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The Catholic Intellectual Tradition

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The Catholic Intellectual Tradition

Scholarship, Faith, and Higher Education

Edited by John J. O’Keefe, Gina Merys, and Bridget Keegan

Introduction

Catholic Intellectual Tradition and University Mission

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[1] A Google search for the string “Catholic Intellectual Tradition” performed in May 2009 returned 14,700 hits. By the standards of the modern Internet, this is a small number and suggests only a modest interest in a tradition that purports to be two thousand years old. A further search of the Google Book database returned a paltry 512 entries, only one of which included the words “Catholic Intellectual Tradition” in the title. All the other occurrences were scattered here and there in oceans of text. The print record is even more meager. The Library of Congress database returned only two books with the words “Catholic Intellectual Tradition” in the title. One of them is a book examining the meaning of the said tradition. That collection, like this one, explores the nature of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition as expressed at Catholic colleges and universities (Cernera and Morgan). The second is a work of political theory (Grasso et al.). Moreover, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* has no entry for

“Catholic Intellectual Tradition,” and, surprisingly, neither does Wikipedia. Thus, the objective revelation of modern search technology suggests, paradoxically, that our ancient tradition may be somewhat recent.

[2] This conclusion would, of course, be quite false. Those of us who have spent our careers engaged in the study of the Catholic tradition are confident that there is, in fact, something that could appropriately be called the “Catholic Intellectual Tradition.” Fundamentally, we would say that this tradition includes, at a minimum, a conviction that faith and reason can and should be reconciled. Although the early Christian theologian Tertullian (d. ca. 220) may have quipped, “what has Athens to do with Jerusalem...or the Academy with the Church,” he was no enemy of the intellectual life and actively pursued ways to bring these seeming opposites into constructive dialogue. Likewise, Clement of Alexandria (d. ca 215) and Origen (d. 254) engaged Platonic philosophy and attempted to reconcile Christian scriptures with that intellectual world. The work of these pioneering Christian theologians set the paradigm for the subsequent unfolding of the entire project of Christian theology.

[3] The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, emerged as a theological formulation that used the categories of Platonic metaphysics to resolve the apparent incoherence of Christian monotheism. We do not worship three Gods when we worship the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Rather, we worship one God, one divine *ousia* – a Greek philosophical term – that subsists in three identities or *hypostases* – another philosophical term. Theologians like Augustine routinely interpreted the creation stories in the book of Genesis as coded accounts consistent with the basic cosmogonies of antiquity. Similarly, centuries later, St. Thomas Aquinas, when confronted with Aristotelian philosophy, attempted a reconciliation of the old Platonic worldview with that of the newly recovered Aristotle. The result was an intellectual synthesis that not only allowed Christian theology to integrate Aristotelian thought, but that also contributed to the foundation of modern science. While contemporary fundamentalist Christianity views science as an enemy of faith bent on the destruction of the Church, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition is more sanguine: science and faith are not necessarily at odds, evolution can coexist with creation because reason can coexist with faith, Jerusalem can partner with Athens. These themes will be a major focus of the essays in this collection.

[4] Because we know all this about our tradition’s past and present judgments, we are not flummoxed when we hear uttered in apposition “faith” and “reason,” or “Catholic” and “intellectual.” This long habit of association allows us to answer with a confident *yes* when asked if we know the meaning of the phrase “Catholic Intellectual Tradition.” Yet, knowing about Catholic habits of thinking is not the same as understanding the undeniably recent upsurge in usage of the phrase “Catholic Intellectual Tradition.” This is another story altogether.

[5] During a recent conversation with a colleague from Loyola College in Maryland, both of us noted that we had only recently, perhaps within the past five or six years, been referring actively to a Catholic Intellectual Tradition. It was definitely not a common turn of phrase in our theological training twenty years earlier, which more commonly would just refer to “the tradition” without the added qualifier of “intellectual.” Upon further reflection we realized that the increased usage of this phrase corresponded directly to the effort on the campuses

of Catholic colleges and universities to expand the conversation about mission and identity into the heart of the university's academic mission. For decades Catholic colleges and universities have held up community service and social justice as emblems of their commitment to catholicity. Although both of these are vital aspects of a healthy Catholic university culture, in recent years a growing chorus of voices has warned that unless the entire project of the university – both curricular and extra-curricular – is somehow engaged in the Catholic mission, service and justice programs will do little, in the long run, to preserve Catholic identity.

[6] One result of this effort to expand the language of mission into the academic life of the university has been confusion. We often speak as if we have lost what we once had. In the past, so the argument goes, we were committed to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, now we are not. If we consider it more carefully, however, we realize that to speak in this way is misleading. On the one hand, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition has existed since the first centuries of the Church. On the other hand, the current use of this phrase applies to a specific moment in the history of Catholic colleges and universities. From a certain point of view, according to theologian Monica Hellwig, “Discerning a Catholic identity appropriate today ‘is not a matter of something we have lost and must retrieve. It is a matter of discovering how to do something we have never done before’” (as quoted in Steinfels: 161). The Catholic Intellectual Tradition is not new, but our explicit reference to it as a way to preserve Catholic identity at Catholic colleges and universities is.

[7] While more research is needed to understand the exact origins of this phrase, its recent expanded usage corresponds with a concern about the Catholic identity of Catholic colleges and universities that has been growing since the 1980s, and that gained significant momentum with the publications of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in 1990 and several key books in the late nineties. Taking these somewhat out of order, in 1994 George Marsden published *The Soul of the American University*, a comprehensive study detailing the gradual alienation of America's top universities from their founding churches. Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, and Princeton, to name a few, all trace their origins to Christian churches, and all are now wholly secular. Marsden brilliantly explains this separation, which was, in his view, largely the result of massive changes in the cultural matrix of the United States rather than intentionally charted courses by institutional leaders.

[8] Since Marsden's book was about the events that happened at Protestant institutions in the middle of the twentieth century, it could easily have been ignored as irrelevant by Catholic institutions. However, the publication, a few years later, of James Burtchaell's magisterial book, *The Dying of the Light: the Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches*, made it difficult for Catholic institutions to avoid asking the question, “Might it happen here?” Like Marsden, Burtchaell traces the alienation of Protestant schools from their founding churches. Unlike Marsden, he also includes a series of case studies about several Catholic universities, which, he argues, are showing signs of following the trail already blazed by our Protestant cousins. Burtchaell's book leaves readers with the inescapable conclusion that some – perhaps many – of the nation's 201 Catholic colleges and universities will gradually cease to be recognizably Catholic as they are assimilated by the wider culture.

[9] In 2003, Peter Steinfels, former senior religion correspondent for the *New York Times*, increased the threat level, suggesting not only that Catholic universities in America, but all Catholic institutions were at risk of losing their identities. His book, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*, is an extended meditation on trends within American Catholicism since the Second Vatican Council. All of these trends, in Steinfels's view, point to an inevitable diminishment of the great edifice of American Catholic culture that was patiently constructed by waves of immigrants during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (the rise and decline of this culture is carefully chronicled by Morris). His chapter on Catholic institutions, especially the section on Catholic colleges and universities, is particularly perceptive. Steinfels notes that some leaders of these institutions seem to suffer from a particular kind of blindness that derives, at least in part, from having come of age in the fullness of the old immigrant culture. They seem unable to recognize that Catholic identity now must be an intentional choice; it can no longer be taken for granted as part of an institution's founding spiritual endowment. In the past, the presence of members of the religious orders on the campuses of the institutions that they founded along with a large population of Catholic students ensured the persistence of Catholic identity without much effort. Without these groups Catholic identity can be lost and, in many cases, will be lost unless intentional choices are made to preserve it.

[10] Steinfels is generally known as a fairly progressive Catholic, and he has no interest in fostering the return to the Catholic ghettos that characterized the American church before Vatican II. Yet, in *A People Adrift* he is clearly concerned about the prospect that the secular world could consume Catholic institutions. In preparation for the book, Steinfels conducted numerous interviews with Catholic educators. A selection from one of these conversations bears repeating at length:

An official at one university sent me a national study he had made of the Catholic character of Catholic colleges and universities. A priest and member of the religious order that had founded the university, he had defined Catholic identity in terms of a concern for individual student's whole well-being and not only their intellectual achievement, the promotion of service to the local community, and so on. By this definition, the results showed that the religious identity of Catholic campuses was in fine shape. When I pointed out that almost all humanistically inclined, liberal arts schools would affirm the concerns he had defined as distinctively Catholic, he seemed oblivious to the implicit question behind my observation – and nonplussed when I spelled it out. In the same interview, he proudly volunteered that the university had just hired a dean of students without any consideration of her religious background (137).

Steinfels' point is a good one. During the 1970s, 1980s, and even into the 1990s, there was a sense on many Catholic campuses that identity was *sui generis*. It is this attitude in particular that is challenged by books like this, as well as by those of Marsden and Burtchaell.

[11] In addition to the cultural trends just noted, a major catalyst to all of these books and conversations about Catholic and Christian identity at Catholic colleges and universities, was and is, the apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, published in August of 1990 by Pope

John Paul II. The constitution urged Catholic universities to recover their calling and think again and more deeply about their origin as a part of the Church's apostolic mission. It urged these institutions to once again act "from the heart of the church" (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*). It was, in short, a call for the re-evangelization of Catholic institutions of higher learning. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, however, was more than an exhortation; it also included certain canonical requirements that some believed impinged upon institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Of particular concern was the requirement in the "general norms" that Catholic theologians receive a *mandatum* from the local ordinary and that the number of "non-Catholic teachers should not be allowed to constitute a majority" (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, General Norms, article 4, no. 4). Although the full impact of *Ex Corde* defies easy summary, its publication certainly helped to engender a serious debate about the nature of a university as both Catholic and intellectual. After *Ex Corde*, it became more difficult to point to the existence of centers of service and justice or to a curricular requirement in ethics as evidence of an abiding Catholic presence on campus. *Ex Corde* forced a kind of introspection that was new.

[12] For example, for the past fifteen or twenty years, the College of Arts and Sciences at Creighton University, the home institution of the three editors of this collection and many of the contributors, has been engaged in a sustained conversation about identity. These essays are one of the fruits of that conversation, which has, at times, been difficult. Yet, largely because of this conversation, as a college we have become more articulate about what it means for us to be a Catholic college of Arts and Sciences. The College's *Identity Statement*, approved in 2005, reflects an effort to more intentionally locate the religious identity of the institution within the wider rhetoric of the College's academic mission. On the one hand, the statement affirms many traditional themes: it declares that the distinctive disciplines of the college are engaged in a humanistic "pursuit of truth" and that "a liberal arts education" must remain central to our mission. The statement also affirms strongly faculty-student interaction and the importance of peer-to-peer collaboration within and across disciplines. On the other hand, the statement also unequivocally declares that the "Jesuit-Catholic identity is a key element of the College." Moreover, the Jesuit and Catholic identity serves to unify the College as a community of inquiry "by establishing the Western Christian intellectual tradition as a common touchstone," and by providing focus in an increasingly fragmented intellectual culture. This statement and the conversations that produced it would not have been possible were it not for the wider discussions about that Catholic Intellectual Tradition that were happening across the United States, largely because of the publication of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.

[13] Clearly then, the current usage of the phrase "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition" is a major result of the new introspective mood at Catholic universities. Many argue that if Catholic universities are to survive as Catholic, Catholic identity should penetrate deeply into the whole institutional culture, including and especially the academic culture. As recently as the 1960s, Catholic identity at Catholic universities was ensured by sheer demographics. Most of these institutions had been founded by religious orders, and members of those orders continued to be a strong presence. The vast majority of the students came from the American immigrant Catholic population, which needed these institutions to move forward in American life. Finally, the lay faculty at Catholic colleges and universities were, for the

most part, Catholics themselves. Since the sixties, however, this situation has changed dramatically. The presence of the founding religious orders has declined in tandem with the general decline in vowed religious life. Boards of directors have been turned over to lay colleagues, and non-Catholic students make up a significant part of the student body; in some schools they are the majority.

[14] The constitution of the faculty represents a special challenge. As Catholic universities struggled for acceptance in the mainstream of American higher education, they made conscious decisions to hire faculty based upon professional competence rather than on religious affiliation. As a result, in many institutions the faculty has little interest in, or commitment to, Catholic identity. One of my colleagues at another university thinks that the percentage of Catholic faculty at his institution may be as low as 20%. Whatever the numbers, it is clear that it will be difficult, if not impossible, for the Catholic university to act “from the heart of the Church” without engaging the central academic mission.

[15] If in the past, the Catholic identity of institutions was ensured simply by the presence of Catholics, in the future – given the more complicated demographics – it must be something else, something more intentional. Part of that intentionality can certainly be the presence of strong campus ministries and centers for service and justice. These entities do wonderful work involving students, faculty, and staff in a critical aspect of the Church’s mission to the world. They also help to bridge the gap between the university and the wider community. Still, the heart of the university is academic – the pursuit of knowledge and truth. In some way then, Catholic identity must be actively present here as well.

[16] Generally, theologians by training and disposition tend to be ecclesiastically oriented. They understand their academic vocations as co-extensive with the Church’s mission, and they have no problem conceiving of their intellectual activities as religiously significant. Moreover, there is such a thing as “Catholic Theology.” Thus for theologians, personal piety can fuse with professional competence in a unique way. This is not the case in other disciplines. There is, for example, no such thing as “Catholic Physics” or “Catholic Political Science.” There are, of course, Catholic physicists and Catholic political scientists, but this refers to their personal conviction, not to their disciplinary competence. Yet, unless we find a way to bring the competent physicist and the competent political scientist into some kind of relationship with Catholic mission – understood precisely as an academic mission – it is difficult to see a way forward for Catholic colleges and universities.

[17] With these things in mind, the emergent usage of the phrase “the Catholic Intellectual Tradition” makes more sense. While it may be true that the physicist and political scientist may not be able to unite their own religious commitments and their professional research interest in the same ways that theologians can, this does not mean that they cannot unite them at all. The Catholic tradition has always honored truth wherever it is found. That means that all members of the academy can potentially participate in this tradition. In a way, this is an intentional return to the ideals of Christian humanism that have defined so much of the activity of Western intellectual culture. The difference is that now we are inviting people into the project as volunteers.

[18] Yet, most of the people engaged in academic life have not been trained to think of themselves as participants in a project of Christian humanism; they do so only with

difficulty, even when they are favorably predisposed. The essays in this collection represent the efforts of some faculty to attempt such engagement and to begin to explore what it means for them to be participants in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. The specific context for this effort was a symposium held at Creighton University in March of 2009 that was called “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition as a Source of Scholarly Wisdom.” Reflecting the themes discussed in this introduction, the symposium planners noted both in the call for papers and in the announcement of the event that “Catholic intellectuals are referring with increasing frequency to the idea of the “Catholic Intellectual Tradition” as part of an ongoing effort to redefine the nature and purpose of the Catholic university in the modern world.” Furthermore, the planners explained, “the meaning of this phrase is multivalent, but, broadly speaking, it refers both to the Church’s traditional openness to learning from all areas of human inquiry and to a general confidence in the ultimate compatibility of faith and reason.”

[19] A primary goal of the symposium was to engage faculty from a number of disciplines in a conversation about the nature of Christian humanism. “Many observers have noted” the symposium announcement explained, “that this tradition of Christian humanism was the product of a particular Christian culture that is now in the process of passing away. Thus, it can no longer be taken for granted as a given.” The participants in the symposium were challenged to ask how this tradition is or is not functional in their own context in departments of Biology, Physics, English, Political Science, Theology, and in a school of Law at a Catholic University. A secondary goal of the symposium was to consider the question of whether the Catholic Intellectual Tradition maintains sufficient vitality to assist Catholic universities in their efforts to preserve and advance Catholic intellectual culture. Some of the results of the conversations that took place at this event are presented in this collection.

[20] The essays assembled here are divided into two groups. The essays in the first group were written by scholars whose areas of expertise parallel traditional humanistic discourse. However, because the organizers of the symposium wanted representation from a wide range of academic disciplines, we are also including several “responses” written by scholars for whom this kind of writing is more of a professional stretch. The contribution of these “responding” scholars was invaluable and we are grateful for their willingness to participate in this conversation.

[21] The first essay, written by a theologian who specializes in the study of St. Thomas Aquinas, outlines the historical background of the idea of a Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Essays two and three are from English scholars, with the second considering the development of English as a modern discipline and investigating what it means to be a Catholic intellectual and a scholar of English, particularly in light of the conclusions of much poststructuralist literary theory. Essay three looks at the problem of the literary canon – particularly the canon of eighteenth century literature – in the context of its relationship to Catholic concerns – both within the eighteenth century and today.

[22] The next two essays were written by scholars in political science and public policy. Essay four looks at the role that Catholic Identity plays in elections and voting, in particular how Catholic Social Teaching has (or has not) responded to various secular political ideologies. Essay five builds on essay four, looking at civic engagement more broadly at Catholic

colleges and universities and meditates upon more practical suggestions for how the Catholic Intellectual Tradition can encourage students to become engaged in public life.

[23] The first essay in the “responses” section reflects upon the relevance of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition to current trends and practices in legal education. This is followed by contributions from a physicist and a biologist who respectively offer arguments against conventional assumptions of the animosity between science and faith in terms of the history and questions of their disciplines. The collection concludes with an afterword that examines the implications of the preceding chapters for collegial community building, college curriculum, and pedagogy in Catholic colleges and universities today.

[24] As noted above, this project began as a symposium held at Creighton University March 26th and 27th, 2009. Convened by the *Center for Catholic Thought* at Creighton University, the symposium’s primary object was to consider the nature of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. This volume reflects that diversity. Four scholars from Creighton engaged four scholars from other institutions around the topic *The Catholic Intellectual Tradition as a Source of Scholarly Wisdom*. The two-day event was the first of what we hope will be more formal occasions where scholars who rarely interact with each other can come together to discuss topics of mutual concern and interest, especially as they relate to the preservation of Catholic intellectual culture.

[25] The editors of this collection wish to thank Robert Leuger, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Creighton University for generously sponsoring the symposium. We also wish to thank our colleagues Dr. Thomas Kelly and Dr. Charles Brockhouse for their help in planning and organizing the event. We hope that readers of these essays will themselves be prompted to initiate similar conversations in their own contexts and in doing so continue the great Catholic tradition of intellectual engagement.

[26] At the time of this writing, we are aware of no other collection like this. The aforementioned *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition* is primarily the work of theologians. Our project has a wider scope. First, we hope to open a conversation across disciplines that will, in some way, help to articulate a way forward for Catholic colleges and universities that wish to preserve their religious heritage. Second, we think this volume will be helpful to those who seek to expand the ways in which students engage the Catholic mission at Catholic colleges and universities. Students who are already excited by the work of service and justice may find it refreshing to learn of the Church’s rich intellectual heritage, and students currently disengaged from the mission altogether may find a new point of entry. Finally, we hope this collection will appeal more broadly to those interested in the place of religious identity in contemporary culture. With this in mind, it seems appropriate to end this introduction with a quotation from the opening lines of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*:

Born from the heart of the Church, a Catholic University is located in that course of tradition, which may be traced back to the very origin of the University as an institution. It has always been recognized as an incomparable centre of creativity and dissemination of knowledge for the good of humanity. By vocation, the *Universitas magistrorum et scholarium* is dedicated to research, to teaching and to the education of students who freely associate with their teachers in a common love of knowledge (1). With every other

University it shares that *gaudium de veritate*, so precious to Saint Augustine, which is that joy of searching for, discovering and communicating truth (2) in every field of knowledge. A Catholic University's privileged task is "to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth" (3).

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