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Why is Catholicism growing in Africa and Asia and losing to secularism in other parts?

The Status *of* Catholic Studies

By Thomas Landy

In the dozen or so years since Catholic studies was first being broached as a model for educating undergraduate students at Catholic colleges and universities, it has been encouraging to witness steady growth in the number of programs at Jesuit, Catholic and even state institutions. Many programs remain small, but a good deal of creative energy has been poured into them collectively, and students have no doubt benefited.

Beyond that, how do we assess Catholic studies achievement so far? Where might a few of us teaching in Catholic studies still need to be nudged? A few thoughts might help to stir things up at this stage in the programs' development.

Passing on a Faith and a Culture

There are certainly legitimate questions one might raise about whether the development of Catholic studies programs ultimately excuses Catholic colleges or universities from work they should be doing for *every* student across the curriculum. I'm doubtful of the viability today of more than

a handful of colleges that insist on a heavily religious core that teaches with the kind of breadth that Catholic studies espouses. Hoping for such perfection will often be the enemy of achieving the good.

But I think that, for those who choose it, Catholic studies can help us educate students in Catholic faith and culture *better* than under the famous Jesuit philosophy and theology-heavy core of the mid-twentieth century.

One of the primary advantages of Catholic studies is that it can remind us that Catholicism is too rich and broad to be relegated to a single field of study. No one should doubt that theological study is crucial for understanding Catholicism and is of course a legitimate independent field of study. But Catholicism is more than a body of texts, controversies, and right

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beliefs. Catholicism is embodied in cultures and practices manifested in devotions, rituals, images, sounds, and movement.

David Tracy has helped us to understand Catholicism as a whole “imagination.” It concerns ideas, but it is (especially in relation to Reform Protestantism) deeply corporeal, material, and visual. It is illuminated and often enriched by dialogue between faith and reason, but is by no means limited to or defined by that dialogue. Religious expression in metaphor, image, and sound serves just as important an intellectual and cultural function, and will at times say more about the divine than a discussion limited to the bounds of reason ever could. A Caravaggio, Rouault, or a Hopkins poem may in fact communicate religious truth more readily than a Thomistic proof.

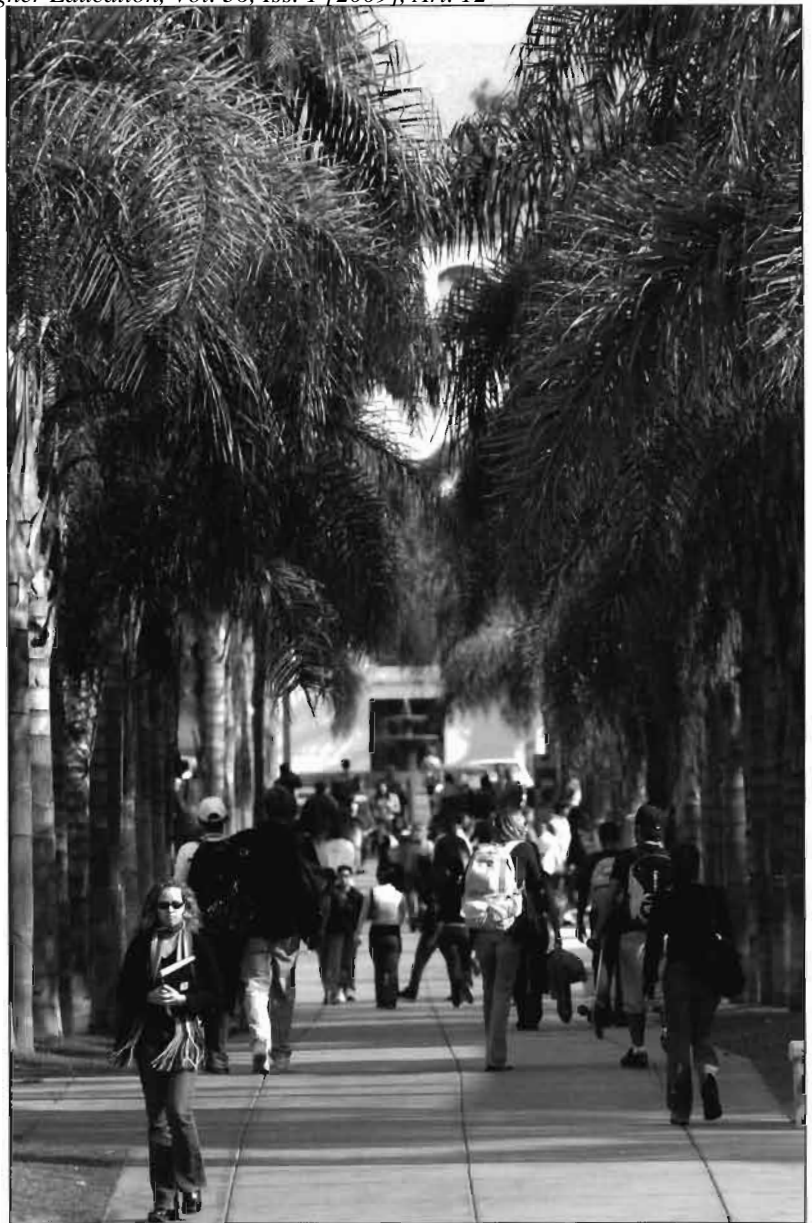
In Catholicism, popular devotion has as much a place as high art. Catholic cultures are manifest in social relationships and in everyday notions of the good. Catholic studies have to explore all these. The programs I know of make significant progress in this direction not only compared to the 1980s, when too few Catholic-content courses might have been available, but also compared to the 1950s, when Jesuit schools paid scant attention to art and music, and were seldom places where a poet could flourish. Catholic studies can keep us from reducing Catholicism to form of inquiry that is too narrow to do Catholicism justice.

Anyone who doubts that Jesuit schools’ use of scholastic philosophy and theology was ultimately reductionist should spend time talking to an alumnus who thinks that teaching many courses in scholastic philosophy and theology is the *only* way to properly educate students in the Catholic intellectual tradition. Catholic studies can take us beyond that narrow focus, and help us give students a fuller sense of Catholic faith and culture.

Against Nostalgia

It will surprise no one, at this point, if say that I am warier as I grow older about discussions that justify Catholic studies in ways that seem too nostalgic for a past era’s form of education—even if we acknowledge that everything that changed about education after 1968 might not be for the best.

One of the biggest arguments for Catholic studies, one most frequently advocated on program web sites (one I’ve advocated many times myself) is that it introduces students to the Catholic intellectual tradition. I want to validate that task, but at the same time argue that the notion of passing on “the” tradition is too limiting an aspiration. It has the potential



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to deteriorate into nostalgia and can also mean that students are deprived of the opportunity to understand the many ways Catholicism is embodied in, and struggles to find a place within, an astounding array of cultures worldwide.

Focus on tradition or culture as it developed in the United States and a few parts of Western Europe, risks radically underemphasizing it in São Paulo, Manila, or Kinshasa, whose metro areas alone comprise more than 50 million people, and whose populations are majority Catholic. I believe that we are only beginning to make progress at thinking about Catholicism in global or universal terms. Yet in addition to teaching students about a Catholic past, Catholic studies needs to be much more adept at teaching about Catholic thought and practice in

INSTITUTION	CATHOLIC STUDIES PROGRAM	MAJOR/MINOR
Boston College	Yes	Minor
Canisius College	Yes	Minor
College of the Holy Cross	No	N/A
Creighton University	No	N/A
Fairfield University	Yes	Minor
Fordham University	Yes	Undergraduate Certificate Program
Georgetown University	Yes	Minor
Gonzaga University	Yes	Concentration: Total of 21 credits
John Carroll University	Yes	Concentration: Total of 18 credits
Le Moyne College	Yes	Minor
Loyola College in Maryland	Yes	Minor
Loyola Marymount University	Yes	Minor
Loyola University Chicago	Yes	Minor
Loyola University New Orleans	Yes	Minor
Marquette University	Yes	Minor
Regis University	Yes	Minor
Rockhurst University	Yes	Minor
Saint Joseph's University	No	N/A
Saint Louis University	Yes ¹	Certificate
Saint Peter's College	No	N/A
Santa Clara University	Yes	Minor
Seattle University	Yes	Minor
Spring Hill College	No	N/A
University of Detroit Mercy	Yes	Certificate
University of San Francisco	Yes	Minor
University of Scranton	Yes	Concentration: Total of 18 credits
Wheeling Jesuit University	Yes	Minor
Xavier University	Yes ²	Minor

¹ Known as the Manresa Program

² Known as the Catholicism and Culture Program

places that are seldom more than footnotes in discussions about the Catholic intellectual tradition. Students should be compelled to examine why Catholicism is growing rapidly in so many parts of Africa and Asia, and why it is losing rapidly to Pentecostals or to secularists in so many other parts of the world.

A Larger Agenda

One need not underestimate the importance of influencing undergraduate students to recognize that there is also a larger intellectual task for Catholic studies. Success at that task will ultimately determine whether Catholic studies remains a niche subject in a postmodern academy, or really fulfills its promise.

While some observers critique the development of ethnic and gender studies as evidence of a postmodern fragmentation of knowledge, I'd suggest that the best programs and thinkers, led by women's studies and African-American Studies, have done the opposite. They have not said, "Let's just study ourselves," but have turned instead to study where that group really fits in a larger world. They manage through good scholarship to push others to re-conceive whole fields of study.

At their best, women's studies and African-American studies have worked to write the narratives, experience, ideas and perspectives of women and African Americans into the broader historical and cultural narratives that had ignored or trivialized them. Scholars in African-American studies show that it is impossible to understand white Americans' conceptions of self or of freedom without understanding African Americans' presence and situation in America. Scholars of ethnic history have been compelled to recognize how impossible it is to tell the story of "white ethnics" without reference to the

American categorization of race. Musicologists, art historians, and theologians are regularly pushed to think differently because of the collective experience and influence of African Americans. This success is not about political correctness. African American studies has helped scholars see that leaving the African American experience out of the story distorts our ability to understand our world.

The achievements of African American studies have been realized in significant part through conversations fostered in programmatic ways at centers at major colleges and universities.

To what degree has Catholic studies accomplished something similar? To what degree have we laid the ground for proving why other scholars would be remiss if, for example, they tried to tell the story of Progressive-era political history without taking into account Catholic thought and organizations from the era? I would suggest that while a number of individual Catholic scholars have done so, not enough of that work has directly been the outcome—or even the apparent aspiration—of many Jesuit schools' Catholic studies programs.

A Good Foundation in Place

In pragmatic terms, Catholic studies has helped ensure that institutions will be more conscious of the need to hire faculty in many disciplines who understand Catholic intellectual traditions and can think about Catholicism and culture. It should mean that the faculty who teach under its auspices are engaged in sustained intellectual conversation about Catholicism, in ways that cross-fertilize our thinking and bring us out of potential sub-disciplinary ghettos.

My sense is that Catholic studies has helped lay the groundwork. In the early and mid-1990s, I often heard stories from young scholars in non-theological disciplines whose mentors had told them that specialization in areas that connected Catholicism and politics, history, psychology, sociology, and other fields would be “suicide,” or at the very least would result in intellectual marginalization. Catholic studies programs insure that there are positions out there, and that a promising graduate student would not be foolish to dedicate herself to such work. Editors have some hope that books in Catholic studies will find interested audiences.

So much good work is in place. But it would be a great mistake to be complacent with that. ■



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