

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and American Catholic Higher Education

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Nearly sixty years ago, in the journal *Thought*, Msgr. John Tracy Ellis published a scathing critique of Catholic intellectual life in America.¹ While he does acknowledge the profoundly negative consequences of a deeply ingrained anti-Catholic prejudice in American intellectual culture, which when not downright hostile was at least “aloof and unfriendly to Catholic thought,” he argues that it is not primarily this bias that accounts for the poverty of Catholic intellectual thought in his time.² Instead, he places the prime responsibility on the shoulders of Catholic leaders (clergy included) and Catholic colleges and universities themselves. The upshot is nothing short of an indictment of American Catholic higher education couched in terms of a number of serious defects.

Among the defects he cites is an abandonment of a fundamental distinctive feature of the Catholic intellectual tradition, specifically, its strong commitment to investigation in theology, philosophy, and the liberal arts generally. As Catholic institutions followed every passing intellectual craze—presumably in an effort to be timely and more like their secular counterparts—the secular schools had taken prominence in traditionally “Catholic” scholastic thought (e.g., theology at the University of Chicago, philosophy at Princeton). Catholic institutions increasingly separated themselves from the foundational elements of the great tradition of learning in the liberal arts and sciences. So much was this the case that Robert M. Hutchins, in a talk delivered to a meeting of the National Catholic Education Association (1937) and with due deference to the Catholic Church as having “the longest intellectual tradition of any institution in the contemporary world,” chastised the Catholic educators for having “imitated the worst features of secular education and ignored most of the good ones.”³ Ellis suggests that Hutchins was right to point out that Catholic institutions caved to the expediency of vocationalism and were largely anti-intellectual, and that there was no fundamental change in their characteristic lack of commitment to high academic standards, development of the habits of intellectual work, and scholarly research.

Ellis also claims that among American Catholics generally and far too many Catholic educators in particular there was an absence of a love of scholarship for its own sake, or in his words “the absence of a sense of dedication to an intellectual apostolate.”⁴ This defect, he suggests, deprived those working in Catholic colleges and universities of the virtues associated with “the admirable industry and unremitting labor in research and publication which characterize a far greater proportion of their colleagues on the faculties of secular universities.”⁵ He hypothesizes that this may well be the result of an overemphasis on the idea of intellectual humility coupled with a distorted conception of intellectual pride which obscures the valuable lessons of industry and

scholarly labor. (He even likens it to a similar distortion embodied in William Jennings Bryan's infamous declaration: "If we come to the stage at which we must decide between geology and Christianity, I think it is better to know the Rock of Ages than the ages of rocks."⁶)

Closely associated with this absence of a sense of dedication to the intellectual life is an overemphasis on the idea of a Catholic university as an agency for moral development and an undervaluing of the Catholic institution as a place that nourishes intellectual excellence. This is not to say that moral development is not a central function of a Catholic institution—or education generally, for that matter—nor that it stands in contrast to intellectual pursuits, but rather that this institutional role is often seen as distinct from the academic life and so might be pursued independently of intellectual excellence. Intellectual excellence is itself, however, a virtue from which flows an even more robust sense of morality, a kind of courage required to lead a religious life in a public context and an ability to withstand the pressures associated with leading that life.

These defects, along with many other points in his paper, lead Ellis to conclude that Catholic intellectuals separated themselves from their fellow citizens of other religious faiths and developed a stifling "sense of inferiority induced by their consciousness of the inadequacy of Catholic scholarship."⁷ Who, he asks, is to blame for this inadequacy? His response, devastating as it sounds, is unambiguous. It is certainly not the enemies of the Church, as enmity that historically issued in some of the greatest works of Catholic scholarship (Augustine's *City of God*, for instance). "The chief blame," he writes, "lies with Catholics themselves."⁸ And in the strongest terms possible, Ellis writes:

It lies in their frequently self-imposed ghetto mentality which prevents them from mingling as they should with their non-Catholic colleagues, and in their lack of industry and the habits of work [...]. It lies in their failure to have measured up to their responsibilities to the incomparable tradition of Catholic learning of which they are the direct heirs [...].⁹

These are powerful words indeed, but do they still ring true? Where have we come in the decades since Ellis issued his indictment? Over the past twenty-five years or so, there has been a wealth—a massive amount—of extraordinarily self-reflective, deeply honest, and extremely productive scholarship devoted to identifying the hallmarks of a Catholic intellectual tradition, clarifying the idea of a characteristically Catholic intellectual perspective, and delineating the institutional responsibilities of Catholic colleges and universities. The resulting conversation, itself, is one measure of the remarkable progress that has been made over the past fifty years. Though not an end itself, the on-going conversation is a necessary step in retrieving the foundational elements of and reaffirming our collective responsibility to the "incomparable tradition of Catholic learning," if we wish to claim ourselves as rightful heirs to that tradition.

It is imperative that Catholic colleges (like King's or Iona, where I work) enter this conversation and engage in a process of understanding themselves better precisely as "Catholic." We should feel confident in knowing what it means to be Catholic in this sense; and, perhaps more difficult, we should be able to articulate this publicly. Before others can, in John Henry Newman's words, "be made to know us as we are" ("know our religion as it is and not as they fancy it to be"), we must sufficiently know ourselves.¹⁰ In coming to this self-understanding, we must grapple with providing some sense of the tradition and what it requires of both those who may be called "Catholic" intellectuals and those institutions in which they conduct their work.

In this discussion, I want to consider the idea of a Catholic intellectual, not so much in terms of holding certain substantive ideas, but rather in terms of adopting a certain perspective. It is a responsibility of those who educate in the tradition to take a certain stand with respect to persons and the world; it is also incumbent upon university and college administrators—deans, provosts, and presidents—to ensure that there is an academic infrastructure sufficient to carry out the teaching and learning associated with that perspective.

The Catholic intellectual tradition is founded on certain fundamental principles regarding the nature of persons and their relationship to God and the world. I want to be careful here. In saying this, I do not mean to leave the impression that these principles are exhaustive of the Catholic intellectual tradition, only that they seem to me to be among the most salient ones. Moreover, these principles are not understood here as canonical concepts which combine to form a fully systematized theory, but rather more as guides for the development of a uniquely Catholic point of view.

First, at the core of the tradition is a sanguine belief in the capacity of human reason to realize the purpose of attaining determinate knowledge; with its human limitations, reason is nonetheless capable of discovering truth and discerning objective moral values. The tradition holds to the ancient idea that humans, by nature, are rational and desire to know and that it would be a peculiar situation indeed if we had the desire but were incapable of the knowing itself. The very desire motivates us to learn, and the learning itself is ineliminable in the process of coming to live well. Catholic intellectuals are thus committed to the idea that there is truth and that there is a real objective difference between right and wrong. At the same time, it must be recognized that human reason is not absolute, and thus does not deliver the universe as a whole. While we can proudly know certain truths along the route of inquiry, we are humbled by reason's limitation. We cannot view the world with a God's-eye perspective. I should add that critics of the Catholic intellectual tradition often see it as dogmatic—and with good reason. There are those who operate within the tradition who believe that reason can get us to the God's-eye perspective—that it can, in its human form, arrive at some ultimate conclusion. Such a suggestion cannot be anything but dogmatic. It is one thing to think about dogma from a theological point of view, quite another to be dogmatic.

A second salient feature of the Catholic intellectual tradition is the intrinsic connection between faith and reason. Humbled as we might be by the healthy skepticism associated with reason's limitations, we may also be optimistic about arriving at some kind of understanding from a different angle. Reason is continuous with faith; far from being opposed to each other, faith and reason are in a necessarily continuous relationship. Reason justifies faith, and faith challenges reason to understand things more fully; but even faith does not get us there completely. As reason and faith are the interdependent ways to find truth, they will, when viewed together, bring us closer to God. The Catholic intellectual is thus open to this possibility, open to the idea that the world may present itself in ways that transcend yet complement our capacity to reason.

A third feature is the adoption of a particular view regarding the nature of persons. Through the dynamic interplay of faith and reason that characterizes human nature, persons are understood as spiritual beings made in God's image. Accordingly, the Catholic intellectual tradition requires a respect for the dignity of all persons as members of a community of rational investigators. Martha Nussbaum, a convert to Judaism from Protestantism, writes that she feels at home on the campuses of Catholic universities because, more than at most secular institutions, they take to heart the intrinsic worth of the human person, which provides "a common language in which we can, without preliminary skirmishing [over whether human beings have intrinsic value], converse."¹¹ Even Richard Rorty—an avowed atheist and a postmodern anti-foundationalist who has little truck for prioritizing personhood, reason, and objectivity—was moved by this salient feature. He comments that this element in the Judeo-Christian tradition contains a universal sense of human dignity "gratefully invoked by free-loading atheists like myself."¹²

Fourth, there is a sense that the objects of academic investigation have what might be called a "sacramental quality." Central to the Catholic intellectual tradition is a unique notion of revelation: God is revealed not only through the sacred scriptures, but also through history, tradition, and the products of various human intellectual endeavors.¹³ Scientific discoveries, objects of art, works of literature, etc. may all reveal aspects of God. The Catholic intellectual tradition holds that not only can these disciplines be studied, they must be studied, for otherwise we risk missing parts of God's communication with us. Against this background, Catholic intellectuals ought to be led away from the highly general to the minutely particular. One of the failures of philosophy in general, and often Catholic philosophy in particular, is what Wittgenstein called contempt for the particular case. It is not just the conclusions we draw, but the perspective we take to get there that matters—a perspective that catches glimpses of the sacred, so to speak, in the various and particular objects of our understanding. Conclusions may shift and change—quite naturally as a result of reason's limitations and our natural desire to inquire—but this perspective ought not.

Finally, the Catholic intellectual tradition is inclusive. It does not merely tolerate difference, but embraces it. This marks perhaps the most difficult task for institutions as they struggle to articulate their Catholic identity and balance this with respect for those who have been traditionally

marginalized by a narrow understanding of that identity. Nussbaum notes, for instance, that while in her experience at Catholic institutions she finds a “deliberative richness” regarding the notion of the intrinsic worth of persons, she cannot but worry about a kind of “deliberative impoverishment” with respect to issues of non-Western societies, race, equality of women, and gay and lesbian rights.¹³ It is my sense that many Catholic institutions share this worry, not because they wish to jump on a bandwagon for diversity, but because they struggle to find a way to live up to a traditional ideal of inclusivity by accepting difference and welcoming all reasonable voices in the intellectual community. God’s immanence, the sacredness of objects, is not reserved for Catholics alone; the practicing Catholic intellectual has much to learn from colleagues of other traditions, cultures, and faiths. Intellectuals working in Catholic institutions must come to appreciate this mutually.

Colleges and universities that operate within the Catholic intellectual tradition thus must educate from a solid foundation in the liberal arts and sciences and preserve the distinct nature of the academic disciplines, but with a view towards integrating knowledge in a unified view of reality. Scholars in this tradition are called upon to engage in rational contemplation about the disciplines and, through imaginative synthesis, come to a more unified conception of persons and the world. Educators in this tradition recognize the impact that their teaching has on students and are called upon to help students understand how their knowledge will impact the world. And, finally, students educated in the Catholic intellectual tradition ought to be able to integrate what they have learned into a personal philosophy that will guide them through a wholesome and productive life, a life lived well with others.

But are Catholic colleges and universities ready for this? Are they ready for the kind of intellectual activity the tradition seems to require? Clearly, I think, we have come some great distance from the place Ellis described sixty years ago. But are we where we should be? Institutions must ask and adequately answer the question, “What is to be Catholic?” Many institutions have asked the question, but have they adequately answered it?

There are two fundamental ways in which institutions fail, I think, in this regard; each such failure is an attempt by an institution to define its Catholicism in terms of functions, which when not fully integrated with the core academic enterprise are extrinsic to that central activity. First: An institution may think it meets the challenge by saying that its Catholic nature is defined by its vigorous commitment to campus ministries, to service, etc. While it is difficult to imagine a Catholic institution without such a vibrant program, the demands of a uniquely Catholic intellectual life are not met solely by pastoral ministry or service. To recall, Ellis himself stresses the inadequacy of the concept of the Catholic university as fundamentally an instrument of moral development. Second: An institution may think of itself as Catholic in the sense that the Church is merely present on campus, as if it were one among the many items that define the institution, or as if its “Catholicism” were a kind of accidental tourist roaming the ivy halls—a saintly statue

here, a crucifix there, mass in the morning—where an otherwise fundamentally secular education is conducted. I am in fundamental agreement with Peter Steinfels when he writes that

Catholic identity must be reflected not only in campus ministry, liturgical events, student-life policies, and community service, but also in the central activity of higher education: its intellectual life, the teaching and research agendas of the faculty [...]. [Further] that Catholic identity is something broader than the place and character of theology [...]. A history department, a literature department, a sociology department, should offer courses or address questions within courses that one would not be likely to find at the state university down the road. The science faculty should include people ready to engage in discussions at the meeting points of science, faith, and ethics. The economics and business departments should have the capacity to join in examining the interrelationship of commerce, the Christian tradition, and social justice.¹⁴

A Catholic institution's Catholicism must be intrinsic; it must define its very mode of existing—not merely in terms of its ostensible images and not exclusively in terms of what is taught in theology/religious studies departments, but in terms of its course offerings across the disciplines and of the demonstrable support given to faculty to be the kind of scholars the tradition demands.

There may be many ways to demonstrate this, but there are a few that are, in my estimation, non-negotiable. The intrinsically Catholic college or university must be committed to providing its undergraduate students with a core curriculum that is grounded in the liberal arts and sciences and that is truly integrative. Resource allocation must be made both to allow faculty to conduct research in their particular disciplines and to enable them to find points of meaningful convergence among the disciplines. We must value scholarship and encourage its intense pursuit, both for its own sake, as knowledge is an unbridled human good, and for the purpose of advancing pedagogy—and, by extension, student learning, and, by further extension, living well.

In these respects we have made significant progress, but we are by no means ready to proclaim the good news that we have achieved our end. A final word of caution: beware of self-congratulation, now or at any time, and focus on advancing this noble cause, always mindful that there is no finality as long as there are human inquirers.

Notes

1. Ellis 1955. Ellis's paper is also published by permission on the Boston College website: see <http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/offices/mission/pdf1/cu25.pdf>.

2. Ibid., 354.
3. Ibid., 374–375.
4. Ibid., 377.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 386.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid. Ellis quotes these lines from Newman’s 1851 lectures to English Catholics: “They must be made to know us as we are; they must be made to know our religion as it is, not as they fancy it; they must be made to look at us, and they are overcome. This is the work that lies before you in your place and in your measure” (*Lectures on the Present Position of the Catholics in England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1913), 378). In those lectures, Ellis notes, Newman “challenged his hearers to be equal to the obligation they owed to their non-Catholic fellow-countrymen.” This ideal is achieved, no doubt, through effective scholarship as Ellis suggests; my point here is that we should first engage in serious scholarly self-reflection.
11. Nussbaum 1996, 32. Nussbaum’s paper is also available online; see <http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/offices/mission/pdf1/cu18.pdf>.
12. Rorty 1991, 202. See also Robert P. Kraynak, “Justice without Foundations,” *The New Atlantis* 32 (Summer 2011): 103–120, also available online at <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/justice-without-foundations>.

Commenting on this passage, Kraynak notes that Rorty’s justification for appealing to this sense of human dignity is “that he is part of a community of moral traditions inherited from Judaism and Christianity.” So even “free-loading atheists” appropriate salient elements of our religious tradition, but are content to view them simply as “inherited.” The problem for Rorty’s view, as Kraynak sees it, is “that our belief in God or rationally grounded moral duties turns out to be relevant after all.”

It is important, then, to acknowledge the wide difference between Rorty’s conventionalist appeal and Nussbaum’s claim that we should take as our starting point the objective fact

of the dignity of persons. How could one make sense of such a value without rationally prioritizing personhood in some way? Though Rorty's view does attest to the profound influence of the tradition, it is not only influence or inheritance we rely on in an effort to ground the Catholic intellectual tradition.

13. Nussbaum 1996, 33.

14. Steinfels 1996, 38. Steinfels's paper is likewise available online; see <http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/offices/mission/pdf1/cu17.pdf>.

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