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Believing Scholars: Ten Catholic Intellectuals

Edited by James L. Heft, S.M.

New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, 200 pp., \$45 cloth, \$22 paper

By William Regh, S.J.

How does the Catholic public intellectual or scholar combine intellectual engagement and the faith? For people of faith working in Catholic higher education, this is an important question. The present anthology collects the answers of ten “Catholic intellectuals,” each a recipient of the University of Dayton’s Marianist Award. As Father Heft explains, the award recognizes Catholic intellectuals “who have made a major contribution to the intellectual life.” Their contributions cover a range of areas: theology, philosophy, history, anthropology, law, and journalism. The answers are likewise diverse.

One might expect the theologians to have the easiest time with the question. After all, as Avery Cardinal Dulles explains, theology is inherently at the service of faith. For Dulles, this inner connection also has a personal meaning: his coming to the Catholic faith as a young man went hand-in-hand with his growing love of theology. So the real challenge posed by the question for theologians lies in developing a theology that serves the contemporary Church by confronting the “needs

and problems of the day.” For Dulles, cultural and theological relativism poses the most serious challenge—whence his wariness of theology “from below” and his emphasis on eternal verities and fidelity to the magisterium.

Following that magisterium but speaking from a Latin American context, Gustavo Gutiérrez is led in a different direction by John Paul II’s call for a “preferential option for the poor” in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*. In his very illuminating clarification of that phrase, Gutiérrez links the option with an “ethics of solidarity” grounded in *God’s* preferential love of the poor. Are these two theological emphases incompatible? Not necessarily. David Tracy’s dense reflection on the challenges of modernity and postmodernity suggests a broad framework that might contain both. According to Tracy, theology today must draw on two basic Biblical forms: the prophetic form “speaks on behalf of the other,” especially the poor, whereas the meditative reflects on the perennial features of human existence: death, anxiety, peace, hope, and so on.

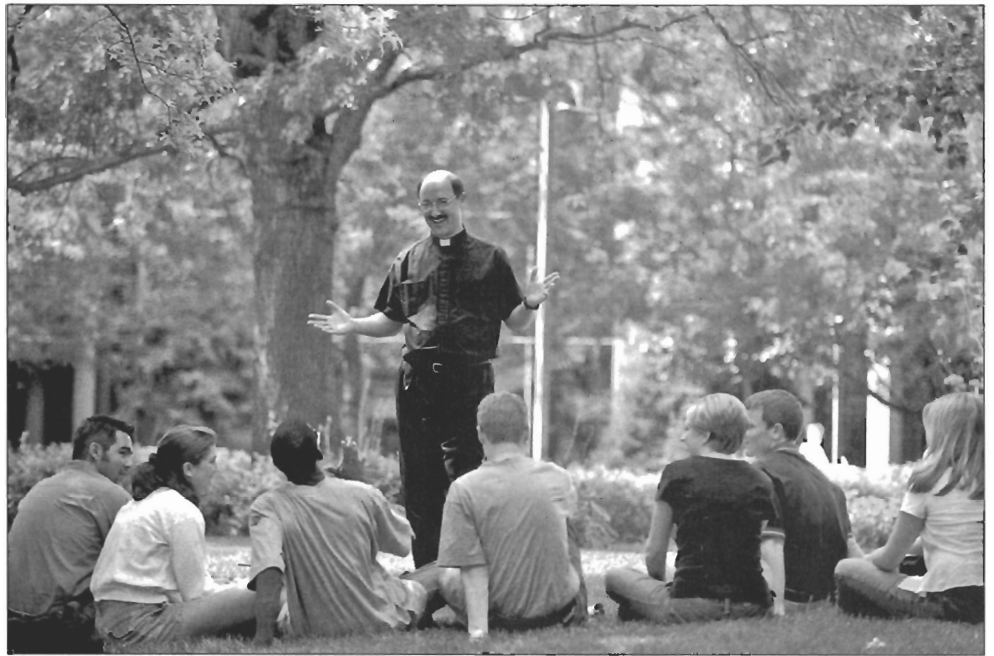
Other areas of intellectual endeavor are not so inherently linked to the faith. For intellectuals in these areas, personal history can have a decisive effect on the choice of research agenda. Anthropologist

Mary Douglas, for example, traces her interest in social hierarchies to childhood experiences of hierarchy — in her grandparents’ home and at convent schools in France and England. In her spirited defense of the value of hierarchy, Douglas demonstrates the importance of the dialogue between anthropology and religion, both for her own work and for the Church’s understanding of itself as an incarnate social reality. Jill Ker Conway integrates her interest as a historian in autobiography with her own narrative. Fascinated from early on by the question of what virtue is specific to women, Conway studies autobiography as a religious document, in which the writer confronts questions about her vocation and relationship to God. Journalist and editor Margaret O’Brien Steinfels’ account of her experience of the “women’s revolution” supports Conway’s conclusions. As an undergraduate at Loyola University-Chicago, Steinfels found Catholics, especially Catholic women but also men, who accepted that revolution. The official Church,

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however, did not, and she laments the fact that women remain second-class Catholics from an institutional standpoint.

These personal narratives show how closely the intellectual's integration of faith and scholarship involves a stance toward social-political currents affecting the contemporary Church. On that score, the interaction between modern Catholicism and the liberal European Enlightenment tradition emerges as a recurrent theme that engages a number of the authors. In some essays, sociohistorical analysis overshadows autobiographical reflections. Historian Marcia L. Colish argues that the Church has both a need for, and a duty to support, "liberal knowledge," an approach to learning that respects disciplinary pluralism and autonomy. Grounding her argument in John Henry Newman's *Idea of a University* and Jaroslav Pelikan's reexamination of Newman, Colish traces the liberal model to a long tradition that culminated in the medieval university.



Students follow a Jesuit led discussion on the campus of Saint Louis University.

social teaching of the Church since Vatican II has incorporated the Enlightenment tradition of human rights—albeit with an accent on solidarity rather than individual self-assertion. Revisiting a 1999 debate with conservative critics of liberalism, journalist and historian Peter Steinfels provides an unusually passionate defense of liberal Catholicism. In contrast to left Catholicism, which has a sectarian, prophetic tendency, the liberal Catholic emphasizes the virtues of democracy: dialogue, compromise, and gradual change.

Charles Taylor's philosophical account of a "Catholic modernity" analyzes the cultural setting for the issues raised by these authors. According to Taylor, the modern affirmation of ordinary life, human rights, and global solidarity extended Gospel values in ways that were not possible within the confines of medieval Christendom. In affirming human flourishing in ordinary life, however, modern humanism also denied medieval ideas of an

absolute that transcends human flourishing. The rejection of absolute transcendence is unfortunate, however, since sustained commitment to the modern ideals of justice and solidarity depends on absolutes such as the unconditional value of love and the idea of human beings as *imago Dei*.

The diverse backgrounds and intellectual interests notwithstanding, the contributors to *Believing Scholars* agree that the contemporary world constitutes an intellectual challenge for the practice of the faith—a challenge strongly shaped by liberal Enlightenment thought and its postmodern denouement. Although their responses to the challenge differ, each understands that response as an attempt to connect the Catholic faith with intellectual engagement. By showing how the Catholic faith of outstanding scholars and intellectuals has relevance across a range of disciplines, this anthology should both enlighten and encourage those who struggle to connect the intellectual life and their faith. ■

Mary

Ann Glendon strikes a similar chord in the area of international law. In her ground-breaking study of the origins of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, Glendon found that the framers drew significantly on Catholic social teaching. Returning the favor, the