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What is the Catholic Intellectual Tradition?

Cover Page Footnote

This paper was presented on December 2, 1992 at a Sacred Heart University faculty dinner and discussion of the Catholic identity of the University.

RICHARD GRIGG

*What is the Catholic Intellectual Tradition?**

Our university has begun to take up in earnest the question of just what it means to be a Roman Catholic college or university. Of course it would be a mistake to suppose that a definitive answer to this question will ever be found. Rather, given the very notion of a university, one ought to expect ongoing inquiry, conversation, and debate. But in order for a debate to take place, suggestions do have to be put forth as to what it *might* mean to talk about a Catholic university. One such suggestion is that a Catholic university passes on – or perhaps, more strongly, develops – the Catholic intellectual tradition. The obvious next question is, “What, then, is the Catholic intellectual tradition?” I would like to briefly sketch one possible answer to this question, and explore its implications for how we understand the nature of the Catholic university. I hope that what I have to say will stimulate some discussion and debate. That is, after all, the point of this gathering.

What distinguishes the Catholic intellectual heritage from the larger intellectual heritage of the West? It would seem reasonable to approach this question by first specifying the essence of Catholicism. Yet that is a problematic venture. There are those, for example, who, adapting insights of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, would contend that a venerable and vast tradition such as Catholicism cannot be reduced to some single essence. The various beliefs and practices that we call “Catholic” do not, they would argue, necessarily all have some common core. Instead, there are overlapping “family resemblances” that allow us to identify each of these beliefs and practices as somehow Catholic, in the same way that I might be able to say that each member of the Smith family looks like a Smith, even though there is no single quality that all of the Smiths share. But despite this Wittgensteinian

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warning, I am going to take a shot at specifying the essence of Catholicism, bolstered by the example of Rabbi Hillel, a crucial figure

in the development of classical Judaism, who in response to a challenge succeeded in describing the essence of Judaism while standing on one foot.

Numerous commentators have noted that Catholicism might well be defined in terms of what has been called the "Incarnational Principle." The center-point of human history is for Catholicism, as for all Christians, the incarnation of God in the man Jesus of Nazareth. But there is a sense in which Catholics put more emphasis upon the Incarnation than do their fellow Christians. For Catholics, the significance of the Incarnation extends both back and forward in time: back to the creation of the human species, and forward to the Church and its ongoing history. The Church is understood in Catholicism not simply as an accidental gathering of like-minded individuals who wish to support one another in the religious quest, but as the continuation of the Incarnation, the "development of Christ in time" as the nineteenth-century Catholic theologian Johann Adam Möhler would have it. The Church is the very presence of the risen Christ on earth, the "body of Christ" according to the New Testament. The Church itself is sacrament, then, and it makes the divine present through the seven specific sacraments that it celebrates. This sacramental emphasis distinguishes Catholicism from both Judaism and Protestantism (though somewhat less from Eastern Orthodox Christianity). Some sociologists have gone so far as to argue that Judaism and Protestantism are by their very nature secularizing, in that they emphasize the divine transcendence at the expense of divine immanence. The fear of idolatry that animates both Judaism and Protestantism ends up contributing to what Max Weber called the "disenchantment of the world." I suspect that Jewish and Protestant thinkers might have something to say on this matter, but my point here is simply to emphasize that the Catholic dynamic is to continually "re-enchant" or "re-sacralize" the world.

It seems to me that this sacramental emphasis in Catholicism has implications both on the level of what can be called a general philosophical anthropology and on the level of specific evaluations of reason and the intellectual life. By briefly investigating both of these levels, we can begin to zero in on the Catholic intellectual tradition and its implications for the Catholic university.

The notion of a general anthropology based on Catholic

incarnationalism takes us back, quite literally, to the beginning: the book of Genesis tells Jews and Christians that God created human beings in God's own image. For some like John Calvin, this image was seriously undermined shortly after Creation; the Fall into sin so distorted the image of God in man and woman that it was scarcely perceptible afterwards. But Catholicism has tended to take a different view, for Catholics have seen the Incarnation of God in Christ as more than simply an extraordinary act of divine intervention to save a species that the Fall rendered, in the Calvinist phrase, "totally depraved." It is true enough, says the Catholic tradition, that Christ must atone for human sin and counter the Fall. But as the guarantor of the image of God in man and woman, Christ is also the Second Adam, the one who shows us our deepest nature. The exceedingly influential twentieth-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner goes so far as to say that, "When God chooses to be what is not God, man comes to be." Humanity is God in God's otherness.

This incarnational take on anthropology is put more artistically by the great Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who, incidentally, is one of the first truly modern poets. In an untitled work, he writes,

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –
Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

A distinctive Catholic interpretation of what it means to be a human being begins to come into focus here. While Friedrich Nietzsche held that the very notion of God degrades the human condition – it was Nietzsche who asked, "If there were gods, how could I stand not to be a god?" – Catholicism holds that humanity is exalted by its connection with divinity. Human beings are defined by what might be called a divine dignity. In many ways this goes against the grain of modern speculations about the human condition. Note Freud's claim, for example, that his psychoanalysis has delivered, along with the work of Copernicus and Darwin, what he calls a "wounding blow" to "human megalomania." Thanks to psycho-analysis, says Freud, we

must now recognize that we are not master even in our own home; that is, our own psyche is under the influence of unconscious urges, many of them inherently antisocial. The Catholic perspective seems to be the antithesis of the Freudian one.

What does this distinctively Catholic anthropology mean for the Catholic university? How does a university embrace the notion of human dignity implied by Catholic incarnationalism? Most obviously, I would think, by striving for a sense of ethical responsibility toward one's fellow human beings commensurate with their God-given dignity. The university ought to show toward its students, and seek to inculcate in them, this sense of responsibility. This might mean, as some have suggested, asking students to engage in public service as part of their experience at a Catholic university. But what about course content? Are there implications here too? On the one hand, I would expect a Catholic university to offer courses in religion and philosophy that explain and explore this Catholic anthropology and the ethical imperatives that flow from it. But, on the other hand, I cannot imagine a Catholic university prescribing or proscribing the content of courses in other disciplines based on Catholic anthropology. The Catholic university must, after all, be distinguished from the Catholic community of worship. While the former is a creation of the latter, one of the commitments the Church makes in founding a university is to respect the nature of such an institution. This too is an ethical matter. It would be a violation of this commitment if, for instance, one were to forbid a psychology department from offering courses on Freud because Freud's anthropology clashes with that of Catholicism. The commitment to found a university entails a commitment to the idea of free inquiry that defines the very notion of the university. As a result, the Catholic university must, it seems to me, allow for the possibility not only that courses on Freud will be offered, but that they might be taught from the Freudian point of view.

All of this is consistent with the position staked out by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. He explains that "Every Catholic university, as a university, is an academic community which, in a rigorous and critical fashion, assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through research, teaching and various

services offered to the local, national and international communities. It possesses that institutional autonomy necessary to perform its functions effectively and guarantees its members academic freedom, so long as the rights of the individual person and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good." The Pope goes on to say that academic freedom means that teachers and researchers "may search for the truth wherever analysis and evidence lead them, and may teach and publish the results of this search."

The discussion of academic freedom moves us to the second level that I want to consider, viz., the more specific notion of reason and the role of the intellect in Catholicism. Here we discover that a Catholic university's commitment to academic freedom can flow not just from the ethical responsibility that comes with opting to found a university, but from Catholicism's notion that reason is a gift of God that, if properly used, cannot conflict with the truths attained by faith.

At this point, we must turn to the work of the paradigmatic Catholic theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas, the "Angelic Doctor." Thomas' theology was awarded a preeminent place in Catholic orthodoxy by Leo XIII in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris* in 1879, and it had already informed the decisions of the First Vatican Council a few years earlier, thanks to the influence of important nineteenth-century Neo-Thomists such as Joseph Kleutgen. According to the classic Catholic position articulated by Vatican I, Christian faith ought not be conceived as a blind leap. Rather, reason provides the basis for the act of faith. After all, there are many possible objects of faith. How do I know in which to put my trust? Through reason, is the Thomistic, Catholic answer. Once reason has provided the avenue to faith, faith will provide access to truths inaccessible to reason by itself. But faith can never be divorced from reason or, even less, played off against it. For reason, when properly employed, can never contradict what God makes evident to faith.

Here again we find ourselves in the presence of something distinctively Catholic. The Church wishes to steer a course between the extremes of rationalism and fideism. Rationalism holds that reason is able to provide all that we need to know about the divine. The Church has not hesitated to condemn modern theologians for relying too much on reason. Witness the case of Georg Hermes, who

attempted to fashion a Catholic theology on the model of Immanuel Kant's philosophy.

In contrast to rationalism, fideism assumes that reason is unnecessary or even inimical to faith, so that the act of faith is independent of reason, a "movement by virtue of the absurd," as Søren Kierkegaard, the great Danish Protestant thinker, put it. There is, of course, a fideistic tendency to be found in the origins of Protestantism, especially in the thought of Martin Luther. Luther, whom one could never accuse of mincing words, referred to reason as the "whore of the devil," and held that no discipline was more contrary to theology than mathematics. Theology for Luther is not a rational, deductive undertaking; it may entail abandoning some of the most basic canons of ordinary logic and rationality. This is not to say, of course, that all Protestant theology is irrationalist in character. While some twentieth-century Protestant thinkers such as Karl Barth are obviously Luther's (and Calvin's) progeny here, others, such as Paul Tillich and the contemporary process theologians, would probably be deemed by the Vatican to have fallen into the error of rationalism.

Be this as it may, the Catholic position is clear, and it has potentially profound consequences for the notion of the Catholic university. If reason is trustworthy and cannot conflict with faith, then reason can indeed be allowed, in the words of John Paul II quoted earlier, to "search for the truth wherever analysis and evidence lead." Academic freedom can be grounded in the Catholic commitment to reason. And note, by the way, that this commitment to reason follows from the more general tenets of a Roman Catholic anthropology that I outlined above: reason is part of the image of God in the human species. As such, it is a good to be relied on. It can open for us not only neutral facts about ourselves and the universe in which we live, but can, according to the Catholic "natural law" tradition, uncover the basic principles of morality to which all human beings are beholden.

This leads me, by way of conclusion, to an opinion about the greatest danger presently facing the Catholic tradition and by extension the Catholic university. There seems to me little danger that Catholicism will capitulate to a thoroughgoing rationalism; if I were a Catholic, I would not lose sleep over the possibility that the Pope and the College of Bishops might suddenly renounce centuries of the

Church's teaching and embrace some sort of secular reductionism. The more realistic danger, it seems to me, especially in this country, is that Catholicism might succumb to the siren song of Protestant fundamentalism with its fideistic rejection of reason. For example, I have turned on the Catholic Cable Network and found, to my amazement, Pat Robertson's "700 Club." This is Pat Robertson the TV evangelist and sometime presidential candidate who claims to have prayed Hurricane Gloria off the coast of his own Virginia, whereupon it went slamming into New England. This might be a fitting metaphor for the destructive power Protestant fundamentalism would wield if unleashed within the Catholic tradition: if fundamentalism were to triumph within Catholicism, it would destroy the synthesis of faith with reason that has been part of the very essence of Catholicism, and it would render the expression "Catholic university" a contradiction in terms.