John Lancaster Spalding:  
Prelate and Philosopher  
of Catholic Education  

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Religion is judged by its influence on faith and conduct, on hope and love, on righteousness and life—by the education it gives.

—John Lancaster Spalding (1905, 129)

No single bishop in the history of the American Catholic hierarchy has commanded the respect and attention of scholars in the area of religious education as much as John Lancaster Spalding (1840-1919), first bishop of Peoria, Illinois. While written essays and lectures give the reader of history a record of his philosophy of education, he was no mere theorist. Through the decades of his religious life which spanned the years between the Civil and First World Wars, Spalding collaborated on the production of the Baltimore Catechism (1885), was instrumental in the founding of the Catholic University of America, heralded women’s education, edited textbook series, and modeled the pedagogies he extolled in his writings. While falling short of developing a systematic philosophical treatment of education, Spalding nevertheless stressed the importance of religious education and the roles of family, church, state, and school in the development of Christian moral values throughout his long career (De Hovre 1934, 173).

Following a brief biography, this chapter examines the philosophical underpinnings of Spalding’s writings on education and concludes with the identification of his major contributions to Catholic religious education in this country. The case for the singularity of this bishop’s concern for Catholic education in the
United States is its core focus. The author is indebted to many fine historians who have built up a substantial body of work on this giant of the American Catholic Church. Included in this group of scholars are John Tracy Ellis, Merle Curti, and Franz Hovre, as well as several scholars who have done dissertation studies on the life, educational theory, and social ideas of Spalding. In 1961, in the Gabriel Richard Lecture to the National Catholic Education Association, John Tracy Ellis said:

Both by the spoken and written word, employed over a period of forty years, John Lancaster Spalding earned the distinction of having made the most significant contribution to education of any single member of the American Catholic community, as well as having won an honored place in the general educational picture of the United States of his time. (1961, 50)

The Spaldings and American Catholicism

The Spalding and Lancaster families arrived in the United States around 1650, having left England most likely as a result of the persecution of Catholics in England at the time. The Lancaster family traced its roots to Edward III of England (Schroll 1944, xv). Both families resided in the Maryland colony and both families, some two hundred years later, moved west to Kentucky as part of the Maryland Colonization League. Kentucky, in the vision of these early Catholic pioneers, was to be “the cradle of Catholicity in the West” (Schroll 1944, 27). In 1839, John’s father, Richard Martin Spalding, a landowner and politician, married Mary Jane Lancaster and together they raised a large family. John, the eldest, was born in Lebanon, Kentucky, on June 2, 1840. Young John was privileged to be a member of such an old and well-established American Catholic family. The Spalding family’s long-time residency was a rarity amid the large number of foreign-born priests in this country at the time.

The education of John Lancaster Spalding was overseen first by his mother and later by his uncle on his father’s side, Bishop Martin John Spalding of Louisville. Mary Jane Lancaster Spalding schooled young “Lank” until he was twelve years of age. For a woman of that time, she was well educated. An early graduate of Loretto Academy, her academic
achievements attest to her gift of remarkable intelligence. Throughout her life, she held education as one of life's highest values. Mary Jane Spalding taught John that “the purpose of human life is to know truth, to love goodness, to do right, that so, having made ourselves god-like, we may be forever be with God” (Spalding 1890, 151). John Lancaster Spalding attributed his love of things of the mind to his upbringing and later scholars would give credit for his advocacy of women's education to Mary Jane Spalding’s influence (Schroll, xvi).

Spalding attended St. Mary’s College in Lebanon, Kentucky (a secondary school in today’s terms) and later Mount St. Mary’s College, a petit séminaire, in Emmitsburg, Maryland (Sweeney 1965, 37). In 1858, he transferred to Mount St. Mary’s of the West in Cincinnati, Ohio. Spalding later graduated from Mount St. Mary’s of the West as the class valedictorian.

The sharp and intelligent mind of young Spalding was channeled early into the arts of debate and rhetoric and it was evident that he would excel at oration. It is not known at exactly what point he determined to study for the priesthood, but it was largely his admiration for his uncle Martin Spalding and his observations of the clerical lifestyle that led him to become a candidate for the diocese of Louisville (Sweeney, 43). In the fall of 1859, following the advice and arrangements of his uncle, Spalding sailed for the American College of the Immaculate Conception in Louvain, Belgium. Martin Spalding had been influential in the founding of the American College in Louvain and it must be noted that it later served as a model in the vision of both the uncle and his nephew for an American Catholic university. John Lancaster Spalding exhibited an exceptional intellect and was soon enrolled in the more advanced courses of study at the Catholic University of Louvain.

In the summer of 1862, while still studying in Europe, John Lancaster Spalding had occasion to attend a meeting of the Catholic Union at Aix-la-Chapelle (Sweeney 1965, 53-54). The Catholic Union was an assembly of lay social groups that had been forming since 1848 throughout the German states. These groups of church and national leaders gathered to discuss issues of Catholic concern: “Side by side with the cardinals, bishops, princes, and the learned professors there sat mechanics, carpenters, shoemakers” (Sweeney 1965, 53). Spalding observed that the assembly gathered together there “in active thought
and cooperation for the furtherance of definite and religious social ends. The brotherhood of the race was there . . . and one felt the breathing of a divine Spirit” (Spalding 1877, 246). This was European Social Catholicism in practice and Spalding was getting an early dose of it. He saw in the Catholic congress at Aix-la-Chapelle an organizational model for the American Catholic Church, one allowing for the cooperation of all social groups. He wrote:

If we wish to be true to the great mission which God has given us, the time has come when American Catholics must take up the works which do not specially concern any one diocese more than another, but whose significance will be as wide as the nation’s life. (Spalding 1877, 247-48)

The stirrings of a vision of a national Church actively and publicly engaged in social issues excited the mind of John Lancaster Spalding as a young man studying for the priesthood in the climate of European Social Catholicism.

Spalding earned bachelor and master degrees in sacred theology and was ordained into the priesthood in 1863. Spalding was in Europe at the time of the issuance of Pius IX’s Syllabus of Errors (1864). Spalding had little to say against it at the time but years later, in a somewhat dramatic shift, he came to see that there was little way to avoid the onset of modernity and so there should be “a rapprochement between American Catholicism and the spirit of the age (Sweeney 1965, 67).

After some travel in Germany and a brief period of studying canon law in Rome, Spalding was given a prophetic mission by Father De Néve of the American College of the Immaculate Conception at Louvain. Father De Néve proposed that the young priest consecrate his first years of service to African-Americans who suffered from enslavement and oppression in America. Upon returning to Louisville in 1865, Spalding realized that the growing population of newly emancipated slaves was in need of pastoral assistance. Insisting on the need for a separate parish of their own, Spalding believed that, with persistence, the funds might be found so that this increasing Catholic population might be kept within the fold. In 1870, St. Augustine’s parish and school was dedicated and Spalding, its young pastor, lived
happily and simply for a time among the parish members. The parish remains vibrant today (Sweeney 1965, 69).

Father Spalding’s early years of priesthood signaled to his peers that he would be a force to be reckoned with in the American Catholic Church. His oratory and writing skills quickly gained him recognition. In 1866, at only twenty-six years of age, Spalding was chosen to accompany Bishop Blanchet of Oregon to the Second Plenary Council in Baltimore as his theologian (Schroll, xvii). Spalding’s biographer, David Sweeney, writes that Spalding’s address to the Council, entitled “The Visible Head of the Church,” acknowledged Christ’s choice of Peter to preserve and teach the faith, but that “it was the privilege of the Church, notwithstanding her immutable constitution, to adapt herself, without harm to her unity and catholicity, to the various modifications of human society” (1965, 79). The Church in the United States was not different from the Church of Europe, but the context in which it existed was different enough to warrant variances. As Sweeney notes, this predates any discussion of “Americanism,” but foreshadows Spalding’s reaction to the apostolic letter of Leo XIII, Testem benevolentiae in 1899.

After the death of his uncle, Archbishop Martin Spalding of Baltimore, in 1872, Spalding was invited by Isaac Hecker to the New York Paulist residence to write the archbishop’s biography in his stead. In little over a year the work was completed and was hailed by Orestes Brownson as one of the finest American examples of the biographical literary genre ever written (Sweeney 1965, 95).

The years in New York afforded Spalding opportunities to develop his speaking skills as well as his knowledge of the Catholic educational system. He came to see that public schools were necessary for building up a responsible citizenship in a democratic setting, but that, lacking a religious component, they were destined to produce nothing more than “improved machines.” Without compromise, he upheld religious education as indispensable for the development of virtue and for the realization of the only complete life—a life in God (Curti 1935, 356). While in New York, young Spalding became more involved in issues of school and education. The Depression of 1877 led to his involvement in the Irish Colonization Association, a group that sought to help Irish families leave the destitution of overcrowded cities to find land to farm in rural areas. That same year, when Father Michael Hurley, pastor of
St. Patrick’s Parish in Peoria, declined to accept appointment as first bishop of the new diocese of Peoria, John Lancaster Spalding was nominated. After some initial concern in the Vatican about his orthodoxy, Spalding was appointed and he accepted “in spite of an apparent reluctance to shoulder the burdens of the episcopacy” (Sweeney 1965, 107).

Among the key issues that captured Spalding’s energy and attention during the 1880s and 1890s were the development of the *Baltimore Catechism*, the founding of the Catholic University of America (1888), the Catholic school questions, the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893), and the Americanist controversy.

The Third Plenary Council of Baltimore (1884) gave major impetus to the eminent role Spalding came to play in Catholic education in the United States. The issue of a national catechism that would give unity to the presentation of the faith was of great concern to many bishops and Spalding was appointed to the Council committee to address the matter. The move to develop a national catechism was quickly approved and a draft prepared by Monsignor Janarius De Concilio of St. Michael’s in Newark, New Jersey, was presented to the Council just eight days later (Mongoven 2000, 40-42). The Council closed on December 7, 1884, and Spalding was left with the task of collecting suggested revisions from the archbishops in order to expedite the publication of the catechism. He was anxious to complete the work and did so in less than a year. Sweeney described the outcome:

> While it is a tribute to the bishops of the commission, and especially Bishop Spalding, that within six months after the end of the Council there appeared the first edition of the *Baltimore Catechism*, the bishop of Peoria was undoubtedly relieved, as he said, to get the work off his hands so that he might devote his time and energies to what would be a more difficult task, namely the making of a Catholic university a reality. (Sweeney 1965, 175-76)

There is some evidence that the revised catechism was prematurely submitted for publication before all the archbishops had time to respond. Anne Marie Mongoven wrote: “Spalding, a dynamic and self-confident man, did not follow the recommended procedures” (41).
Foreseeing long discussion and argument among the archbishops, Spalding submitted the catechism to John Cardinal McClosky for his imprimatur and shortly thereafter James Cardinal Gibbons gave the text his approval. Mongoven described the results:

The *Baltimore Catechism* was a small book, seventy-two pages, with 421 questions in thirty-seven chapters. It was not universally well received when it was first published. An anonymous critic writing in *Pastoral Blatt*, a monthly periodical from St. Louis, found the work to be pedagogically unsuitable and theologically inadequate. . . . While the *Baltimore Catechism* was endorsed in some dioceses, from its beginning it encountered serious resistance from both instructors and bishops. (Mongoven 2000, 41-42)

Whether or not Bishop Spalding can be blamed for the inadequacies of the catechism remains unclear. Monsignor De Concilio, another author to which the writing has been attributed, was a respected scholar and a former professor of theology at Seton Hall’s Immaculate Conception Seminary (Mahwah, NJ). Spalding made what he thought were the necessary changes. To many minds, the text was theologically flawed. Nevertheless, the *Baltimore Catechism* would be the primary sourcebook for Catholic religious instruction for decades to come with little or no revision occurring until 1941. As noted, one possible, and most likely the primary reason for Spalding’s haste in getting the catechism published was his desire to begin work on the task closest to his heart: the development of a Catholic university on American soil. Years before, Spalding and his uncle Martin had discussed the possibility of establishing in this country a national university along the lines of the American College of the Immaculate Conception in Louvain, Belgium. The younger Spalding thought seminary training of the time narrow and limited to preparation for professional practice. He held that priests who are zealous, earnest, self-sacrificing, who to piety join discretion and good sense, rarely possess the intellectual culture of which I am speaking, for the simple reason that a university and not a seminary is the school in which this kind
of education is received. That the absence of such trained intellects is a most serious obstacle of the progress of the Catholic faith, no thoughtful man will doubt or deny. . . . (Spalding 1895, 214-16)

At the time of the Third Plenary Council, James Cardinal Gibbons invited Spalding to speak on the need for higher education of the clergy and the need for an American Catholic university. Oddly, Spalding asked to be excused, only to later change his mind. Mary Gwendolen Caldwell declared her intention to donate a large amount of a personal inheritance for such a university project, thus bringing hope to a long held dream. Much debate ensued over issues of financing, where to locate such a university, and how much control the twenty-one years old Miss Caldwell might exercise. Approval for a “higher seminary” came just as the Council was coming to a close, “but the seed that was planted in 1884 is today the university of which Spalding had dreamed (Sweeney 1965, 170). While Miss Caldwell stipulated that she be named foundress, Spalding is widely credited for his zealous efforts in establishing the Catholic University of America. James Cardinal Gibbons stated:

All great works have their inception in the brain of some great thinker. God gave such a brain, such a man, in Bishop Spalding. With his wonderful intuitionary power, he took in all the meaning of the present and the future Church in America. If the Catholic University is today an accomplished fact, we are indebted for its existence in our generation, in no small measure, to the persuasive eloquence and convincing arguments of the Bishop of Peoria. (Gibbons 1916, 195)

Years later, John Tracy Ellis heralded Spalding’s accomplishments:

The Catholic University of America will, indeed, always remain the principal monument to Spalding’s memory as an educator. . . . Both by the spoken and written word, employed over a period of forty years, John Lancaster Spalding earned the distinction of having made the most significant contribution to education of any single member of the
American Catholic community, as well as having won an honored place in the general educational picture of the United States of his time. (Ellis 1961, 50)

In 1892 Spalding was appointed to oversee the Catholic educational exhibit at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which was ultimately successful in making public the practical and philosophical contributions of the nation’s Catholic school system and its zealous pursuit of Christian education. In an article written for the Catholic World about the upcoming Catholic exhibit, Spalding stated that there could be no compromise: “The Catholic Church is irrevocably committed to the doctrine that education is essentially religious, that purely secular schools give instruction, but do not properly educate” (Spalding 1892a, 4). The article proposed a religious education congress of Catholic schoolteachers to stimulate learning and discussion in the science of pedagogy. Spalding also hoped the educationally-based exhibition would lead to the development of a journal of Catholic education. He asked:

What more interesting subject is there than education? It is a question of life, of religion of country; it is a question of science and art; it is a question of politics, of progress, of civilization; it is a question even of commerce, of production of wealth. What could be more instructive than a series of articles on the history of education, on the great teachers and educational reformers, on pedagogics as a science and as an art; on educational methods; on the bearing of psychology upon questions of education; on hygiene in its relation to the health of teachers and pupils; on the educational values of the various branches of knowledge; on personal influence as a factor in education; on the best means of forming true religious character? (1892a, 8)

Spalding’s work in bringing about this exhibit cannot be stressed enough. Speaking at Spalding’s Golden Jubilee ceremonies, Archbishop Glennon of St. Louis remarked that the “exposition gave an opportunity for his genius with the result that America was made to realize that there were millions who believed in and were prepared to defend the platform of Christian education” (Ceremonies, 16).
The 1890s were years of major educational controversies between public and parochial school systems and Spalding never shied away from stating his views. While state schools had their place, any school that excluded religion, being less than holistic in its approach to the students, was inferior. Spalding, whose rhetoric was less inflammatory than some of the other Catholic voices, recognized both school systems would inevitably have to exist side by side. American Catholics should, he believed, recognize the freedom inherent in this great country’s founding and acknowledge the universal right of all people to a religion and an education of their choice. The focus and energy should be on improving methodologies and teacher training, not in arguing over what seemed to him the inevitable problems (Sweeney 1965, 203). In addition to the suspicions of the general American public concerning the rising numbers of Catholics and Catholic schools, the Holy See’s plan to send a permanent apostolic delegate to the United States fanned the flames of anti-Catholicism. Spalding strongly opposed Leo XIII’s proposal:

This opposition arises from the fixed and strongly-rooted desire, which exists throughout the whole English-speaking world to manage as far as possible one’s own affairs. . . . Catholics who live here, and who, wherever they were born, are true American citizens, feel the impulse of this desire and wish to manage as far as possible their own affairs. They are devoted to the Church; they recognize in the Pope Christ’s Vicar, and gladly receive from him the doctrines of faith and morals; but for the rest, they ask him to interfere as little as may be. (1892b)

Spalding made significant contributions to the development of Catholic social thought during the years of his service. Involved deeply in causes of anti-racism, anti-sexism, immigration, and labor disputes, Spalding served as a role model to others, including a young priest named John Ryan, who later became the premier writer and spokesperson on social justice for the Catholic Church. Ryan considered Spalding “undoubtedly the greatest literary artist in the entire history of the American hierarchy” and acknowledged that the Bishop of Peoria had “a greater influence upon my general philosophy
of life, my ideals, my sense of comparative values than any other contemporary writer” (Ryan 1941, 28).

Keenly aware of the plight of all immigrants, Spalding was chosen to preside over the Board of Directors of the Irish Catholic Colonization Association in 1879, a position he held until the dissolution of the agency (Sweeney 1965, 120-21). In 1880, Spalding wrote *The Religious Mission of the Irish People and Catholic Colonization*.

Spalding became embroiled in the tense debate concerning Americanism, which cautioned against making concessions with regard to faith, doctrine, and ways of living with other religions or governments, especially the American democracy experiment. In March of 1900, just nine-months following Leo XIII’s condemnation of the ideas tabbed as the “heresy of Americanism,” Spalding gave a sermon in Rome that came to be called the Gesú discourse on the topic of “Education and the Future of Religion.” Spalding pleaded for intellectual freedom and made his case for the necessity of addressing the science and culture of the times. John Tracy Ellis wrote that this sermon was

his most notable pulpit performance. Delivered at a time when the memory of all informed men was still alive with the subject of Americanism, it constituted a bold challenge to those who seemed determined to find doctrinal errancy among American Catholics. . . . The leading Protestant weekly of the United States made it the subject of an enthusiastic editorial in which it was said, “For the intelligence, courage and sound Americanism of this admirable sermon Catholics and Protestants may be equally grateful. Such a leader, who is scholar, theologian and poet, is an honor to his Church. (1961, 79)

European modernists and liberal bishops in the United States hailed Spalding for his firm stance against any who would claim as heresy any of the actual practices of the American Catholic Church.

The twentieth century marked a decline in the Bishop of Peoria’s health. Shifts in episcopal assignments in major U.S. dioceses meant political maneuvering for Spalding. Considered for the dioceses of Milwaukee, San Francisco, and Chicago, he preferred to remain in
Peoria. What energy Spalding did have went into the building of The Spalding Institute, a secondary school for young men of his diocese and serving at the request of Theodore Roosevelt on the Strike Council for the anthracite coal crisis of 1902. He remained active in speaking and fund-raising on behalf of the Catholic University of America. His ideas would encourage Father Thomas E. Shields to establish the Sisters College of the Catholic University of America (Ellis 1961, 81-82).

Spalding said in 1905 of the stroke that left him partially paralyzed and considerably weakened, “I was intoxicated with work and God saw it and struck me down” (Sweeney 1965, 343). His remaining years were spent in such a state of ill health that in 1908 he was forced to resign as bishop of Peoria. Old rumors about his support of the heresy of Americanism threatened to be exposed and those who knew and respected Spalding sought to protect him from “further harassment and humiliation” (Sweeney 1965, 351). He was elevated to the rank of titular Archbishop of Scythopolis and moved into a home overlooking Peoria built for him by the priests of the diocese. In 1913, Spalding managed with some assistance to preside over his golden sacerdotal jubilee mass where he was addressed as “the prophet of Catholic higher education” (Sweeney 1965, 368). He died shortly thereafter on August 25, 1916, at the age of 76.

Spalding’s biographer, David Sweeney, O.F.M., wrote:

Because of Spalding, education in the United States, and particularly higher education, was changed forever, and for the best. He was, by determination, if not explicitly, a champion of the religious and political pluralism so cherished in our day, and a staunch advocate of intellectual freedom. (1965, 373)

Archbishop John J. Glennon spoke these words at Spalding’s funeral:

I need not recount for you what Archbishop Spalding has done for the cause of Christian education. How he has sought to unify and strengthen the parochial school system, to bring it from the narrow confines of race or language to the broad platform of Christian teaching; how a national exposition gave an opportunity for his genius, with the result that America
was made to realize that there were millions who believed in, and were prepared to defend the platform of Christian education. (Cosgrove 1960, 107)

The philosophy underpinning Spalding’s understanding of education is neither comprehensive nor is it systematic. It may be pieced together from his writings and public addresses. As time went on, education became increasingly pervasive in his thought. The next section addresses key elements of Spalding’s philosophy of education.

The Divine Impulse and the Human Pursuit of Truth

The philosophy of education put forth by John Lancaster Spalding has been characterized as a unique combination of German idealism and American progressivism (Barger 1976, 37) with some discernable influences of the dominant philosophy of education of his early school years, scholasticism. The ultimate end of all humankind’s educational pursuits was an eternal life lived out with the divine. This life, however, was to be lived in this world through engagement with all of creation, including cultural development and scientific discoveries. In 1863, as a young man studying in Louvain, Spalding wrote to his uncle, Bishop Martin Spalding: “You would almost say that I am German, I am so mysteriously and deeply philosophical” (Cosgrove 1960, 41).

The eclectic nature of the young priest’s views did not go unnoticed and there is evidence that he earned a reputation “at the Roman Curia for being a man of ‘liberal’ views” (Ellis 1961, 45). Robert Barger wrote that “although [Spalding] was educated in the Neo-Scholastic tradition at he University of Louvain, he did not share the emphasis on truth and the intellect that is the heritage of Aristotle and Aquinas” (1976, 38). Spalding’s oft-spoken views on progress included comments on Aquinas as part of a “vague and incomplete . . . medieval scheme of education” (Spalding 1890, 196). Yet, paradoxically Spalding also identified with Aquinas as one who was, like himself, willing to speak against the conventions of his time. Though Spalding was an accomplished historian of education, he was
not inclined to glorify the Middle Ages as a golden era for the Church. Rather he saw it as a “privilege to live at a time when knowledge is increasing more rapidly even than population and wealth” and that scholars should endeavor to “keep pace with the onward movement of the mind” (Spalding 1890, 196). He continued, “To turn away from this outburst of splendor and power; to look back to pagan civilization or Christian barbarism—is to love darkness more than light” (196).

Spalding’s strong belief in progress and the ascent of the mind toward the divine were hallmarks of a philosophy of education that predated the progressive educational thought of John Dewey by some twelve years. In “Progressive Education and Bishop Spalding,” Edward J. Power compares Spalding’s educational perspectives with those of Dewey and the progressives and finds that on points of progress, life and growth, nature, self-activity, and sociality Spalding anticipated all that would be said (Powers 1953, 673). The primary distinction that Spalding made was the idea that the human person was more than a social animal (the naturalist position). For Spalding, the human person was the jewel of God’s created universe and moral character, love, and will were as important, if not more so, than the pursuit of truth and intellectual activity (Barger 1976, 38). Reason and the intellect, God’s great gifts to humankind, must be used in the service of living the moral life. Spalding reflected:

We get nearer to the heart of being when we act rightly than when we speculate acutely. The chief value of the study of philosophy lies in the exercise it gives the mind, which, when made strong and luminous, is best put to use, not in metaphysical inquiry, but in directing life to moral ends. (1901a, 65)

Wisdom is in the service of the will, which is oriented by it to the practice of virtue and moral rectitude. But for the scholar, Spalding held education and the things of the mind as the sublime and most delightful of pursuits. “All things have an educational value” (1901b, 173) and Bishop Spalding believed one of the greatest values of education is that it is the corrector of inequality in human beings. In education, the end is the “idea of human perfection” (1901b, 89).
The following sections address three salient characteristics of Spalding’s philosophy of education as culled from lectures, essays, and articles. The end of education is to prepare oneself “to bow before the sovereignty of God, to seek His paternal guidance, to acknowledge His supreme authority, to humble oneself in His presence as becometh a creature, to become a little child” (Hovre 1934, 192.)

The Supremacy of the Gift of Life
in Religion and Education

Life alone has absolute value: the rest, as religion, philosophy, art, science, wealth and position, have worth only in so far as they are related to life, proceed from it, express its meaning, and increase its power and beauty.

–John Lancaster Spalding (1901a, 284)

Spalding’s emphasis on life as the Creator’s greatest gift led to his understanding of the abundant life as the ultimate goal of all religion and education: “Religion is life in and with God through Jesus Christ; and the stronger, the purer, the more loving the life, the higher and holier is one’s religion” (Spalding 1902b, 147). The Catholic religion is more a way of life to be lived than a doctrinal body to which one would adhere. The bishop wrote:

Since education is furtherance of life, its value is manifest. Life is the only good, and the supreme good is the highest life. At the heart of all things, giving them reality, endurance, splendor, and serviceableness, there reigns not death, but life. Nothing has worth except for living. . . .

What can give us wealth and power and goodness and freedom and joy? Education and education alone. . . .

Religion is judged by its influence on faith and conduct, on hope and love, on righteousness and life, by the education it gives. (Spalding 1905, 1969, 127-29)

Religious education leads to a higher and richer life. It is “a kind of celestial education, which trains the soul to godlike life” (Spalding 1895, 185). Education and religion act together in bringing about the
blessings of “a larger liberty, wider life, purer delights, and a juster sense of the relative values of the means and ends which lie within or reach. . . . Wisdom and religion converge, as love and knowledge meet in God” (Spalding 1895, 191). For Spalding, a religious education is essential to the attainment of the highest qualities of human life.

Ironically, it was Spalding’s passion for living the higher life of religion and education that connected his thought to the American spirit of progressivism. He wrote of this alignment of Catholic and American thought,

If we are to act along an inner line upon the life of America, we must bring to the task a divine confidence that our Catholic faith is akin to whatever is good and true or fair . . . so it is prepared to welcome whatever progress mankind may make. . . and to cooperate without misgivings or afterthought, in whatever promises to make for higher and holier life. (Spalding 1900, 76)

Indeed, Spalding’s exalted view of life as the supreme reality would place him within the parameters of progressivism. De Hovre pointed to the foundational element of Spalding’s pedagogy: “Real life is a process of education and education is a life-process” (1934, 171). Humans cooperate with God in the ongoing creation and progress of life to the extent that they participate in life-enhancing religious education of self and others.

Spalding’s philosophy of education is grounded in his elevation of the value of human life above all else. Life as the end and means of religious education gives coherence and consistency to this philosophy. This sort of education for life and life-process does not end. Spalding believed that

education is not merely or chiefly a scholastic affair; it is a life-work, to be carried on with unwearying patience, until death bids us cease or introduces us to a world of diviner opportunities. The wise and good are they who grow old still learning many things, entering day by day into more vital communion with truth, beauty, and righteousness, gaining
more and more complete initiation into the life of the wisest, noblest, and strongest who have thought, loved and accomplished. (Spalding 1905, 92)

Addressing the 1901 gathering of the National Education Association, Bishop Spalding gave his views on the close relationship between the Christian understanding of the sacredness of life and the ultimate goal of education:

Faith in the goodness of life, issuing in ceaseless efforts to develop it to higher and higher potencies, has determined our world-view and brought us to understand that the universe is a system of forces whose end is the education of souls; that the drama enacted throughout the whole earth and all the ages has for its central idea and guiding motive the progressive spiritual culture of mankind, which is the will of God as revealed in the conduct and teaching of Christ. (Spalding 1902b, 209)

**The Pursuit of Truth as a Religious Endeavor**

All truth is orthodox, whether it come to us through revelation, reaffirmed by the voice of the Church, or whether it come in the form of certain scientific knowledge. Both the Church and the men of science must accept the validity of reason, and must therefore hold that reason cannot contradict itself. Knowledge and faith both do God’s work.

–John Lancaster Spalding (1902b, 156)

Spalding believed there was no higher purpose in life than the pursuit of truth. This is part of the human struggle toward perfection in all areas of life, but the nature of the pursuit is, for Spalding, religious. Likewise, Spalding held that truth is housed in discoveries of all kinds—intellectual and affective, scientific and theological, natural and supernatural. A firm supporter of liberal education, he believed strongly in a broad curriculum that included the arts, science, literature, theology, music, and history. All knowledge is related and all truth is orthodox. Spalding wrote:
All facts are sacred, since the truth is sacred. . . . Our Catholic faith is akin to whatever is true or good or fair; that as it allied itself with the philosophy, the literature, the art, and the forms of government of Greece and Rome, so it is prepared to welcome whatever progress mankind may make, whether it be material or moral or intellectual; nay, that it is prepared to cooperate, without misgivings or afterthought, in whatever promises to make for higher and holier life. (1900, 74, 79)

The deep pursuit of self-knowledge, insight into life’s mysteries, and comprehension of things natural and supernatural are the most human of all efforts. For Spalding, “We are human because God is present in the soul; we have reason because the divine light shines with us” (1902b, 155). Therefore, humanity need not fear the consequences of the discovery truth. He asked:

Does the religion of Christ, the absolute and abiding faith, need the defense of concealment, or of sophistical apology, or of lies? Truth is the supreme good of the mind, as holiness of the heart; and truthfulness is the foundation of righteousness. . . . If only we go deep enough, we never fail to find God and the soul. . . . What God has permitted to happen, man may be permitted to know. . . .

The fundamental principle of the Catholic theologian and apologist is that there is harmony between revelation rightly understood, and the facts of the universe rightly known; and since this is so, the deepest thought and the most certain knowledge must furnish the irrefragable proof of the truth of our faith. (1902b, 159-60)

From the point of view of the first bishop of Peoria, education, and more specifically a religious education, is a lifelong, humanizing endeavor which has the potential to elevate humanity to a higher level, closer to the divine that transcends all reality. He was not naïve enough to believe that all would spend their life’s energy in this pursuit, but for those who are able to,

The unseen world ceases to be a future world; and is recognized as the very world in which we now think and love, and so intellectual and moral life passes into the sphere of
religion. We no longer pursue ideals which forever elude us, but we become partakers in the divine life; for in giving ourselves to the Eternal and Infinite we find God in our souls. (Spalding 1890, 171)

**Religious Education and Moral Development**

The aim and end of education is to bring out and strengthen man’s faculties, physical, intellectual and moral; to call into healthful play his manifold capacities; and to promote also with due subordination their harmonious exercise; and this to fit him to fulfill his high and heaven-given mission, and to attain his true destiny.

–John Lancaster Spalding (1894, 128)

Humanity’s perfection in Christ is the ideal of all education, but in particular, Christian religious education. Without such a vision, the Christian identity is blurred or lost. Spalding’s philosophy of education was that it be essentially religious because he saw religion as “enveloping and diffusing itself through the whole life of man. It must therefore be a fundamental part of his education. To exclude religion is equivalent to denying its truth and efficacy” (Grollmes 1969, 242-43). All truth, all things, are to be seen in light of their relation to the divine. All education then must be directed toward this sort of growth. Spalding believed that

growth is development, and the universal means God has given us to unfold and strengthen our being is education. . . . Religion itself, the worship of God in spirit and in truth, can be maintained only by education. . . . To educate rightly, we must touch the depths of man’s being; we must speak to him in the innermost recesses where faith, hope, and love are born where God is present and appealing. (1902b, 149-50)

The enlightened human spirit sees all things and all truth as “bound together in harmony around the feet of the eternal Father” (Spalding 1902b, 166). Morality serves to strengthen religion and schools, and therefore we should strive to become centers of moral influence. For
Spalding this is the essence of the Catholic view of education. He queried, “Do we not all recognize that to quicken the wits and leave the conscience untouched is not education?” (Spalding 1900, 99). Any hope of a moral transformation of humanity and society is seated in right education and a right education is religious by nature.

Education for moral growth and development does not have to exclude the intellectual aspects of a proper education. Spalding’s holistic understanding of the human person gave impetus to a balanced philosophy of education where reason and intellect were as important as the affective and moral dimensions. He wrote, “Man exists that he may grow; and human growth is increase in the power to know and love and help, and to promote this is the purpose of education” (1905, 137).

Essentially, character development, the primary aim and end of all education, demands the environment of a religious and liberal education:

Information is, of course, indispensable; . . . but the end is a cultivated mind. . . .

In a rightly educated mind intellectual culture is inseparable from moral culture. . . . Moral character is the only foundation on which the temple of life can stand symmetrical and secure; and hence there is a general agreement among serious thinkers that the primary aim and end of education is to form character. (1902b, 234)

Religious education is best suited to this task, in Spalding’s view, because “conduct springs from what we believe, cling to, love, and yearn for, vastly more than from what we know” (1895, 170). For Spalding, “Religion is the profoundest and most quickening educational influence. . . . It has been and is the chief school in which mankind have learned to understand the worth and sacredness of human life” (Spalding 1905, 117). Religion, Spalding believed, was to be judged by the education it gives and “the deeper tendency” of his time was not “to exclude religion from any vital process, but rather to widen the content of the idea of religion until it embrace the whole life of man” (Spalding 1895, 181).

Spalding gave remarkable philosophical creditability to Catholic education in general but it was Catholic higher education that most
captured his interest. The following section addresses some of Spalding’s most significant contributions to education in the United States of the early twentieth century.

**Contributions to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition**

Perhaps more than any other U.S. bishop in history, John Lancaster Spalding took seriously the teaching office of his episcopacy. At Spalding’s silver jubilee (1903), Cardinal Gibbons remarked that he had enlightened people throughout the land, and at Spalding’s golden jubilee, E.L. Rivard remarked:

For all time he has linked his name with the greatest Catholic educational enterprise of our country and when his splendid dream is realized . . . we shall know the extent of our indebtedness to the Father of the Catholic University. (*Ceremonies* 1913, 7)

It is difficult to judge whether it was his educational philosophy or his actual endeavors on behalf of education that most significantly influenced Catholic education in his time. His great zeal for both is evident in his efforts to develop Catholic educational institutions and in his call for the best of preparation for those who would teach in them. As the biographical portrait in this chapter has pointed out, Spalding made many significant concrete contributions to Catholic education in the United States. However, Spalding’s greatest contributions fall in the realm of ideas and perspectives on education, many of which are still operative today. The following themes are key to the bishop’s thought.

**The Role of the Teacher**

The truest patriots are not party leaders nor captains of industry, nor inventors, but teachers—all the men and women who live and labor to make themselves and all who are brought under their influence wiser, holier, and happier. This is the noblest work. This is honor, worth, and blessedness.

—John Lancaster Spalding (1905, 140)
Bishop Spalding spared no accolades for teachers. A right education depended on the quality of the teacher and a school was only as good as its teachers: “The teacher makes the school; and when high, pure, devout, and enlightened men and women educate, the conditions favorable to mental and moral growth will be found” (Spalding, 1895, 179). Perhaps harboring his great love and respect for his mother who home-schooled him, Spalding exalted the role of the educator: “O fathers and mothers, O teachers and ministers of God, be mindful that in your hands lie the issues of life and death, that you are committed to the highest and holiest hopes of the race” (1901a, 120). In “The Meaning and Worth of Education,” he wrote:

The mother-heart is indispensable in whoever would teach, for nothing is so persuasive as love, and nothing inspires such patience and such desire to help. It makes workers unmindful of disappointment and fatigue, holding their thoughts to one supreme end. (Spalding, 1905, 125)

All persons have a responsibility for self-education, but the fortunate student has the teacher who will

inspire the love of mental exercise and a living faith in the power of labor to develop faculty, and to open worlds of use and delight which are infinite. . . . It is the educator’s business to cherish the aspirations of the young, to inspire them with confidence in themselves, and to make them feel and understand that no labor is too great or too long, if its result be cultivation and enlightenment of the mind. (Spalding 1890, 75)

Well-acquainted with ancient pedagogies, Spalding, like Socrates, thought teaching is best accomplished as a labor of love: “We can teach what we know and love to those who know and love us. The rest is drill.” The bishop continued:

Nothing has such power to draw forth human strength and goodness as love. The teacher’s first business is to win the heart and through the heart the will of his pupils; and to this end a generous faith in them is the most effective means. (Spalding 1900, 116)
Only those of a gentle and loving nature can educate souls: “The teacher accomplishes more by making strong impressions than by constructing lucid arguments” (Spalding 1900, 122). For Bishop Spalding, students should be able to observe and grow to love the virtues exhibited by the example of their teachers (1902a, 131).

The true educator strives to possess what he or she would pass on to students: “Educableness is man’s true characteristic; and the teacher who loves his calling and understands his business will give his chief thought and labor to education, whether it is his own, or that of a few, or of the whole race” (Spalding 1900, 124). Spalding went as far as to say that the effectiveness of any school is dependent on the character of its teachers. Character is contagious and, conversely, disinterested, uncultivated teachers will produce only more of the same. Teachers should model the joyful pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty, inspiring students toward the highest ideals of human personhood: “Little depends of what is taught; everything on who teaches” (Spalding, 1905,127).

In an address entitled “The University and the Teacher,” delivered at the 1899 Convocation of the University of Chicago, Spalding said:

The whole question of educational reform and progress is simply a question of employing good and removing incompetent teachers. And those who have experience best know how extremely difficult this is. In a university, at least, it should be possible; for a university is a home of great teachers or it is not a university at all. (Spalding 1900, 140)

Spalding knew how difficult it was to find and keep good teachers. He recognized the lack of respect held for what he considered the noblest profession. Addressing educators assembled at the 1901 NEA convention in Detroit, Bishop Spalding expounded on the challenges of teaching:

The wise take an exalted view of the teacher’s office, and they know the difficulties by which he is beset. He is made to bear the sins of parents and the corruption of society. His merit is little recognized and his work is poorly paid. The ignorant take the liberty to instruct him and they who care nothing for
education become interested when he is to be found fault with. The results of his labors are uncertain and remote, and those he has helped most rarely think it necessary to be thankful. But if he knows how to do his work and loves it, he cannot be discouraged. (Spalding 1902b, 230-31)

Spalding believed that if education as a whole was to be fostered, first and foremost educational leaders must encourage and inspire the brightest of young teachers in their work. He held that teachers and scholars should be granted intellectual freedom in study and research and that diversity in interpreting the Christian perspective should be expected and encouraged. He feared that censorship would drive the brightest Catholic scholars into disciplines where their work would be better appreciated (Grollmes, 1969, 72-75). Spalding stated:

The number of born teachers, however is not great; and nothing is left to us but to train, as best we may, those who lack power to interest, to command attention, and to create enthusiasm. (1897, 72)

He wrote: “Whatever else the incapable be permitted to do, let them not become teachers” (Spalding, 1901a, 232). Spalding called for serious thought on the question of how to make the profession of teaching more attractive, respected, and well salaried. Better conditions in schools, smaller classes, and shorter hours would lead to more pleasant working conditions for teachers and give them more hope for advancement in their vocation. Spalding hoped

to persuade the best men and women to devote themselves to teaching; for we shall make them feel that the teacher does not take up a trade, but the highest of art—the art of fashioning immortal souls in the light of the ideals of truth, goodness and beauty. (1902b, 232)

Educating Women

We must give to woman the best education it is possible for her to receive. She has the same right as man to become all
that she may be, to know whatever may be known, to do whatever is fair and just and good.

–John Lancaster Spalding (1902b, 152)

Sister Agnes Claire Schroll, O.S.B., observed that Bishop Spalding changed his thinking about women’s education over the course of time. In 1879 Spalding said, “When I hear a woman use intellectual arguments I am dismayed” (“The Blessed Virgin Mary,” The Ave Maria, 1879, ix). By 1884, Spalding was professing that women should receive the best of education if humankind was to achieve genuine progress. In the home, school, church, and workplace, women should be equal to men. Where society does not educate women it lacks the hope of progress and its young, male and female alike, remain callous and uncultivated. As noted earlier, Spalding’s mother was a highly educated woman, rare for her time. He valued the early education she gave him and the love of learning she imparted. While sometimes seemingly motivated by the benefits women’s education would have for men, Spalding nevertheless was well ahead of his time in his thinking on all aspects of women’s equality. In a lecture entitled “Women and Education,” Spalding expressed his resolve to promote the equality of women in all arenas of life:

There is not a religion, a philosophy, a science, an art for man and another for woman. Consequently there is not, in its essential elements at least, an education for man and another for woman. In souls, in minds, in consciences, in hearts, there is no sex. What is the best education for woman? That which will best help her to become a perfect human being, wise, loving and strong. What is her work? Whatever may help her to become herself. What is forbidden her? Nothing but what degrades or narrows or warps. What has she the right to do? Any good and beautiful and useful thing she is able to do without hurt to her dignity and worth as a human being. (1895, 101)

Spalding lamented that women were excluded from many professions and “rarely get the same pay as men for the same work” (1897, 227). That women had been treated unequally for so long
was for him “an indelible stain on the page of history” (1900, 49), one that was completely out of line with the notion of democracy. Spalding observed:

The domination of the animal in man had kept woman in subjection, had made of her a slave, a drudge, or a plaything; but faith in education as a human need and right revealed to the nineteenth century the duty of providing for the education of women as of men. (1905, 84)

Spalding genuinely endorsed women’s participation in higher institutions of learning and all professions. He observed that women were superior students and read more books than men (1895, 111). In Spalding’s view, education for women is not toward motherhood or being a good wife but toward human perfection as the ideal. In a lecture given on behalf of Trinity College, a Catholic women’s college to be established in Washington, D.C., Spalding made his stance for women’s equality perfectly clear. Historian and Spalding biographer, David Francis Sweeney, O.F.M., described the speech as eloquent, inciting an enthusiastic response from the listeners for both the future women’s college and the higher education of women (1965, 329). Spalding’s classic talk was entitled “Women and the Higher Education.” In it he noted:

Woman’s sphere lies where she can live nobly and do useful work. The career open to ability applies to her not less than man. It is good to have a strong and enlightened mind; therefore it is good for a woman to have such a mind. . . . To be a human being, many sided and well-rounded, is to be like God; therefore it is good that woman be developed on many sides in harmony and completeness. (Spalding 1900, 58)

Without question, the Bishop of Peoria met with opposition to this line of thinking concerning women’s equality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This did not deter him. In her dissertation, Sister Agnes Claire Schroll wrote that, for Spalding, the end of education is the same for girls and boys—“to develop power, faculty, self-
control, sanity, breadth of view, wide sympathies, and an abiding sense of justice” (1944, 257). De Hovre called Spalding “a champion of the higher education of women” (1934, 190).

The Importance of Freedom in Academic Research

If the Church is to live and prosper in the world, Catholics must not only have the freedom to learn, but also freedom to teach.

–John Lancaster Spalding (1902b, 158)

Spalding was ahead of his time in stressing the need for open scholarship in order for the Church to become an intellectual force in a nation founded on principles of human freedom. He looked upon his generation of Catholic thinkers and writers as sadly behind in their contributions to the body of American intellectual tradition. For the scholarly Bishop of Peoria, education and the free pursuit of new ideas about the relationship between religion and culture were the only remedies for the dearth of Catholic scholarship and the university was the place to best prepare such future scholars, men and women alike.

The nature of Church teachings was not static and therefore it was the role of theology to reflect on and express these truths as rethought by each generation. This required freedom: “If the Church prohibits this self-criticism—one which draws its power from contemporary thought–then a decay of doctrine rather than a healthy development will be the result” (Killen 1973, 428). For Spalding, the Church must be open to the “spirit of the age” and this includes both natural and the supernatural truths, both scientific and religious. In his view:

A truly catholic spirit deems nothing that may be of service to man foreign to the will of God as revealed in Christ. We hold fast to the principle of authority: and at the same time we believe that a man’s mind is free, and that he has the right to inquire into and learn whatever may be investigated and known. If the Church is to live and prosper in the modern world, Catholics must have not only freedom to learn, but also freedom to teach. (1902b, 157-58)

Whether clergy or lay, Catholics were encouraged by Spalding to study, read widely, and put their intellectual talents to use on behalf of both
the Church and the country. John Tracy Ellis noted that Spalding’s real fear was that “if Catholics isolated themselves and withdrew from the circles where the thought of the modern world was being shaped, . . . they would drift into a position of inferiority and lose whatever chance they might have to make themselves heard and understood” (1961, 74-75). Thus, in Spalding’s view, “If mistrust of ablest minds be permitted to exist, the inevitable result will be a lowering of the whole intellectual life of Catholics.” (1902b, 163-64).

The Importance of Improving the Education of Clergy

Professional men are united by indissoluble bonds. They all alike find their reason for being, in the needs and miseries of man; they all minister to his ills, and to all, science, culture, and religion supply the means which render them capable to help.

–John Lancaster Spalding (1894, 122)

That Spalding was exceptionally concerned with the role of priest as educator is confirmed by his repeated references to the necessity of improving their education so that they may become adequate to the task of pastoring the most active and progressive people of their churches. The task of teaching and preaching God’s word, so central to the priestly vocation, should be performed by the most cultivated and eloquently expressive bishops and priests. Only a higher education given to such excellence could help effect such a standard of quality in the priesthood. To Spalding, “so long as no step is taken to give to the Church in the United States men of the best cultivation of mind, each year seems like a decade, and each decade a century” (1882, 157).

Such an education is an education in the preparation for knowledge. It is a liberal education, bestowing freedom, courage, and confidence. The clergy should not only be mindful of their initial preparation but should understand themselves as life-long students (1894, 102-03). Freeing themselves from any narrowness of mind, the bishops and priests may execute the charge of teaching God’s word in openness and freedom. The Church and its people are deserving of no less.

Spalding’s dedication to the establishment of an American Catholic university is indicative of his great resolve that priests be afforded opportunities for the best of educations, “For what is the
pulpit but the holiest teacher’s chair that has been placed upon the earth?” (Spalding 1895, 186) The urgency in his plea makes evident his desire for Catholics to take their place among the cultivated and intellectual minds of the new world. When priests are able to bring scholarly advancements into the realm of religion, Catholic theology “will again come forth from its isolation in the modern world” (Spalding 1895, 216).

**Conclusion**

John Tracy Ellis noted that Spalding’s “Lifelong crusade on behalf of higher educational standards for all Americans . . . was, perhaps, the characteristic by which he was most frequently identified in the minds of his contemporaries” (1-2). Spalding’s work displays a wide knowledge and deep understanding of the history and impact of Christian education. There is very little of his work that does not allude to some aspect of teaching, education or school. Historian Nathan Mitchell records that the early church defined the responsibilities of bishops as “overseeing and regulating the community’s life, administering its fiscal resources and teaching sound doctrine” (1982, 156). Clearly, Spalding saw the latter as the central focus of his vocation.

John Tracy Ellis and David Sweeney agree that the best of the Spalding’s energies were probably “on behalf of religious education and social betterment” (Sweeney 1965, 14). His understanding of the importance of Catholic education in helping an immigrant Church find its place in the United States and his unrelenting belief in the educational power of the Christian religion are true legacies for religious educators everywhere and for all times. His writings on educational philosophy are unmatched by any U.S. prelate to date. John Lancaster Spalding was without precedent or successor as an American Catholic philosopher of education. Widely acknowledged as a true Catholic intellectual himself, Spalding knew that if “we permit ourselves to fall out of the intellectual movement of the age, we shall lose influence over the minds that create opinion and shape the future” (1902b, 161). The visionary Bishop of Peoria was a giant upon whose shoulders the Catholic intellectual tradition in education stands.