



SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University

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The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University – by Monika K. Hellwig

We are in an age of increasing ecumenical activity in scholarship and in university circles. For example, Scripture scholarship has become almost totally inter-denominational. Traditions in sacred music have continuously borrowed from one another, as have conventional representations in the visual arts. Catholic programs in philosophy now have on their required reading lists books that were formerly listed in the Index of Forbidden Books and therefore inaccessible to Catholic students through normal channels. Recent trends in the study of literature have tended to abandon any claim to a canon of required classics. The study of history and of religion now addresses many cultures and languages.

In the midst of this, several questions arise. First of all, is depth of knowledge being sacrificed for the sake of breadth? In university studies, especially at the undergraduate level, this is no idle question. Secondly, are we abandoning efforts towards the integration of knowledge? Thirdly, are we in danger of losing our distinctive identity? Catholic universities and colleges, responsible more than any other body for the care and continuity of the Catholic intellectual tradition, are particularly challenged by these three questions.

The first of these questions, about the risk of losing depth, has exercised educators in the broader higher education field for some time. The extension of post-secondary education to a much larger proportion of the population has meant in many cases lowered expectations and less personal intellectual exchange between professors and students. While this may be quite efficient in technical fields, it impoverishes study in the humanities. It may be reducing higher education simply to longer schooling. Because religiously motivated schools of all traditions are concerned with assimilation of culture and critical discernment about values, this trend to the less personal in favor of the more technically efficient is damaging to the essential fabric of religious higher education.

The question about sacrificing depth for breadth is closely related to the second question, namely, whether we are achieving any integration in higher education. It has been fashionable, even in Catholic circles, to say that integration of studies is no longer possible in a pluralistic society, that each student must find some sort of personal balance or integration, but that it cannot be found in the planning of programs and curricula. Clearly, this is not a problem if education is seen as a matter of acquiring certain specialized skills and the means of access to information. If education is seen as preparation for life and for societal responsibilities, the lack of integration is disastrous because there is no foundation for making serious decisions about lifestyle, social participation, career goals, and so forth. Religiously sponsored institutions cannot surrender the task of integration.

The third question is whether we are in danger of forgetting and losing our identity. This risk is built into the pattern of contemporary developments in communication technology. It is caused in part by rapid sequences of change in the economy, upsetting employment patterns, calling for quick retraining of large numbers of the newly unemployable. It is a function of the political restlessness and reshaping of the world's alliances and balance of power with consequent shifting of what needs to be known for practical purposes. It is part of the culture, with its unquestioning favoring of the new over the already tested and the consequent changing relationships between the generations. All these are but a few of the external factors that tend to erode both the integration of higher education and the identity of religiously sponsored institutions. Erosion of identity is not a matter of any conscious decision to abandon the particular religious identity of an institution, but rather a combination of many new demands and the subtle influence of the secular expectations of the wider academy.

All these forces contribute to a situation in which a Catholic university or college cannot take its Catholic identity for granted in the way we might have done in the earlier decades of the twentieth century. It is not by anyone's failure or fault that U.S. Catholic colleges and universities had in many cases moved unnoticed towards secularization in the seventies and early eighties, to discover with a jolt in the late eighties that without taking thought and action they would not retain their distinctive identities. Such action had to address hiring policies, public statements of the institutions about their identity, leadership of the central administration, departments of theology and philosophy, the focus of university-sponsored research, structure and formation of boards, continuing bonds with the sponsoring religious community or diocese, student recruitment, campus ministry and much else. But most basic to the whole enterprise is the institution's respect and care for the Catholic intellectual heritage.

This paper discusses two topics: what defines the Catholic intellectual tradition; and how we can expect it to be present in the life of a university or college.

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