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Jesuit Higher Education in a Secular Age

By Daniel S. Hendrickson, S.J.

In *A Secular Age* (2007), the philosopher Charles Taylor challenges us to appreciate the significance of genuine spiritual experience in human life, an occurrence he refers to as *fullness*. Western societies, however, are increasingly more secular, and personal occasions of fullness are becoming less possible.

Generally understood as a socio-cultural dynamic in apposition to the religious, secularism is often recognized as a process of losing or letting go of religion and its myriad influences. In some places around the world, secularism may be a catalyst for individual and social dignities and equalities. In regard to our western context, Taylor discusses it differently. He views our variant of secularism as a crisis of relating (such as to a higher power). Despite powerful spiritual yearnings and expressions in our lives, western secularism is a process that distrusts, misinterprets, and even prevents spiritual experiences from happening. The demise of fullness, he suggests, proffers tremendous existential cost, and he urges us to resuscitate parts of our lives that are gasping.

As Taylor's discussion of fullness drives a nearly 900-page historical narrative, a Jesuit sensibility burgeons. Fullness is portrayed as heightened moments of God's love similar to the personal experiences of transformation that revolutionized the life of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the late-Medieval Spaniard and founder of the Society of Jesus, and the animus of our educational enterprise. In his writings Ignatius indicates salient moments of spiritual consolation, describing them as instances of connection, reconciliation, light, purpose, peace, and general confirmation. In Ignatian diction, they are moments of God's grace, and they frame for us an explicit connection Taylor is trying to reestablish.

In *A Secular Age*, fullness represents a point of contact, and in our modern lives multiple intersections cease to be engaged. We are less relational, and fullness invites a way of being human – an operative subjectivity – that

is open to emotional, cultural, social, political, and spiritual possibilities. Fullness is not unrelated to capacities for friendship, intimacy, dialogue, moral responsibility, social and political cooperation and action, prayer, and social justice. The ambit of fullness is wide, and in both its fundamentals and its future – and in the midst of a pervasive secular milieu – Jesuit higher education can open our lives to various points of contact. I propose three educational strategies from the Jesuit tradition that can do this.

These strategies – what I refer to as pedagogies of fullness – augment waning relations. A pedagogy of study, a pedagogy of solidarity, and a pedagogy of grace focus upon the contexts of the self, others, and an Other. Philosophically, they correspond with epistemic, moral-ethical, and metaphysical realities, but because they network layers of meaning and relating in our lives, they are all existential.

Much can be said about each. They reveal elements and inspirations of the Renaissance humanist tradition of Jesuit education, the Jesuit administrative and curricular plan of education known as the *Ratio Studiorum* (1599), the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, contemporary practices of *faith-doing-justice*, and the local and global networking more increasingly exhibited by our colleges and universities. As they display recognizable expressions of our campuses, they demonstrate both an educational sensitivity to the forces of secularism that mitigate relating and a way forward.

The pedagogy of study is valued as an exploration of the self. The work of Jesuit education can celebrate individual acts of inquiry and isolated ideas as well as the multiple intellectual capacities of students. A robust

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concept of study appreciates the full range of one's thoughts, feelings, intuitions, and imaginations. Jesuit educators can provoke the personal insights, emotions, interests, impulses, conflicts, and credences of students to expand understandings of themselves. We can amplify self-awareness.

As a pedagogy of fullness, study is an intentional exploration of one's whole life, including the many familial, ecclesial, social, and civil relationships that form and inform it. In exposing the messiness and mysteries of life, the role of the humanities is ever essential. More strategically, consider the Renaissance humanist perspective of Michel de Montaigne. His philosophical method – a testing and trying of the self (through the writing of essays) – is not unlike some of the thoughtful, discerning portrayals of the activity of study in the *Ratio*. There are precedents within the Jesuit tradition for showcasing curricula in self-awareness.

As the first pedagogy explores and integrates the depths of the self, the pedagogy of solidarity explores the frontiers of alterity, or otherness. It cultivates within students an orientation of adaptability to the environments – the lives, cultures, customs, and concepts – of others. The engagement with alterity facilitates relationships to other persons, perspectives, and places. Dimensions of flexibility and adjustment to difference let students assess and appropriate experiences of otherness and establish meaningful associations.

Think of the grim global realities of poverty Peter Hans-Kolvenbach beckons us into in his address to American Jesuit Higher Education (2000). Or consider the late 16th-century efforts of Christian enculturation in China and India demonstrated by Jesuit missionaries Matteo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili. They entered foreign contexts with deep respect, genuine curiosity, intensive engagement, and receptive hearts. Regard also an underappreciated mandate in Part IV of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus for Jesuit-sponsored personnel and programs to adapt to “times, places, and persons,” or, finally, the early Jesuit Jeronimo Nadal's concept of a Jesuit's “home” being anywhere he finds himself. These are significant pedagogical precedents.

Curricula, programs, and educators on our campuses can prompt study and engage alterity, but the third pedagogy – a pedagogy of grace – represents what is not planned or what is unprepared. Like the pedagogies of study and solidarity, it cultivates a dimension of openness, but it does so for inexplicable and phenomenal moments of wonder, awe, gratitude, and

confirmation that suddenly fill our lives. A pedagogy of grace orients students to expressions of revelation and signification. It invites an aptitude for an Other, or an awareness of the extraordinary.

Study and solidarity widen sensibilities within the self and around. Grace opens oneself to transcendent impact. Classically, the Spiritual Exercises do this. What is important in this pedagogy is a metaphysical dimension and a leaning into what Taylor refers to as the “ontic commitment,” a willingness to debunk the self as the sole locus of meaning and reality. How can we recognize the many sensations of grace – such as peacefulness or a sense of purpose – as responses to something beyond us? Moreover, how can we describe these dynamics of experience-and-response in relational terms?

By engaging and networking multiple intellectual construals of individual insight, immersing students into contexts of alterity, and validating inexplicable and phenomenal moments of grace, the pedagogies of fullness demonstrate Jesuit higher educational invitations to openness. The pedagogies focus the work we do as relational. They also establish for us a way of negotiating suffocating dynamics of western secularism.

When Taylor laments the demise of fullness in our lives, he characterizes it as a kind of disenchantment. The pedagogies of study, solidarity, and grace can be valued in their ability to reenchant our modern lives. To ourselves, others, and an Other, Jesuit higher educational enchantment awakens relations. Most of our students leave our programs after four quick years. Let us assure that they will be connected for the rest of their lives. ■



Matteo Ricci S.J. and Chinese scholar Hsu Kuangchi.