

Identity and the Catholic University: Culture or Epistemology?

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Higher education is undergoing major revisions today due to a number of factors including changing demographics, online education, financial constraints, and a selective job market. How to educate for today's world has become the crucial question. The Catholic college or university finds itself in the same competitive sphere of higher education as its secular counterparts: jobs, attractive majors, tuition costs, and online versus onsite teaching are frequent topics of faculty and administrative meetings. Survival of the four-year undergraduate college or university, religious or secular, has become a competition of the fittest—or at least the richest. The fact that Catholic schools of higher learning find themselves on the same racetrack as their secular peers raises the question: Does the Catholic college or university have anything distinctive to offer to today's world? Does Catholic education make a difference?

This paper argues that Catholicism does have a distinct approach to learning and that the Catholic intellectual tradition can make a valuable contribution to higher education today. To do so, however, the Catholic intellectual tradition must find its own voice and epistemology. The Jesuit charism, with its deep incarnational commitment, coupled with the Jesuit mission of education, has yielded some outstanding thinkers in this regard. Here I focus on several Jesuit thinkers of the twentieth century who have contributed to a deepened understanding of the Catholic intellectual tradition in the modern age. Their names are familiar to many—John Courtney Murray, Walter Ong, Bernard Lonergan, John Haughey—but the one name not usually associated with higher education is Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Yet, it is Teilhard's evolutionary paradigm of Christianity that allows the Catholic intellectual tradition to acquire a new vision. My thesis rests on the relationship between catholicity and cosmology: unless we educate for a cosmos in evolution, and thus the work of God in evolution, we shall not know where we are going or how to get there. Our Jesuit thinkers map some new paths for the future of Catholic higher education in an evolutionary age, and it is to them that I now turn.

Murray, Ong, Longergan, Haughey

John Courtney Murray is best known for his insights regarding Church-State relations; however, he was keenly aware of the critical role Catholic higher education plays in secular society. He was concerned that a narrow Catholicism could deaden the spirit, and he countered that the purpose of Catholic education is not to shrink the soul but to widen its capacity for the unity of truth.

According to Murray, the Catholic scholar, rooted in the Catholic tradition, must be open to all streams of thought in the modern world.¹ Without broad knowledge that can engage pluralism and complexity, Catholic education risks being insular and thus impotent to effect real change in the world. Murray asked: “Is the Catholic scholar a self-enclosed spiritual monad in a secularist world? Is the Catholic institution of learning simply a citadel, a fortress of defense, or an asylum of escape?”² In his view, all knowledge moves dynamically toward an ultimate horizon, and educators must foster that movement. The Christian educator is “a ‘midwife’ who helps to bring to birth the full humanity of the students.”³

Murray’s hope was that the Catholic university could create a new unity between the sacral and the secular realms, a unity fully respecting the integrity of both orders. In this way, the Catholic university could create an “intellectual apostolate” to nurture both mind and soul, producing spiritually mature, committed young scholars who would be a leaven to the world they enter upon graduation. This apostolate would require a sincere engagement of Catholic thought with modern developments in science, literature, history, philosophy, and the social sciences.⁴ The Catholic university would be a place of enlarged dialogue characterized by a healthy secularity—that is, openness to and engagement with the secular world—and a community of teachers, scholars, students, and administrators explicitly committed to sharing an intellectual journey. Grounded in an Incarnational commitment to intellectual and spiritual wholeness, the Catholic university would engage real conversation in pursuit of the wholeness of truth.⁵

Closely aligned with Murray’s thought (befitting a former student of Murray), Jesuit theologian John Haughey has argued for an expansive understanding of what it means to participate in the Catholic intellectual tradition. His explorations have focused specifically on developing an epistemology for Catholic higher education. His thesis is a response to the question: Is all knowledge the same, regardless whether it is sacred or secular, or is there a particular “catholic” way of knowing? Haughey locates the root of the word “catholic” in the “Letter to the Smyrnaeans” composed by the second-century bishop Ignatius of Antioch (d. AD 110), as he was on his way to martyrdom.⁶ In this letter, Ignatius reflected on the divinity of Christ, the Eucharist as medicine of immortality, and the relationship between bishop and Church, and he exhorted the faithful to gather together as the one Body of Christ. He used the Greek word *katholikos* (καθολικός), meaning according to (*kata-*) the whole (*holos*), or more colloquially, “universal,” to identify the purpose of the early Christians.

Building on this Greek word, Haughey unpacks the word “catholic” as a dynamic principle of “wholemaking” in a way that is consonant with Murray’s thought.⁷ The word “catholic” describes movement toward universality or wholeness. Hence the term “catholicity” means openness in contrast to what is incomplete, partial, sectarian, factional, tribal, and selective. It connotes a dynamic principle of gathering together what is fragmented or separated. The philologist Walter Ong likened the dynamic of catholicity to the parable of the yeast (Mt 13:33) or the gathering

together into the one loaf of bread described in the *Didache* (9.4): “Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.” Ong wrote:

“Catholic” is commonly said to mean “universal,” a term from the Latin *universalis*. The equation is not quite exact. If “universal” is the adequate meaning of “catholic,” why did the Latin church, which in its vernacular language had the word *universalis*, not use the word but rather borrow from the Greek the term *katholikos* instead, speaking of the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” instead of the “one, holy, universal and apostolic church”?⁸

Ong states that universality, as used historically by Christians, was not often an inclusive concept because everything that was not in the circle of universality was excluded from it. The word “catholic,” by contrast, simply means “through-the-whole” or “throughout-the-whole,” like yeast which leavens bread. It connotes an active presence of wholemaking or leavening the stuff of life to create a greater whole.

Haughey sees the work of epistemology as “thinking that makes greater wholes.” By “whole,” I understand him to mean greater unity, connectedness, depth, and insight. Our understanding is always partial and thus open to more depth and breadth which occurs when the mind can explore the uncharted territories of knowledge freely. An epistemology of “wholemaking,” or what might be called a “catholic” epistemology, requires an openness of the mind, such that the mind does not have pre-set ideas to be verified, but is open to the experience of concrete reality. The word “mind,” in this usage, includes the range of intellect and emotions that comprise personhood and can expand and change.⁹ The knowing process is an orientation to the real and the potentialities of being, but one must be conscious of and open to being. Following Bernard Lonergan, thinking begins with a subject’s grasp of oneself as open to the real. The best route to knowledge is to develop a strong grasp of one’s own subjectivity and of the operations of one’s own consciousness rather than seeking more and more information about stuff “out there.”¹⁰ By contrast, our educational system is like cardboard boxes in a room that someone fills with mental stuff. In an information-laden age, information overload counters true knowledge by preventing the gathering of insights into new horizons of meaning; hence, we know more and more about less and less.¹¹ Knowledge which forms from the dynamism of the mind’s thought processes is not simply information-gathering and certainly not storing concepts in a mental warehouse; rather, knowledge flows from that deep center of desire within the human person who is searching for truth.

Haughey speaks of “catholicity” as the gathering of fragments into greater wholes, a “virtue of ceaseless wonder” that, by nature of its own inner spiritual dynamism, cannot be controlled or manipulated.¹² This gathering process is the work of the Creator Spirit in our lives. It is the Spirit

of God co-laboring with us to create anew, as we seek ultimate meaning and truth. Hence catholicity is also an orientation toward the one, true, good, and beautiful, a grace-filled orientation toward God. As a dynamic engagement of the mind, catholicity is bound up with personal authenticity, having a grasp of one's own self and self-consciousness. This exploration of the mind, seeking to form wholes out of thought fragments gained from experience, intelligence, and judgment, is an ever deepening of love. God is the name of genuine unrestricted love bubbling up at the heart of life, attracting more insight, wonder, and creativity. Catholicity, accordingly, is a way of knowing by which we enter more deeply into love.

Catholicity and Cosmology

The Jesuit emphasis on catholicity as the dynamism of the mind toward making wholes is highly consonant with the original meaning of catholicity as the Greeks first conceived it. To understand the Greek notion of catholicity is to realize that the word emerges with the new consciousness of cosmos. For the Greeks, catholicity and cosmology were integrally related. The word "cosmos" emerged in the axial period (900–200 B.C.E.). Beginning in the Hellenic Ages, the universe came to be seen existing apart from human action and possessing a kind of wisdom that humanity did not have. The word "cosmos" rose among the Greeks and referred to the "whole" or that which makes the world a "world." The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 540–c. 480 B.C.E.) referred to *ta panta* (the "all things"), which another pre-Socratic, Empedocles (c. 490–430 B.C.E.), transformed into the singular *to pan*, or "the all." The Greeks' most innovative step was the formulation of a special word for the world. The word they chose, *kosmos*, was first used in Homer's *Iliad* to mean "in good order" or the order which gives rise to beauty, such as an ornament. (Hence, the word "cosmos" is related to "cosmetics"!)

The ancient Greek separation of "human" from "world" allowed the Greeks to discover a "cosmos" that could provide humans with models of perfection to gaze upon (cosmology) and natural spaces to define and conquer (cosmography). In this context, "world" was as much a concept as a concrete place; it meant not just physical creation but also the environment in which humans function. Prior to the axial period, the "world" was thought to be a flat, two-tiered structure, with the sky above and earth below. The Greeks conceived of the cosmos as three-dimensional with height, depth, and width. One could suggest that awareness of a spatial, three-dimensional cosmos impelled the ancient Greeks to separate "human" from "world" in a way that allowed them to discover a "cosmos." In other words, the human was no longer part of an interdependent nature; now the human had "self-consciousness" and consciousness of "other" that was called "world." Catholicity was coined to describe a consciousness of the whole, as awareness of the cosmos other than human but to which the human was connected. Catholicity is not a physical order or a spiritual one; it does not connote geographical extension. *Kath' holou*

(according to the whole) is not the same as *kata pantos* (according to all things). Catholicity belongs not to the phenomenal and empirical, but to the noumenal and ontological plane; it describes the essential nature of reality, not the external manifestations. Catholicity is an orientation of being toward wholeness; for the Greeks it was how the human stood in relation to the stars and attended to the stars as mediators of the Good.

This is to say that the cosmos was a mirror for human action. The human was not simply in the world; the world was also in the human. It gave rhythm to our history, defined our aspirations and directed our physical structure. The human was to contemplate superior things, intelligible things, the harmonious disposition of which was taken to reveal profound mysteries.¹³ Plato's cosmology influenced thinkers of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages; the cosmos influenced what one ought to be and what one was to do.¹⁴ Justice was the result of the agreement between cosmos and humanity, each with its own nature, instilled by God. As Rémi Brague writes, "Cosmology had an ethical dimension. In turn, the task of transporting such good into the here below where we live enriched ethics with a cosmological dimension."¹⁵

The Mechanistic University

It is not difficult to see why early Christians appropriated the Greek word "catholic" to describe the early Church. Just as the Incarnation fulfills the potential within creation for union with God, so too catholicity (as an epistemology) fulfills the mind desire for unity. We see this virtue of "catholicity" played out in the life of Jesus, shown in the way he brought people together—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—and healed them of their divisions. He preached oneness of mind and heart, centered in God, and spoke of the reign of God as a dynamic process of relatedness by which the world could move forward to a new level of unity, with God dwelling in its midst. Jesus was a "wholemaker." He directed himself to those in need of being made whole: the brokenhearted, the captives, those in darkness, the prisoners, those who were mourning and grieving, the poor, the blind, and the oppressed. He indicated that his mission is not one of abusive power but a different type of power, one of healing or making wholes through the "the Spirit of the Lord," the Spirit who anointed Jesus to reach out to those who are broken or disconnected from the fullness of life.¹⁶ We see catholicity in the early Church in the way Christians gathered around the Bishop and Eucharist, a consciousness of part of a new creation in Christ. That mindfulness of unity was compromised, however, in the Constantinian era as the battle over Arianism was bitterly fought. The inner dynamic of catholicity was compromised as wholemaking succumbed to orthodoxy.

Over the centuries, catholicity has narrowed its field of gathering power. The rise of university in the modern period followed the paradigm of Newton's world, as the rise of mechanistic structures made possible a systematic program of education. The cosmology of the modern

university reflects a mechanistic model, a Newtonian order, of interacting parts. Catholic universities have followed suit, developing along the cosmological lines of Newton's world, that is, along the lines of an established fixed order (cosmology) of mechanized and specialized parts. Individual departments, tenured faculty, and a hierarchy of positions from staff to president, comprise the parts of the university "machine." Students are encouraged to succeed in their individual studies rather than search for the wholeness of truth. Everything has its niche, its fixity of place, space, and function within the established order. If a part wears out (retires) or breaks down (tenure denied), it can be replaced with little to no disturbance of the machine's overall operation. Such a model cannot adequately embrace the inner dynamic of catholicity because there is no room for this spirit-filled epistemology to expand the mind in its desire to gather knowledge into greater wholes.

Interestingly, Newton's world held little room for God because the internal laws of the machine world were believed to be regulated according to the natural laws of time, space, and motion. God governs the world from above, but God is not necessary to the daily operations of the world. Similarly, one could make the argument that the university does not need God as the animating core of its life; rather, God is governor of the whole operation in which each part (or department) operates according to its own internal laws and demands. Instead of educating to know the universe as a web of interconnected life, consonant with contemporary Big Bang cosmology and quantum physics, education has become the study of highly specialized fields.¹⁷ Not only do students concentrate in a discipline, but they do so to the exclusion of others. The whole idea of developing human identity integral to the cosmos is subsumed in the drive for mastery and success. Elaine Ecklund notes, "movements to secularize the academy have relegated religious perspectives to the sidelines, or shut them out altogether."¹⁸

Systems thinking has changed the way we consider the relations of parts to wholes and undergirds the shift from mechanism to holism. We are beginning to see that the world is not a collection of isolated objects but a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. Whereas in the mechanistic paradigm parts are autonomous units, in the holistic, open system, a part is a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships. The properties of parts, therefore, are not intrinsic properties but understood only within the context of the larger whole. A brief comparison of mechanistic and holistic systems shows that the difference between linear and holistic thinking results in a difference of values:¹⁹

<u>Thinking</u>		<u>Values</u>	
<i>Mechanistic</i>	<i>Holistic</i>	<i>Mechanistic</i>	<i>Holistic</i>
rational	intuitive	conservation	expansion
analysis	synthesis	competition	cooperation
reductionist	integrative	quantity	quality
linear	nonlinear	domination	partnership

Although open systems now mark just about every level of biological life, the training of the mind on the level of higher education still follows the closed system paradigm.

Teilhard on Thinking and Evolution

If catholicity is a function of cosmology, as the Greeks originally conceived it, then we have some rethinking to do. Our cosmos today is not static and fixed; it does not operate on mechanistic principles. Rather, we find ourselves in a 13.8 billion-year-old universe that is large, dynamic, and interconnected. Evolution is term that best describes the ongoing development of life, from simple isolated forms to complex, self-conscious species such as our own. Evolution means that nature does not operate according to fixed laws but the dynamic interplay of law, chance, and deep time; that is, one cannot understand natural processes apart from developmental categories. Evolution is a general condition from which all theories, systems, and hypotheses must conform and which they must satisfy if they are to be thinkable and true. It is not background to the human story; it *is* the human story. What makes the world in which we live specifically modern—what distinguishes it from past worlds—is evolution, a word which now defines virtually every science as a history of systems.²⁰ Teilhard de Chardin wrote:

They truly are blind who do not see the scope of a movement whose orbit, infinitely transcending that of the natural sciences, has successively overtaken and invaded the surrounding fields of chemistry, physics, sociology, and even mathematics and history of religions. Drawn along together by a single fundamental current, one after the other all the domains of human knowledge have set off toward the study of some kind of *development* [...]. *Evolution is a general condition, which all theories, all hypotheses, all systems must submit to and satisfy from now on in order to be conceivable and true.*²¹

Teilhard saw evolution of the human person as part of the whole natural process of creativity and generativity. The human person is integrally part of evolution in that we rise from the process, but in reflecting on the process we stand apart from it, as well. He defined reflection as “the power

acquired by a consciousness of turning in on itself and taking possession of itself as an object endowed with its own particular consistency and value; no longer only to know something—but to know *itself*; no longer only to know, but to know that knows.”²² Thus the human person is “the point of emergence in nature, at which this deep cosmic evolution culminates and declares itself.”²³ The human person is the arrow of evolution.

By locating the human person as the growing tip of the cosmic evolutionary process, Teilhard saw a link between epistemology and evolution. He did not view mind apart from matter; rather, mind is the “withinness” of matter, from the beginning of evolution. Consciousness, for Teilhard, is active at all levels of reality. Thus, he considered matter and consciousness not as two substances or two different modes of existence but as two aspects of the same cosmic stuff. The within is the mental aspect and the without is the physical aspect of the same stuff; physical and psychic are co-related in the evolutionary movement of convergence and complexity.

Teilhard also held that knowledge and faith are critical to the direction evolution will take. To form the first living cell, the elements had to reach beyond their individual identity, beyond what was “given.” He asked, “Are not nature’s countless experiments all variants of a single act of faith?”²⁴ Within the inner dimension of every being there is a desire for more being; hence, on every level of existence there is yearning for greater unity or wholeness. Similarly, on the level of the human person, there is an implicit faith in ultimate wholeness, that is, for more being and life through a deepening of consciousness. Attracted by the desire to create greater wholes, the mind seeks to create new unities by reaching beyond simple recognition of the “given” of experience.

Teilhard’s epistemology is consonant with the catholicity of Murray, Lonergan, and Haughey. Teilhard warned against abstract knowledge divorced from physical reality; abstract knowledge, he claimed, is a faded reality compared to boundless presence. It forms ideas but leaves the physical world adrift. Such knowledge can only lead to fragmentation. Even among physicists, he noted, the advent of quantum physics and the non-deterministic nature of reality has led to the recognition of the primacy of thought in interpreting the shifting patterns of phenomena.²⁵ In other words, knowledge is not for oneself alone but shapes the way one participates in the evolution of self and world. Teilhard was concerned that knowledge was being sought apart from physical reality and said that true knowledge must engage all levels of reality, including physical reality, because this reality is the basis of who we are. Knowledge is essential to the ongoing process of evolution. To know is to dynamically participate in the concrete experience of reality.

The Cosmology of the Catholic University

How do we make sense of this dynamic principle of catholicity on the level of the Catholic university? To ask, “what forms a Catholic university” is to recap the insights of our Jesuit scholars. For Murray and Haughey, catholicity is epistemological. The word “catholic” does not

connote so much what a person is but what a person does. A “catholic” is one who gathers or unites. As an epistemology, it is a way of knowing by co-laboring with the Spirit of God, seeking to unify the partials of what we know into greater wholes. How do we educate for a world in evolution where we know ourselves increasingly to be part of an interconnected web of life? How do we educate to evolve toward a sustainable future of life?

The starting point for rethinking the Catholic university is awakening to the fact that we no longer live in a mechanistic universe. Ours is an evolutionary universe. Mechanisms can operate efficiently but they cannot evolve toward more being and consciousness. Teilhard relentlessly argued that Christianity is not only compatible with evolution; it is a religion of evolution.²⁶ By its very nature, it demands a new way of thinking and acting. Catholicity is an Incarnational commitment to thinking as a way of contributing to the development of life—an epistemology that evokes more being and consciousness of God at the heart of life.²⁷ This type of catholic thinking should evoke a new zest for life, a “waking up” to the presence of God who is empowering evolution towards a new future.

In light of Teilhard, I would suggest that a Catholic institution must be a system *open* to creating a new future through new relationships, consciousness, and a deepening of love. The aim of the institution is to advance knowing as a spiritual act, instilling knowledge as the contemplative dimension of being itself. In a world saturated with information, Catholic education has the capacity to transform “flatland thinking” (exponential amounts of information that flatten out interior depth) into interior thinking, where depth and the mystical dimensions of reality become integral to the knowing process. Thinking is the work not only of the human spirit but God’s Spirit. Each time the mind comprehends something it unites the world in a new way.²⁸ “To discover and know,” Teilhard wrote, “is to actually extend the universe ahead and to complete it.”²⁹ We pursue knowledge not to gain information or control life but to deepen and unify life toward the fullness of Christ.

The Catholic university, grounded in its Incarnational commitment, has the capacity to breathe new life into the educative process by inviting new ways of knowing through engagement, participation, and dialogue. Discovery of the world is ultimately self-discovery and discovery of God. The human’s evolving consciousness must be seen as integral to the physical world, and the physical world must be seen as integral to the human’s desire to know. Murray noted over fifty years ago that all knowledge moves dynamically toward an ultimate horizon, and educators must foster that movement. Knowledge must be both deep and wide, a dynamic spirit of engagement that undergirds the richness of diverse disciplines and worldviews. One sees deeply into a truth when one sees it in relationship to other truths, in all its premises and conclusions, in all its applications to life. A deep knowledge, therefore, is nourished by fact and structured into a system of knowledge.³⁰

This type of integrative knowledge does not dismiss specializations within disciplines but calls for less bounded disciplines and more integration via dialogue across disciplines. It also calls for a new vision of education where prayer and meditation are enfolded into the core curriculum so that the mind can focus on the priorities of wisdom. In an information-saturated age, we are losing the capacity to think and thus the capacity to unify. Teilhard believed that Christianity could evolve the world towards a new humanity, a new unity, and a new future in God. What better place to begin this evolution than on the level of Catholic education?

Notes

1. Garcia 2012, 893.
2. Murray 1949, 40.
3. Murray 1994, 124; Garcia 2012, 892.
4. Garcia 2012, 895.
5. Murray 1994, 124. Murray was clear that Catholic higher education is to be based on the doctrine of the Incarnation.
6. Ignatius 1900.
7. Haughey 2010, 40.
8. Ong 1990, 347.
9. Contemporary neuroscience is revealing a new understanding of mind that includes the emotions and environment. For a current scientific understanding of mind, see Gazzaniga, Ivry, and Mangun 2002; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991; Damasio 1995; Damasio 1999.
10. Haughey 2010, 42.
11. Jonah Lehrer notes that too much information can actually interfere with understanding in Lehrer 2009, 164.
12. Haughey 2010, 44–46.
13. Brague 2003, 101.

14. Ibid., 105.
15. Ibid., 121.
16. See Delio 2011a, 64–9; Haughey 2010, 47–49.
17. Einstein’s theory of relativity changed our understanding of space and time. Today, cosmologists indicate that the universe came into being about 13.8 billion years ago, rapidly inflated, and subsequently began cooling, marked by expansion. For a discussion of Big Bang cosmology, see Frank 2009, 146; Singh 2004, 120–128.
18. Ecklund 2010; Delio 2011b, 16.
19. Capra 1996, 10.
20. For a broad discussion on evolution and its use in non-scientific areas, see Phipps 2012.
21. Teilhard de Chardin 1999, 152; italics added.
22. Ibid., 110.
23. Teilhard de Chardin 1969, 23. Teilhard’s position on human evolution put him at odds with Church teaching, primarily because he rejected the idea of original sin in light of evolution. The Church has taken a moderate position on evolution, accepting it as a plausible explanation for the physical body, but maintaining that the soul is created immediately by God. In his 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis*, Pope Pius XII wrote: “The Teaching Authority of the Church does not forbid that, in conformity with the present state of human sciences and sacred theology, research and discussions, on the part of men experienced in both fields, take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution, in as far as it inquires into the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter—for the *Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God*” (emphasis added). See Pope Pius XII 1950, §36.
24. Teilhard de Chardin 1964, 179.
25. Ibid., 5.
26. Teilhard de Chardin 2002, 207–208.
27. Haught 2008.
28. King 1981, 36.
29. Ibid., 35.

30. Garcia 2012, 896.

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