching myself enough so that I could then teach basic undergraduate courses and also having things for the students to read, he was extremely important.

Peini Feng

I remember the question now. At the beginning of this project, I heard different accounts of how to understand Father Fortin. Some people said that he was not necessarily a Straussian, even though he learned from and admired Strauss, but was primarily an Augustinian.

I also heard that some graduate students wondered whether Father Fortin was really a priest because he taught texts critical of Christianity with such intellectual honesty. Did you hear discussions of that kind?

Christopher Kelly

Not really. I mean, a little bit from some of the graduate students that they would wonder, but it's never really something that occurred to me to wonder about. I mean, he was a priest.

He taught and wrote a lot about contemporary Catholic disputes and never in a satirical or belittling way. I'm not the person who could tell you about how orthodox he was, but it was not something that I thought very much about.

Peini Feng

I see. Father Lawrence wrote in an essay that Father Fortin once told him he wanted to teach texts with such integrity that students would wonder why he remained a priest.

Father Fortin believed this was an important form of Christian witness in an age of diaspora. I find it very interesting that his teaching intentionally led students to wonder why he remained a priest.

Christopher Kelly

Well, you know, he was interested in the truth.

Peini Feng

Yes.

Christopher Kelly

And so that he would take seriously people whose positions disagreed with his and present them in a very rigorous way.

And I think he did not think there was anything to be gained by not doing that. It was really the only way for him to proceed.

Peini Feng

Yes. It is beautiful that the pursuit of truth produced friendship rather than enmity.

I think that is all I have for now. Before we finish, do you have any other thoughts, memories, or jokes about Father Fortin that you would like to share?

Christopher Kelly

Yeah, jokes, that would be a good...

Peini Feng

When I have asked previous interviewees this question, they have often said that we had covered the basics but that they still had a few anecdotes or jokes about Father Fortin to share.

Christopher Kelly

Well, the anecdote was really the one about the breakfast when he dropped his commitment to go see a panel he wanted to go. I think something which shows his general good humor and his spirits are in one of the... I think it's the fourth volume of the *Collected Essays*.

There are talks when he was teaching at Assumption College about football games and things like that. Those are extraordinarily humorous because he sort of puts himself in the position of a fanatic and pretends to be a fanatic about what one wants to do to destroy the Holy Cross football team and so on. That shows how good-humored he was, also how funny and witty he was, but also show his ability to put himself into the shoes of a character that's not really him. I had been completely unaware of those before they were published.

But yet it seemed to me it showed something that I recognized in him.

Peini Feng

That reminds me of the fourth volume, which includes an autobiographical essay by Father Fortin. He wrote that some streets in his childhood neighborhood were lawless and that gangsters were around.

That environment seems to have influenced his thinking in some way. Professor Michael Foley also told me that Father Fortin very much enjoyed reading detective novels.

Christopher Kelly

Yes.

Peini Feng

He often used examples from detective novels in his classes. He would say that some detectives were natural-law theorists and others were natural-right theorists.

Christopher Kelly

I can remember him talking about Agatha Christie as a natural law theorist.

Peini Feng

That was also an important part of his character. Similarly, Strauss would discuss Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty, comparing them with Hobbes and Machiavelli.

Christopher Kelly

Yes.

Peini Feng

That is all I have for today. Thank you very much, Professor.

Christopher Kelly

It's a pleasure talking to you. It is a pleasure to think back about Father Fortin and talk about him.

Peini Feng

Thank you very much, Professor.