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John O'Keefe

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PRODDING CATHOLICS TO BE MORE INTELLECTUALLY SERIOUS

John O'Keefe

When John Tracy Ellis published his now infamous skewering of American Catholic colleges and universities for their disengagement from the intellectual life, he was not, as we are in this edition of *Conversations*, calling for a rekindling of the Catholic intellectual tradition at universities. He was, rather, calling for Catholic intellectuals to assume their rightful place at the table of American intellectual discourse. For Ellis, the Catholic character of Catholic colleges and universities in the United States was given. Their character as centers of intellectual activity was not.

While it may be tempting to interpret current conversation on our campuses about the Catholic intellectual tradition as somehow similar to the problem that Ellis exposed, this interpretation would be misleading. From a certain point of view, the problem of the disengagement of Catholics from American intellectual life has been corrected. Certainly some might argue that the American Catholic ghetto culture still exists and that Catholic thinkers are still significantly underrepresented on the lists of elite public intellectuals. However, our best universities now number among the best universities in the United States, and the scholarly activity that takes place on these campuses has changed dramatically in the years between 1955 and 2009.

The issue before us is quite different, and it relates to mission and



John O'Keefe

identity more than to intellectual engagement. The exact nature of our challenge came clear to me during preparations for a symposium on the Catholic intellectual tradition at Creighton College of Arts and Sciences hosted in March and that I

was responsible for planning. My idea for the symposium was to assemble a group of scholars from a variety of disciplines and charge them with the task of discussing how the Catholic intellectual tradition functioned as a living reality in their

own work as scholars. Moving from concept to reality turned out to be fairly difficult, mainly because there is so little agreement about what, exactly, we mean when we say the phrase “the Catholic intellectual tradition.”

Ellis was trying to prod Catholics...

Ellis was trying to prod Catholics to be more intellectually serious. In contrast, our usage seems to be designed to prod intellectuals to take religious identity more seriously. Hence my claim that current usage relates to the identity crisis that has been a part of the conversation for as long as I have been a faculty member, now nearly seventeen years.

A side conversation at the aforementioned symposium helped clarify this for me. My colleague from Loyola College and I both noted that we had begun to use the phrase “Catholic intellectual tradition” in our active discourse only quite recently, say, within the last five or six years. Moreover, our use of this phrase corresponded with efforts to shift the language of mission and identity on our campuses from an exclusive focus on service and justice to a more expansive vision that included the intellectual activity of

the faculty. While our use of the phrase is relatively recent, both of us noted that we tended to speak as if the phrase has been a part of the active vocabulary of every Catholic intellectual since the time of the Church fathers. The fathers did not speak thus. Recognizing this link between current usage and mission talk helps to explain why the term is confusing to so many us: the mission dimension is not explicit.

Now, I am not suggesting that the Catholic intellectual tradition is something that we have fabricated for the nefarious purpose of pressuring reluctant colleagues into its service. Rather, I am suggesting that our usage reflects a genuine sense of urgency about the intellectual identity of Catholic institutions of higher learning. If the heart of the university is the quest for knowledge and truth, how do we as participants in this quest at a Catholic university engage differently, if at all? What does it mean to be an intellectual, Catholic or non-Catholic, at a Catholic institution? Does it matter? These are critical questions.

The Catholic intellectual tradition does exist. When the first Christian intellectuals labored to find a way to integrate Biblical revelation with Platonic philosophy, they established

a paradigm for subsequent thinking about the relationship between faith and reason. What has changed in America since Ellis wrote his essay is that we are no longer the lazy inheritors of a tradition that we take for granted. Instead we have the possibility of being active custodians of an inheritance that is slipping away. Naming that inheritance, as Professor Liddy has done, is important. Perhaps more important is that we engage each other.

At Creighton in March we experienced some of the first-fruits of such engagement. Eight scholars, four from Creighton and four from other institutions—a theologian, a lawyer, a physicist, a biologist, two English professors and two political scientists—gathered on campus. We talked not as Catholic struggling to engage the intellectual life, but as intellectuals struggling to understand what it means to be an intellectual in this context and within this tradition. Although these are not exactly the kinds of conversation that John Tracy Ellis envisioned more than fifty years ago, they surely embody their spirit. ■

John J. O’Keefe is professor of theology at Creighton University.

John & Jacquelyn Dionne Campus Green, University of Scranton.

