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## THE INVENTION OF THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION: MISSION AND IDENTITY IN CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>



### Darlene Fozard Weaver, Ph.D.

Darlene Fozard Weaver, Ph.D. is Director of the Center for the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and Associate Professor of Theology at Duquesne University. She previously served as Director of the Theology Institute and Associate Professor of Theology at Villanova University, and Visiting Assistant Professor at Georgetown University. Weaver is the author of *The Acting Person and Christian Moral Life* (Georgetown University Press, 2011), *Self Love and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) and co-editor and contributor to *The Ethics of Embryo Adoption and the Catholic Tradition: Moral Arguments, Economic Reality, and Social Analysis* (2007). Her work has been supported by the Center of Theological Inquiry, the Louisville Institute, and the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. Weaver is currently working on a book on ethics, spirituality, and moral psychology and a series of articles addressing parental relinquishment laws, fathers' rights, and sex education. Darlene read the paper published here as the Inaugural Lecture of the Center for the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

In recent years many American<sup>2</sup> Catholic colleges and universities have made prominent appeals to their Catholic identity and respective missions, as well as invested significant resources in mission-related initiatives and administration.<sup>3</sup> In these appeals one can discern a marked gravitation toward using the language of the Catholic intellectual tradition to describe the scholarly dimensions of their faith identity.<sup>4</sup> The Catholic intellectual tradition can frame institutional identity and mission in appealing ways—it emphasizes intellectual formation without limiting the disciplines or fields in which this formation occurs; it provides a vehicle for responding to worries that academic rigor and freedom are compromised in religiously-affiliated contexts; it can be used to negotiate the contentious question of what makes a university Catholic. Perhaps the greatest liability that accompanies decisions to frame mission and identity in terms of the Catholic intellectual tradition is the fact that so many people, including lifelong Catholics, are not sure what the phrase “Catholic intellectual tradition” even means.

This uncertainty is telling. It reflects changes in American culture and in Catholic higher education that the two previous speakers in this series—James Heft and Margaret Steinfels—observed, as did our President Dougherty in his 2011 Convocation address. Catholic subculture in America has eroded as sustaining social and institutional structures—densely populated and stable Catholic neighborhoods, vocations to clerical and religious life, Catholic school systems—have declined. The Catholic identity of a college or university used to consist largely in the strong presence of a school's sponsoring religious congregation and in the largely shared Catholic affiliation of its faculty, staff, and students. With smaller numbers of clergy or religious to administer higher education and greater numbers of faculty, staff, and students who come from other faith traditions or have no religious affiliation, Catholic universities and colleges have to consider how best to preserve and transmit Catholic identity. Appealing to the Catholic intellectual tradition to do so is in many ways an act of invention, a heuristic device that has emerged in the last 30 or so years to clarify identity and mission and market the value of Catholic higher education.<sup>5</sup>

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Bearing all this in mind, I want to ask: can Catholic universities create an intellectual culture in which Catholic ideas and ideals are permitted to make a difference to academic inquiry and teaching? Would such a difference automatically assault the integrity of scholarship in non-theological disciplines, or might it actually contribute to that integrity? Can Catholic universities do this while deepening their engagement with and hospitality toward other traditions and toward persons with different religious convictions? Must the distinctive character and value of Catholic education come at the price of intellectual rigor, academic freedom, cultural sensitivity, and hospitality?

### **The Catholic intellectual tradition**

But before we get to those questions we have to answer another, prior question, one I am asked frequently these days: what *is* the Catholic intellectual tradition? I offer three answers.

First, the Catholic intellectual tradition is an inheritance that we receive. It encompasses the deposit of Catholic faith along with the rich and varied historical efforts made to understand, express, apply, and live out that faith. This inheritance includes humanistic scholarship, scientific discovery, legal reasoning, professional expertise in fields like medicine and business, as well as literary and artistic contributions to and commentaries on culture. It is not uniform—the Catholic intellectual tradition includes divergent viewpoints, apparently contradictory findings, and seemingly incommensurable positions—but it is a rich treasury of knowledge, texts, interlocutors, analytic tools, methodologies, and ideas with considerable import for us today.

Second, the Catholic intellectual tradition is an ongoing dialogue. We receive this inheritance, endeavor to make sense of it in light of our particular contexts and contemporary challenges, and offer our own contributions. We rightly call the tradition a dialogue not only because it is a living tradition that we shape as we receive and transmit it, but also because its best impulses and basic convictions include commitments to discovering the truth through engagement and collaboration with others. Consider the origins of Christianity in the encounter between Hebrew and Greek cultures, Thomas Aquinas' engagement with Maimonides, and St. Hildegard's dizzying contributions to so many fields of inquiry and to the creative arts, contributions she nourished through extensive correspondence with others.

Finally, we can call the Catholic intellectual tradition an invention, not in the sense that we are manufacturing something from scratch, but in the sense that we are actively constructing

an understanding of what it means to be a Catholic intellectual community.<sup>6</sup> Some might describe the tradition as an invention in order to lodge a criticism. After all, the Catholic intellectual tradition seems to name an abstraction that overlooks the deep differences among particular traditions (Dominican versus Spiritan charisms, for example, or Jesuitical probabilism versus Latin American liberation theology), divergent manifestations of Catholicism (Opus Dei versus Santeria, for example), and cultural and historical contexts for Catholic intellectual inquiry (for example, medieval versus modern periods, seminaries versus universities, educational institutions in America, versus Europe, versus Africa). How can such a range of historical, cultural, disciplinary, and professional endeavors meaningfully be grouped into a single tradition?

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I place myself in the camp of thinkers who contend we can speak of a coherent, if fluid and pluralistic Catholic intellectual tradition because we can discern hallmarks that unite particular Catholic intellectual traditions, ideas and ideals that endure historically and appear cross-culturally while also differing in emphasis, inflection, and application.<sup>7</sup> In *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* Pope John Paul II identifies four such hallmarks: a shared vision, a commitment to service, inquiry conducted in the light of faith, and fidelity to Catholic tradition.<sup>8</sup>

I do not take issue with his list, or with many other claims about what provides coherence to the Catholic intellectual tradition. Rather, my point is that when Catholic colleges and universities claim to educate students in the Catholic intellectual tradition they're doing more than naming the body of knowledge they transmit. They are making a commitment to become—more fully, more consistently, more effectively—a certain kind of intellectual community, one capable of forming certain kinds of students, scholars, and employees.<sup>9</sup>

This process involves making choices regarding what aspects of Catholic intellectual tradition to emphasize, which normative impulses to embrace. These choices in turn imply a set of priorities for research and teaching, hiring, curriculum, student life, and community engagement. To be clear, I am not suggesting that these choices are utterly arbitrary, though they are contingent insofar as they represent sincere efforts to receive and deploy Catholic intellectual resources in response to the signs of the times and the particularities of Catholic higher education in a contemporary American context. The choices are freely made yet also rule-governed. Terrence Tilley's characterization

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of Catholic tradition as a grammar may help me to make my point.<sup>10</sup> Just as a grammar entails rules to using a language—rules that still permit astonishing degrees of creativity, rules that can sometimes be played with in order to communicate one’s point more effectively—Catholic tradition entails rules of engagement that are internally linked to foundational convictions of Catholic tradition, for instance that faith and reason are ultimately complementary and to the habitus or way of life in which these convictions are intelligible. So the invention of the Catholic intellectual tradition as a bolster for Catholic identity is never *merely* a process of invention. It is always also a discovery, a response to a dialogue we’ve entered, an answer to the call to steward an inheritance we have received, a participation in a shared way of life. This kind of inventing is tradition in action.

Bearing all this in mind, let me return to the questions I raised at the outset by way of describing four challenges facing Catholic higher education.

#### **Four challenges confronting Catholic higher education**

**The challenge of fluency:** Social fragmentation, secularism, and the privatization of religious belief make it difficult for Catholic communities to educate and socialize young persons who are comfortable speaking in a Catholic intellectual idiom. Sociologist Christian Smith’s study of American college students<sup>11</sup> notes what I have also observed first-hand as a teacher: students’ waning abilities to explain confidently the meaning and relevance of fundamental aspects of Catholic faith and morals, and the reasons why these convictions and commitments can withstand scrutiny. This might sound more like a catechetical problem than an intellectual one. However, if traditions involve not only some content that is transmitted but also the process of transmission and the practices by which that content is inhabited, then the challenge of fluency I am describing is actually a systemic problem that develops when the mission of Catholic higher education is more or less sequestered in Campus Ministry programs and the Catholic intellectual life is treated as the province of theology departments, which are in turn rather marginalized in their influence on the academic life of the university.

Although Catholic colleges and universities often invoke their religious identity as part of their appeal, for the most part the intellectual work that occurs in Catholic universities and colleges “assumes the *practical* irrelevance of God’s existence to the disciplines of reflection and practice that we all use as we interpret and act in the world.” Yet, “if God is the most basic

reality and explanation of the world, then it must be the case that the world cannot adequately be explained, understood, lived in without reference to God.”<sup>12</sup> Students have difficulty articulating the difference a Catholic perspective makes to their education because their education by and large assumes a Catholic perspective cannot make an integral difference to secular scholarly activity. The distinctiveness of Catholic identity instead appears in terms of moral concerns or personal research interests.

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**The challenge of moral identity:** Catholic colleges and universities often promote the place of ethics in their schools as a selling point. Ethics courses sometimes deliver the “mission-related” component of education in their professional schools. In theory, ethics functions as a mark of the distinctiveness of Catholic education. In practice it can operate as a surrogate for other ways the mission could be incorporated into the curriculum.

If I can offer anecdotal evidence, I would point to my experience in recent years teaching mission-related courses in two professional graduate programs—one in Nursing and one in Business. Students—whether or not they identified themselves as Catholic—generally found Catholic ethics—especially Catholic social teaching—to offer a palatable way to link these fields to the Catholic identity and mission of our institution. They usually expressed appreciation and relief—sometimes outright surprise—that the “Catholic theology” components of the courses had some relevance. However, it struck me that this appreciation and relief more often than not focused on how readily moral concerns and values could be distanced from particularly Catholic convictions. Catholic ethics was palatable because the moral concerns or values identified therein seemed to be ones students could affirm whether they identified themselves as Jews or Muslims or Protestants or agnostics. Granted, much of Catholic ethics is indebted to natural law traditions that affirm that religious faith is not a prerequisite for moral knowledge, and there are things I’d want to celebrate here. But if the difference Catholic ideas and ideals make to higher education becomes sequestered in ethics, and ethics devolves into a natural law tradition that isn’t really distinguishable from secular humanism, then it seems to me we have evacuated from Catholic ethics much of intellectual resources it can offer and affirmed the notion that Catholic ideas and ideals are not integral to knowing the world and ourselves adequately. In short, while in theory

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Catholic ethics can be a vehicle for preserving and transmitting the distinctiveness of Catholic education, in practice it often unwittingly works against efforts to show students the viability and explanatory power of Catholic ideas and ideals.

### **The challenge of distinctiveness**

If we tried to do this better—to show how Catholic intellectual resources enable a more adequate knowledge of the world and of ourselves, would education become catechization? Would academic freedom be limited? Would the independence and integrity of non-theological disciplines be contaminated? I think not. Indeed, I think the converse could happen. To be clear, I am not saying that theology should or even could displace secular ways of knowing the world or informing our action with it. Secular disciplines contribute to our knowledge of the truth. They make necessary and invaluable contributions to human understanding and welfare. They offer insights that can help theological or religious traditions engage in vitally important practices of self-criticism, reform, and renewal. My point is that Catholic intellectual resources can enter into conversation with secular disciplines and endeavor to show how reflection undertaken in the light of faith can yield properly intellectual contributions to human knowledge without violating their integrity as Catholic resources or the integrity of secular disciplines.<sup>13</sup>

If we are to respect the integrity of secular forms of scholarly inquiry while also allowing theological or theologically informed ideas really to inform this inquiry—when and where they have something to offer—then we need to foster genuinely cross-disciplinary engagement.

Another facet of this challenge concerns hospitality. Can universities embrace and develop Catholic identity while remaining hospitable to students, faculty, and staff who do not profess Catholic faith or live in conformity with Catholic teaching about certain moral issues? In my short time here at Duquesne I have seen evidence that hospitality and cultural sensitivity are part of the Spiritan charism. But hospitality and cultural sensitivity are not *simply* Spiritian—they follow from Catholic intellectual convictions about the ultimate complementarity of faith and reason, the meaning of the common good, and the pattern of subversive epistemological turns one finds in a tradition centered around Jesus Christ, who repeatedly overturned privilege and linked wisdom to those on the margins of society. There remains a great deal of work and complex issues to navigate as Catholic institutions endeavor to become the sorts of intellectual



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communities that increasingly communicate and appropriate non-Western contributions to Catholic intellectual tradition, and cultivate a culture of ecumenism and pastoral sensitivity. But, this work can be guided by a fitting understanding of what it means to be faithful to Catholic tradition.

### **The challenge of faithfulness**

As James Heft noted in his inaugural lecture for this series, Catholic universities and colleges operate in a free market system and compete against each other to attract students as well as administrative and academic talent. An unfortunate part of that competition has been comparative judgments about which schools are truly Catholic and which are only nominally so. These judgments make fidelity to Catholic tradition a contest predicated on assuming the worst about each other rather than a collaborative discernment of a common call.

The descriptions of tradition that I am working with stress the appropriation of and contribution to an inheritance, participation in an ongoing dialogue, and the intersection of socialization and self-determination in a shared habitus and hermeneutic. This means that faithfulness to Catholic tradition must not be reduced to mechanisms of assent or compliance, unanimity, or litmus tests, even as faithfulness to Catholic tradition cannot be understood apart from sincere respect for authority, serious efforts to engage and be led by Catholic tradition, and sometimes costly endeavors to deepen institutional integrity. Faithfulness to Catholic tradition is better understood as a process that is characteristically relational, structural, practical, pastoral, and open-ended, a process governed by internal hermeneutic and moral commitments that mandate cultural sensitivity, inclusiveness, humility, fraternal correction, and collaboration.

### **Mission and identity in Catholic higher education**

Let me conclude. What do these challenges mean for mission and identity in Catholic higher education? To my mind Duquesne's choice to establish a Center for the Catholic Intellectual Tradition answers the questions I raised at the outset by making identity-conferring commitments to genuinely cross-disciplinary scholarship and teaching, to ecumenism, and to hospitality. I have tried to suggest that these commitments reflect some of the best insights of Catholic intellectual resources. They position us to draw from previous generations of Catholic thought and practice with a view to enriching our understanding of the world and advancing our responses to contemporary problems.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>These remarks were delivered as part of Duquesne University's Catholic Intellectual Tradition Lecture Series. The lecture event included thoughtful responses from fellow Duquesne faculty. Video recording of the full event is available online at <http://edtech.msl.duq.edu/Mediasite/Play/8de7eac8648c4811b9674b7d22b2a8001d>.

<sup>2</sup>I limit my remarks to Catholic higher education in the United States.

<sup>3</sup>See the 2011 brochure "Strengthening Catholic Identity," published by the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities and the Reid Group. It describes the rise of mission officers among Catholic colleges and Universities. A pdf copy of the brochure is available online at <http://www.accunet.org/files/public/Strengthening%20Cath%20Identity/Mission-Officer-Brochure-web.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup>A quick perusal of mission-related web sites for institutions like Boston College, Sacred Heart, University of St. Thomas, and Villanova will lead to invocations of the Catholic intellectual tradition. See also Duquesne University President Dougherty's 2011 Convocation address on mission and identity, available online at [http://www.duq.edu/Documents/public-affairs/\\_pdf/convocation-11.pdf](http://www.duq.edu/Documents/public-affairs/_pdf/convocation-11.pdf).

<sup>5</sup>See Wolfgang Grassl, "Is There Really a Catholic Intellectual Tradition," a paper presented at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. The text is available online at [http://www.consultorium.com/docs/CIT\\_AAR\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.consultorium.com/docs/CIT_AAR_Paper.pdf).

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of the invention of traditions see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup>See for example Richard Grigg, "What is the Catholic intellectual Tradition?" *Sacred Heart University Review*, 13.1.4, 1993.

<sup>8</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Ex corde ecclesiae* (Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities), 1990.

<sup>9</sup>Michael Buckley, "The Catholic University and Its Inherent Promise," *America* (May 29, 1993), 14:3.

<sup>10</sup>Terrence W. Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

<sup>11</sup>Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Moral and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup>Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust, and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 8, 12. See also James Turner, "Catholic Intellectual Traditions and Contemporary Scholarship" (Notre Dame, IN: Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism, 1997), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup>Some perspectives on the challenge of distinctiveness can be found in Don Briel, "The Catholic University, The College and the Church," available online at <http://www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/cst/conferences/becu/becu/Z1%20Briel.pdf>; John Tracy Ellis, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," *Thought* 30 (Autumn 1955), Alasdair MacIntyre, "Catholic Universities: Dangers, Hopes, Choices," in *Higher Learning and Catholic Traditions*, ed. Robert E. Sullivan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001); John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982).