

June 2022

Interviews in Global Catholic Studies: Kenneth Parker

Mathew N. Schmalz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc>



Part of the Catholic Studies Commons, Christianity Commons, Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons, Politics and Social Change Commons, Practical Theology Commons, Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons, Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons, and the Sociology of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

Schmalz, Mathew N. (2022) "Interviews in Global Catholic Studies: Kenneth Parker," *Journal of Global Catholicism*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 10. p.178-187.

DOI: 10.32436/2475-6423.1114

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc/vol6/iss2/10>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Global Catholicism by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.



Catholics & Cultures

VOLUME 6 | ISSUE 2

Journal of GLOBAL CATHOLICISM

SPRING 2022

LIVED EXPERIENCE IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Research and Reflections from
Sub-Saharan Africa and North America



COLLEGE OF THE
Holy Cross

Cover image by Thomas M. Landy

MATHEW N. SCHMALZ

Interviews in Catholic Global Studies: Kenneth Parker



Kenneth Parker is Ryan Endowed Chair for Newman Studies and Professor of Catholic Studies and Historical Theology at Duquesne University. He is the inaugural Chair of the Department of Catholic Studies, which formed in 2020. He has authored two books and co-edited three volumes, including *The Rise of Historical Consciousness among the Christian Churches* (University Press of America, 2012) with Erick Moser. In 2016, he served as Interim Executive Director for the National Institute for Newman Studies.



Mathew N. Schmalz is Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Global Catholicism* and a Professor of Religious Studies at the College of the Holy Cross. He has published more than fifty articles and essays that engage global Catholicism (particularly in South Asia), Catholic theology and spirituality, Mormonism, and The Watchtower movement. He is co-editor of *Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations, and Resistances* (SUNY, 2012, with Peter Gottschalk) and author of *Mercy Matters: Opening Yourself to the Life Changing Gift* (OSV, 2016). He regularly contributes to media coverage of religion and religious issues. He has published opinion pieces in *Newsweek*, *Salon*, *The Washington Post*, *Fortune*, *USNews & World Report*, *Commonweal Magazine*, and *The National Catholic Reporter*.



INTERVIEWS *in* GLOBAL CATHOLIC STUDIES: KENNETH PARKER / DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY



Journal of
GLOBAL CATHOLICISM

Watch this interview on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/jOq6KeiPq58>.

MS: Welcome everyone. My name is Mathew Schmalz, and I'm Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Global Catholicism*, and this is part of our continuing series of interviews with scholars in the field of Catholic studies, broadly understood. And so it's my great pleasure to welcome Dr. Kenneth Parker, the Ryan Endowed Chair for Newman Studies and Chair of the Department of Catholic Studies at Duquesne University. Welcome.

KP: Thank you.

MS: I perused your professional website, and you have quite an interesting professional and personal journey. So could you share some of that story with us?

KP: Sure, just briefly. I was born in 1954, the year of *Brown v. Board of Education* in North Carolina. And my father was a Pilgrim Holiness pastor and my mother, a very devout person in that evangelical tradition. So I was raised and nurtured in an evangelical home. Like a lot of college students, I found myself going through a period of spiritual quest during my undergraduate years and found my way into a deep examination of the Catholic tradition during my junior and senior year. It made me realize that I wanted to turn my interest in history into a study of the history of Christianity, and I

continued that work at Fuller Theological Seminary in historical theology and came in contact with a monastic community in the Mojave Desert that really transformed my thinking. And even though I went away and did a PhD in reformation history at the University of Cambridge under Eoman Duffy, the interest in the desire to explore the possibility of a monastic vocation didn't go away. So I went to the monastery and was a monk for five years. They sent me to Fribourg where I met with Dominicans in the professorial priory there in Fribourg.

MS: Oh, wow.

KP: And then after a period of discernment I decided to return to academic life and found my way after a couple of years to St. Louis University, where I taught in the PhD program in historical theology there at SLU. And in 2016 the National Institute for Newman Studies invited me to become the interim director of that institute. And the following year, Duquesne University invited me to take up the Ryan Endowed Chair for Newman Studies. So that's a very brief overview, but I became a Roman Catholic while I was at Cambridge University. And I have been deeply involved in not only deepening my own experience of the Catholic tradition, but I also see it as a part of my own personal mission to engage in irenic engagement with other people of other Christian traditions and inter-religious dialogue.

MS: Well, that is a wonderfully, I would say empowering story about how your intellectual journey and your faith journey intersect. And so you ended up at Duquesne. Can you tell us a little bit about Duquesne?

KP: Sure, Duquesne University was founded in 1876 by the Holy Ghost Fathers. They now call themselves Spiritans. It's a missionary order primarily that was dominated in the 19th century by French and Irish and German fathers. They were invited to come here to Pittsburgh to work with and engage the immigrant community that was rapidly growing here in Pittsburgh. And they started a kind of an academy that grew into a college that became a university. And so Duquesne now is sort of the regional flagship university for

Western Pennsylvania and has a variety of professional schools and graduate programs up to the PhD level.

MS: Is there still much Spiritan presence at Duquesne?

KP: Well, their provincial house is right on campus. So, while their presence is not as extensive because of the reduction of their size, they remain very present on campus. Our campus minister, for example, director, is a Spiritan.

MS: So tell me about the beginnings of Catholic Studies at a Catholic University.

KP: Right. Well, Duquesne's Catholic Studies department began as a presidential initiative by President Ken Gormley. I was called into the provost office in the summer of 2019. Not something that every faculty member looks forward to.

MS: No, I understand.

KP: And so I was rather surprised when I was presented with this request that I pursue a Catholic studies initiative and to my surprise, and to the delight of our administrators, I sort of stumbled into a very generous donation that funded the department for three years. And so we began in earnest in 2019-2020, planning the creation of this department, and attracted into our planning committee some very significant high profile faculty on campus. Our former dean, James Swindal, a philosopher, joined the team. Dr. Kathleen Roberts, the director of our honors college, who's a sociolinguistics expert, she joined in. Dr. Bill Wright from the Theology Department, our New Testament scholar, requested a primary appointment in Catholic Studies. And I'm a historical theologian. So we came into this work already a very interdisciplinary department. And that really is what sets Catholic Studies aside from other projects, like the discipline of theology or the discipline of philosophy.

MS: That's fascinating. Can you talk a little more building on that, on how you conceptualize Catholic studies, especially vis-a-vis theology?

KP: Well, first of all, I don't say this defensively, but descriptively. Catholic studies is not a shadow theology department or a shadow philosophy department. And from its beginnings, about 30 years ago, as a movement, Catholic studies has been characterized as a project that sees the disciplinary lines blurred based on a very simple principle that in the Catholic tradition we're interested in everything. And so there's nothing that we study, there's no area of knowledge that is not in some way touched by the tradition. So we welcome partners from many different disciplines and professional programs. In our teaching we do a lot of cross listed courses that bear the mark of interest in the Catholic tradition, whether that's psychology, sociology, political science, communication rhetoric—the list could go on and on. We have a very generous and enthusiastic and diverse collection of folks who are interested in helping this project move forward and grow.

MS: Great. So could you share a little bit more specifically then about how the program is structured? So say I'm an undergraduate, and I'm interested in Catholic studies. What would my curriculum look like?

KP: Well, we've got a major and a minor. While the major is officially a stand-alone major, we promote it as a second major. And the minor is one that incorporates and is very friendly to the use of courses in our core curriculum that we call "Bridges" to building up and creating a minor. Our tagline, when asked about what's distinctive about Catholic studies from other majors, we make the point that while your primary major is about the "what?" and the "how?" of your future, Catholic studies is about the "why?" and the "for whom?" of your life. And I find that that's a very attractive concept for students in this era, when we really are struggling with the very reality of the possibility of truth in our culture, and students are eager to find some kind of framing of their system of values in their life.

MS: Wonderful. So you mentioned a number of distinguished faculty at Duquesne who are involved in the program. Can you talk a little more about what you see as a particular strength of Duquesne's program?

When asked about what's distinctive about Catholic studies from other majors, we make the point that while your primary major is about the "what?" and the "how?" of your future, Catholic studies is about the "why?" and the "for whom?" of your life. And I find that that's a very attractive concept for students in this era... students are eager to find some kind of framing of their system of values in their life.

Kenneth Parker

KP: Well, I was saying this just yesterday to a member of the board of directors. The great strength of our department is that with one exception we are a department of full professors. So we're seasoned academics, veterans in the classroom. We have a deep commitment, not just to the curriculum, but to the lives of our students. So we make ourselves available and feel comfortable not only in the classroom but also in conversation in our offices, in presentations to student groups, in creating social opportunities that are connected with the department that are intended to build community. So, in those ways, the department really does have a group of seasoned academics to help grow the program. The downside of that, of course, is that we're made up of full professors. And so, in looking forward to the future, certainly one of the things that we're looking to do is recruit and cultivate and form younger faculty who can be a part of our program and carry on what we're seeking to start.

MS: So you mentioned before that Catholic studies in some ways addresses the "why?" of education. Can you talk a little more about the important questions that Catholic studies addresses or can address both in the classroom and through scholarship?

KP: Sure. Well, I think in our society and in our world today, one of the biggest questions is how do we form people who are deeply committed to the dignity of every human person. And so one needn't be a confessional Roman

Catholic to be attracted to Catholic studies, because at its base, the principles of Catholic studies is about shaping and forming people who are eager to make a difference in the world. We're really interested in creating lay leaders for the next generation of the Catholic Church. And so we see our role as being one that's primarily constructive. While we don't shy away from contentious issues in our teaching and in our classrooms, what we do want to emphasize is the constructive role that the tradition and the Catholic community can play in the lives of these young adults.

MS: Let's talk more about those contentious issues. In my experience, Catholicism in the United States is very politically polarized, and that bleeds over into discussions about Catholic studies and what Catholic studies is about and so forth. How do you negotiate or navigate some of those controversial issues in terms of, first, the way in which Catholic studies is construed, and second, talking about issues in the classroom that might be controversial.

KP: Right. Well, I should first point out that I'm an early modern scholar. So studying the reformation has sort of prepared me for eras of contentious and divisive issues. And it doesn't surprise me. And of course we are living in not just a religiously but politically polarized environment, and that's something that we can either lament or we can lean into and recognize that if we're truly going to live a life guided by the gospels, we've got to find ways to love one another even in the midst of our differences. I mean, if I were to characterize myself in early modern terms, I see myself as very Erasmian and an Irenicist in my approach. I want to listen. I want to understand. And that's what I cultivate in my classroom. And my colleagues are the same.

MS: That's very well put and especially the irenic quality of what we should be doing and so forth, I think it is very well taken. So obviously the *Journal of Global Catholicism* is interested in global Catholicism. And so, to what extent do you think that is an area of Catholic studies that's important to engage and if so, how should we engage it?

KP: Sure. Well, although we're a baby program, we've only been in existence for really less than two years, we've for a range of reasons had an opportunity to be actively engaged at the national level and at the international level, through a couple of projects. And I'll explain. We discovered an opportunity to collaborate with the trustees of the Pontifical Irish College a couple of years ago to search out the potential of a formative collegiate experience in Rome, in collaboration with Pontifical Universities there, principally at the moment the Gregorian and the Angelicum. And the vision for this is not simply to recreate another American study abroad program that's insular that's turned in with American faculty, teaching American students in a kind of American bubble in Rome. But really enabling students to encounter what the global Church is all about in the place that is the center of unity in the Catholic tradition. And so we have a number of US institutions that are engaged in this collaborative multi-institutional project. But we've also got a growing enthusiasm with the bishops of Ireland to send Irish students, lay students, for periods of study in Rome. The undersecretary for education at the Vatican is discussing with us the possibility of Austrian and German students joining into an English language program at the Angelicum and at the Gregorian—possibly other pontifical universities. But the point here is that we recognize that Catholic studies at its base is about forming young lay leaders. And so it's a natural progression in Catholic studies for us to shift into those kinds of discussions. Once we leave the American bubble where Catholic studies is primarily located as a movement and talk about it in a global context. And we're in conversations with institutions that are dealing with people who are truly marginalized around the world, refugees, and the potential of bringing them into this experience as well to give them a space where they often don't find themselves in. Where it's okay to talk about their faith in an academic intellectual context, where it's okay to think about what it means to be committed to the life of the Church, whether that's in some form of dedicated vocation or in a Catholic marriage where they have children. I had one colleague in a conversation that we were having with the archbishops of Ireland last week, who made the observation, you want to

send folks to this place because they're going to be the parents of the next generation of priests and religious. So I feel very excited about what Catholic studies can mean for the life of the Church, not just here in America, but globally.

MS: Okay. Well, on that note I think we'll conclude the interview and thank you so much, Ken, if I may. And this has been a wonderful opportunity for us and the *Journal of Global Catholicism*. So our thanks to you.

KP: My pleasure.

