

# Distinctively Catholic

## Keeping the Faith in Higher Education

*James L. Heft*

In the twenty years since Pope John Paul II issued *Ex corde ecclesiae* (“From the Heart of the Church”), his apostolic constitution on Catholic universities, progress has been made in articulating and reinvigorating the Catholic identity of the more than two hundred and thirty Catholic universities and colleges in the United States. Still, significant work remains to be done, especially in clarifying the distinctive intellectual foundations on which any university that calls itself Catholic must rest.

Once it was commonplace to assume that secularization and scientific and economic progress would eventually stamp out religion along with other “superstitions.” Yet the death of religion, to paraphrase Mark Twain, has been greatly exaggerated. Both here and across the globe, religion continues to influence nearly every aspect of society. To be sure, modernity has purified religion of some of its pretensions. In the West, the church now recognizes the autonomy of science, defends the separation of church and state, and affirms religious freedom. At the same time, the church has demonstrated great resilience. Religion evidently is here to stay.

Yet for the most part, the secular academy remains indifferent, if not openly hostile, to traditional religion. While there has been a renewed interest in the study of religion in the history and sociology departments of some campuses, most secular universities are dismissive of the study of religion and especially theology. There are several reasons for this, one of which is the prevalence of “postmodernism.” Found mainly in the humanities and the social sciences, postmodernism comes in two forms: hard and soft. Hard postmodernism proclaims the end of metaphysics, the end of all “totalizing”

narratives (itself a totalizing narrative), and the reduction of all knowledge claims to various forms of power. Obviously, hard postmodernism is deadly for Christianity; it attacks Christian truths as ideologies of control and oppression. On the other hand, Catholic scholars should welcome soft postmodernism, for this way of thinking recognizes that a purely objective and totally accurate expression of reality is impossible, that the realities of power, gender, and coercion cannot be ignored, that all concepts have a history, and that all truths need to be put in their historical and cultural context. Rightly understood, a soft postmodernism helps us avoid both the pretensions of absolutism and a paralyzing relativism.

The academy’s reluctance to study religion has gone hand-in-hand with the professionalization of the disciplines. Over a hundred years ago, American academics, inspired by their German counterparts, began to organize themselves into separate departments, which established their own journals and professional societies. The professionalization of the academy took place when the influence of science was at its peak. No doubt professionalization has increased methodological rigor and promoted more original research, but professionalization has also had negative consequences, one of which is called “physics envy”: many academics think that unless their research is empirically verifiable, it will be dismissed as mere opinion. The best scholars know better, because they understand the limits of their methods. But because most religious



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claims are not, strictly speaking, empirically verifiable, few professors in the modern academy take the study of religion seriously. Most major secular universities have no room for theologians; those that do tend to isolate them in schools of divinity, where they are often seen not as producers of new knowledge but as trainers of students entering the ministry.

In the face of these powerful cultural forces, what can Catholic intellectuals bring to the modern academy? First and most obviously, our tradition values tradition. If Catholics were to rely primarily—or only—on the study of biblical texts, they would bypass centuries of philosophy and theology, to say nothing of art, music, literature, and architecture. An emphasis on tradition underscores the importance of human reason, the recognition of which should open Catholics to dialogue with anyone who might have something to teach them. The former dean of Notre Dame's College of Arts and Letters, Mark Roche, explains that for the Catholic intellectual "every position is to be entertained and weighed in the service of truth." Secularization and the professionalization of the disciplines have certainly made it difficult for many Catholics to function publicly as intellectuals, and in doing so to serve the truth. Worse, both secularization and postmodernism tend to separate religious desire from religious tradition—that is, they separate spirituality from religion. For Catholics, spirituality and communal religious practices should be intimately related: if you separate them, they both die.

Catholic intellectual tradition is rooted in specific religious beliefs and practices—most fundamentally, the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the Eucharist. Even before the Word became flesh, the Jewish tradition affirmed that all creation is good because it is from God. Jews, Christians, and Muslims together affirm that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Christians believe that the dignity of that image is made most clear in the person of Jesus Christ, the human face of God. But Jesus is not all there is of God: Christians also affirm the existence of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—which means that Christians understand God as a community of persons. Catholic Christians build their own community of persons through the sacraments, primarily through the celebration of the Eucharist. Catholic beliefs and practices ground a university education in a common search for the truth and a dedication to the common good. Scholarship inspired by Catholicism bears on real-life issues, not just for the benefit of that very small percentage of humanity fortunate enough to be professors or students, but for everyone, and especially the poor. A Catholic intellectual community does not lead students to decide who they *want* to be; it helps them discover who they have been *called* to be. The key concern is not personal identity but dedication to God and to others.

Moreover, because reason and faith are intimately related in the Catholic tradition, every part of a Catholic school's curriculum should be informed in some way by philosophical, ethical, and theological perspectives. In professional education, such as medicine, the Christian vision of the human person will fundamentally shape the care given the sick, the poor, and especially the dying. In the study of history, the presence, forms, and vitality of various religions are studied as an integral part of the human story. The teaching of philosophy will not ignore the vital relationship that has existed for centuries between philosophy and theology (even if much of modern philosophy severs that relationship). In other words, at a Catholic university, Catholic intellectual traditions will affect all aspects of the curriculum, and even determine some of the majors that are offered.

Most important, the Catholic intellectual tradition seeks to integrate knowledge. There ought to be connections between all the subjects studied because everything that is studied has its source, ultimately, in God. This is a daunting task given the enormous expansion of knowledge in the past hundred years. Today, courses are taught by professors who may know nothing about what their colleagues in other departments—and sometimes even in their own—are teaching. Still, Catholic universities must resist the fragmentation of knowledge typical of secular universities. Scholars who rely exclusively on already established methodologies within their disciplines will prematurely dismiss important questions they don't yet know how to answer. In the words of Denys Turner, they "reverse the traffic between questions and answers so as to permit only such questions to be asked as we already possess predetermined methodologies for answering, cutting the agenda

of questions down to the shape and size of our given routines for answering them.” This approach spells the death not only of the liberal arts, but of all our disciplines—and certainly the death of Catholic universities, which ask unanswerable questions even of God.

Fostering the distinctive characteristics of Catholic intellectual life also faces administrative and economic challenges. The commercialization of American culture tends to reduce human activity to exchange; it restricts the idea of value to a single, narrow measure—that of economic power. A friend of mine describes the United States as an economy with a culture loosely attached. Commercialization affects everyone in the academy: administrators, faculty, and students.

Administrators, including members of boards of trustees, become agents of commercialization when they rely entirely on models borrowed from the business world—models that maximize revenue, bureaucratize all transactions, and speak of faculty as “employees” and students as “customers.” Development and public-relations staff become agents of commercialization when they focus on “branding,” especially when this means reducing the mission of the university only to what is popular and sells. Some accrediting agencies expect faculty to quantify all the important outcomes of what they do. Of course, any university that does not balance its budget will eventually cease to exist: “No margin, no mission.” But the mission of a Catholic university is about much more than a good margin. In Einstein’s words, “Everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.”

The faculty is commercialized when professors are more concerned with increasing their salaries than with their responsibility to teach and do research that contributes to the common good. Similarly, students can become so focused on acquiring marketable skills and landing good (that is, well-paying) jobs that they see no value in the liberal arts—no value in exploring the theological and philosophical questions inseparable from a life of genuine reflection. Catholic colleges and universities should help students see beyond what they want (or think they want) to what they most need: an integrated education rooted in a distinctive religious tradition that will sustain them in whatever professions they choose.

Faculty who are skeptical about the intellectual relevance of a Catholic university’s religious mission pose another problem. They may not see how the Catholic intellectual tradition relates to their discipline and research. Or they may assume that the university’s religious mission is only pastoral and should be outsourced to campus ministry and the theology department. They may think that being teachers at a Catholic university means simply being fair and kind to their students—which is, of course, a good thing. Or they may think that research that draws on Catholic intellectual traditions cannot be challenging or worthwhile.

Hiring faculty who are sympathetic to the mission of a Catholic university is thus critical. It is a false choice to think one must hire either for mission or for diversity. Hiring a diverse group of people who embrace a single mission is the



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## lent: the temptations

hunger now wraps the Flesh  
like a shroud of dusty gauze  
    command these stones  
        amid the wild beasts  
sand and night  
with their illusions of thunder  
    and in the end

a thirst

—*Sr. Lou Ella Hickman*

answer. In order to “hire for mission,” search committees must understand the religious mission of their university in intellectual terms. *Every* search committee has a mission in mind when it hires. It is not illegal to ask faculty candidates how their research might contribute to the institution’s mission. Faculty from other faiths, and even no faith, can and do make valuable contributions to the mission of Catholic universities. (Disaffected Catholic professors, especially when they are tenured, often pose the greatest obstacle to strengthening the Catholic identity of a university.) Nor does “hiring for mission” inevitably lead to an inner and outer circle among faculty. It all depends on how faculty and administrators go about it.

One way to deal with legitimate concerns raised by policies to strengthen Catholic identity is to spend time—lots of time—talking with chairs of departments and faculty search committees about why it’s important to hire for mission, and even how *not* to go about it. However many years they have spent at a Catholic university, faculty need regular opportunities to learn or to reconsider what it means to teach and do research at a Catholic institution. Book discussions, cross-disciplinary faculty seminars, and carefully designed general-education programs are all good ways to promote the university’s mission. This is especially true for untenured faculty, who are likely to be the most receptive to opportunities to learn about how Catholic intellectual traditions can enrich work across all disciplines.

All candidates for faculty positions—whether Catholic or not—should be able to contribute to the intellectual mission of the institution. I did *not* write “the intellectual *and* the religious missions” of the university. This point is fundamental: no sharp distinction should be drawn between these two closely related aspects of the Catholic university’s mission. Seeking the truth of things, whether in science or the humanities, is a religious act. Faculty must be dedicated to that search for truth.

Depending on their academic disciplines, some faculty will be more able than others to incorporate intellectual themes related explicitly to Catholic intellectual traditions. Diversity needs to be sought and respected, but it is more important that all diversity enrich the mission of the university as a Catholic university—that all diversity be within, not parallel or indifferent to, that mission.

Another important issue facing Catholic universities concerns the meaning of academic freedom. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) is dedicated to protecting the rights of individual professors against the actions of arbitrary administrators, board members, politicians, and anyone else outside the academy. The AAUP stands for some very good things. For example, it insists on rigorous peer review and due process. Catholic universities have learned a great deal from the AAUP about the rights and responsibilities of individual professors. But the secular understanding of academic freedom has consequences when it is adopted without qualification by Catholic universities, where a specific intellectual tradition should be privileged, and where philosophy and theology occupy a special place in the curriculum. Catholic universities need to be able to insist that all faculty show respect for a theologically grounded ethics and a willingness to engage with the church’s intellectual resources. The secular notion of academic freedom gives no importance to strengthening Catholic distinctiveness. This is ironic, since secular liberal organizations say they support pluralism; and Catholic universities, if they can be substantively distinct, will contribute to the needed pluralism of American higher education.

The public perception of a school’s Catholic identity presents yet another problem. Since the Enlightenment, cultural elites have criticized the Catholic Church as the major opponent to intellectual progress, while negative media images of the contemporary Catholic Church make rehabilitating the word “Catholic” problematic for many. It needs to be acknowledged that some Catholic leaders have contributed to that perception. But it is a mistake to respond to such criticisms by limiting a distinctively Catholic mission to the pastoral care of students. Nor is it sufficient to describe mission only in terms of the charisms of the religious orders that have founded Catholic colleges and universities. Some orders have richer intellectual and spiritual traditions than others; none, however, has the depth and variety of intellectual and spiritual traditions of Catholicism as a whole. It makes sense, therefore, to emphasize Catholic intellectual and spiritual traditions first, before moving on to the particular embodiment of those traditions that individual religious orders provide.

This brings us to the tendency of some people in the academy to privilege the so-called small-“c” over so-called capital-“C” of Catholicism. Advocates of small-“c” Catholicism focus on ideas that many non-Catholics, and not only a few Catholics, find acceptable. They affirm a both/and approach, promoting a


capacious understanding of natural law, human rights, and the humanity that everyone shares. These are important truths, to be sure, but left out are what many consider the less attractive truths of Catholicism—namely, the magisterium, dogmas, and certain moral teachings that seem increasingly hard to defend. Instead of speaking of Jesus and the church, small “c” advocates speak of the Christian heritage. Uncomfortable with the concrete details of the gospel (Jesus and his community of believers), some schools speak instead of the “values” of Jesus and the “heritage” of the Christian community.

Sometimes there are legitimate reasons for emphasizing the small “c.” Yet the situation for Catholic universities today calls for something bolder. If one omits the big “C”—the distinctive theological dimensions of Catholicism—the small “c” soon morphs into Christian “values,” and from there it often collapses into a bland humanism. Eventually, what is truly distinctive of Catholic Christianity will disappear altogether. Catholic scholars need to understand that they can be more inclusive precisely because of the big-“C” elements of Catholicism. Catholics are committed to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and research *because* of, not in spite of, their Catholic faith. Rightly understood, the big “C” broadens the intellectual horizon. That some Catholics will then push some nondogmatic teachings as though they were dogmatic, that some members of the hierarchy will seek to close off thinking that is critical but still faithful, that some members of the laity will continue to describe a legitimate diversity of positions among Catholic scholars as heresy—none of these predictable difficulties should lead Catholic universities to retreat from the particulars of the church’s tradition.

Finally, Catholic scholars should be aware not only of what they can offer the church, but also of what the larger church can offer them. Professors and administrators note with sadness the distrust many bishops have of Catholic colleges and universities. That unfortunate distrust, however, should not keep academics from acknowledging what Catholic colleges and universities might learn from the larger church. The Catholic intellectual tradition, which presupposes the interplay of faith and reason, can never be reduced to fundamentalism, be it biblical or papal. Tradition is a socially embodied and historically extended debate, not only about interpretations of Scripture, but also about the interpretation of the constant but still-evolving and historically conditioned teachings of the magisterium. An international church with real teaching authority helps local colleges and universities avoid the pitfalls of nationalism and other kinds of idolatry.

Absent a vibrant Catholic intellectual tradition, the forces of the market economy may well overwhelm our colleges and universities, reducing them to training grounds that produce students who fit seamlessly into seriously flawed corporate or government institutions. If leaders and scholars draw freely and deeply on Catholic tradition, universities can offer a distinctive nonsecularized form of higher education, one that will make a major contribution to the life of the whole church as well as the secular world.

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