

The Role of Catholic Universities in American Public Life

A Conversation with David O'Brien

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Q: You've called yourself a Catholic Americanist. What role, if any, do you think reflecting on global affairs and American foreign policy should play when it comes to the role of Catholic universities in American public life?

A: That's a little bit of a jump. The Americanist idea is very important in American Catholic history. There was a dispute about Americanism in the late 19th century and a formal condemnation of Americanism by Pope Leo XIII that tended, along with the condemnation of modernism, to put serious discussion about the meaning of the American Catholic experience on the shelf until after World War II. So Americanism, I've always argued that the post World War II experience was an experience of Americanization, from ethnic to mainstream, from outsider to insider, intermarriage, move to the suburbs. John Carroll had corrected trustees once and said we don't want German or French parachutes, but Catholic and American parachutes. In a real sense, we never got those until the suburbs after World War II.

So there's an Americanization process going on all through American Catholicism in the post World War II years. I've always argued that Americanization was not a passive process of adaptation, but an active process of people seeking a new kind of way of life for themselves through higher education and through economic aspirations and political participation and recognition. And that was fueled by an idea of Americanism – that is, that it was better in some way to be an American than to be an Irish or a Polish or a French-American. At least it was OK. It was a kind of assimilation that had meaning, because of the almost civil religious quality to American culture in the 1950s that others, like Will Herberg, have referred to.

Secondly, often we attribute changes since the 1960s to Vatican II or reaction to Vatican II. But I think one of the big changes is the change in attitude towards America itself, toward its symbols, society and culture. The '60s changed something about our feeling about America, and the Church felt the need to distance itself from America in order to have a degree of integrity. Race was part of that; so was a sense of economic justice, as the bishops identified with the poor, and in the '60s and early '70s, the war in Vietnam. Many of these things caused the sense that, even in the hierarchy, you would never again hear after 1965 that language of "my country right or wrong" that had been almost taken for granted through the Cold War era.

So in my view, it was a change in attitude toward America that was one of the fundamental shifts that took place in the last 20 or 30 years that helped to account for this more conservative revival in the Catholic Church in the last 20 years and some of the loss of

confidence of people in the mainstream. Peter Steinfels' book is really about what happened in a Cardinal Bernardin center of American Catholicism. And I would say one of the things that happened to it is that it relied upon a certain sense of responsibility within the heart of American culture that is not as strong as it was once felt.

Now, in foreign policy, I think we hit our peak with the Peace Pastoral of 1983. I suppose that's not fair, because in the later '80s, the Church—not just individuals, but the whole hierarchy—was very involved in disputing Central American policy. But I feel that the Church as an institution is not very good at foreign policy questions. If you attend social ministry meetings, where people come from Catholic Charities, Campaign for Human Development (CHD), social action offices around the country, one thing became clear 10, 12, 14 years ago: in dioceses and in the country, there are people to get the mail from Catholic Charities, from Campaign for Human Development, or the Department of Social Development and World Peace of the Catholic Efforts. There are people that get the mail on domestic policy. But there's nobody to get the mail on foreign policy. The bishop makes a statement and nobody gets it. Nobody in the diocese has a hat that says international policy. The closest might be a Catholic Relief Service (CRS) hat, but in most places that's somebody with 25 different hats. So I don't think we have the capacity at the moment to participate vigorously in a foreign policy debate. We saw that in the Gulf War; even the statements that were made never got to the community at large.

Q: It seems to me that Catholics should want to be, if not countercultural, certainly critical when it comes to a unilateralist foreign policy—for example, when it comes to strong resistance to global institutions such as the United Nations, or tax policies that favor the wealthy at the expense of the poor. Catholicism has a rich tradition of thinking socially. Yet Mark Massa's phrase "suburban captivity of the Church" describes a phenomenon of ignorance in terms of cultural affairs. Why isn't there more emphasis on domestic and international issues in suburban parishes? Shouldn't we be more self-critical of our "Americanism"?

A: Since the '60s, the American bishops have been fairly consistent in advocating on behalf of the poor and advocating on behalf of a stronger foreign aid program. The forgiveness of international debt played a major role in that. They contended against welfare reform on behalf of the poor, healthcare, the right to housing—issue after issue. Both collectively and in many dioceses in many states, they've been active champions of all that.

Now, I agree that you don't usually hear this in suburban parishes. This is a little bit of a wasteland in New England in terms of parish ministry, but it doesn't always get down to the grassroots. If you look at the history of the diocese of Boston, Springfield, Worcester, and Fall River, you find that the number of people employed in the social action offices and CHD has really declined dramatically. There's very little staff, very little attention to these issues in the dioceses. The priests' training and formation is not helpful. So we're not getting very far.

Twice a year, on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, we have CHD Sunday; in the spring, we have CRS. Every parish in the United States is supposed to take up a collection. Every parish

receives wonderful materials, bulletin inserts, even a sermon—everything you could possibly want to raise the questions of that day. And most of them don't, at least around here.

This is because of lack of commitment and strategy and other priorities. Once I thought that pastor's work is so demanding that they didn't pay attention to it. My friend, Monsignor Egan, said years ago that we allowed pastoral and social ministry to get separated, and institutionally and organizationally different people did them. Catholic Charities became "referral" instead of being available in the parishes. One of the things that transformed my life was meeting Monsignor Jack Egan of Chicago in 1970. I became very involved with social ministry in a variety of ways, in training programs and so on. I took time off from college to work on the Call to Action Program for the bishops in the mid-'70s, so I've watched social ministry develop over the years. Now I think that social and pastoral ministry did get disconnected, so that what social ministry was doing and social teaching and so on wasn't really working its way into the pastoral life of the church and wasn't maintained as a resource or an asset in the mission of the church.

Too often it came across in a suburban parish as a critique. The phrase "suburban captivity of the church" means "you folks have to be liberated by me." It doesn't work well as a pastoral attitude. We need to go back to some foundational question of thinking through what lay life is like and who the laity are. There was a big argument in the United States after the 1977 Call to Action. The Chicago Declaration on the Laity had a certain vision of the laity, critiquing what we were doing. That never got fully resolved and it still affects how we do the work in higher education.

If you went to dioceses around the country—including Boston, I think—you would find that they have very few resources for intelligent pastoral planning or pastoral activity. Bob McMillan, the Jesuit, did some stuff here, but I think he's pretty much alone. New York used to have a big office of pastoral planning, but I think they have one person now. There's no intelligence about pastoral work. I think it's very sad.

Q: Is this a residue of an overly clerical church?

A: No. I think the default drive of American religion is individualistic and congregational. Ethnic solidarity delayed that for a little while. But once you move out of the ethnic group, out of ethnic identity—through intermarriage across ethnic lines, even across religious lines—you go to the suburbs. What the suburbs mean, maybe, is a cultural Christianity. But can you have a cultural Christianity? Or must it be subcultural in order to survive?

I've always argued that what you would expect to happen, if you know American religious history, is evangelicalism—the focus on the Bible, the personal relationship with Jesus, the continuing invitation to conversion, which we see in a lot of our pastoral practice. Small group strategies, sharing faith—that small congregational, even subcongregational life—that's all evangelicalism. So middle class Catholics become more like middle class Protestants. They look more like evangelicals. That's always been my theory, and I see evidence of it all the time.

You see it in the students too. We were just talking downstairs about how alumni don't know the church as well, but they know Jesus much better than we did. That's the evangelical stuff, the personal relationship with Jesus, and that sort of thing. Is that a bad thing or a good thing? Well, it's both. It's something you deal with. If we have better pastoral intelligence, we'd be saying what can we learn from the evangelicals and how they've dealt with this stuff over the years. I don't mean just evangelicals as we think of them now, but Methodists and Baptists and Presbyterians, Congregationalists, they all come from that evangelical tradition.

The impulse to want to create a subculture, even to create the illusion of subculture, is very powerful. That's where a lot of that conservative stuff comes from, I think. People want denser networks of relationships. You hear those people say it all the time—a smaller church would be better, more traditionalist. But Massa's fear is that we lose something distinctively Catholic.

Q: Do you think that there's a fear of being seen as un-American or too counter-cultural in the inability of some of these suburban parishes to address social justice questions or to think socially, as opposed to a more individualistic, evangelical approach?

A: Today, yes. Forget foreign policy—there are rhythms in American history, and sometimes if you're a strong advocate of social justice, you're an outsider, but sometimes you're an insider. I wouldn't worry about that. I'm not worried about this group getting too radical.

We're just enmeshed into this American reality, and I'm not sure we can solve it by some kind of artificial relocation. If you speak to the religious Christian landscape as a whole, where is the Catholic tradition in that religious landscape? Relatively few people—scholars and monks and a few others. But it's not like there's this popular "high churchism." So I wouldn't worry too much if higher learning or some of these Catholic pieces are relatively restrained. I'd be a lot more encouraging of diverse responses. I'm very encouraged by Sant'Egidio, the neo-catechumenate, communion and liberation seems to be going through some transformation. I'm encouraged by those movements, which seem to be appropriate responses to this trans-cultural, post-cultural Catholicism; some of that has been dramatically moving. The other thing Phil Murnion, who was a great figure in answering your kind of questions, said was that people had rhythms in their life, that there are times when you're looking for that congregation, that parish. You see it in your family—for example, my grandchildren and my five kids. I would say they were relatively active in their faith into college, some of them through college. But then they do other things. And then they have their kids and they come back. There are rhythms to this. There are times when you're more apt to connect with the institution, if you will, and other times when it's different; you're looking for God in your marriage and that kind of thing.

I just want everybody to remember we're Americans; we're not Catholic over against America. I'll grant the *Catholic Worker*, and the fellow who goes to the monastery, but we're Americans. It's more than we met the enemy and it's us and we share the problems. It's *our* problem, not their problem. Take abortion, for example. As many Catholics have abortions as anybody else. It's a public problem.

Q: Would you still be willing to say that there are distinctive American approaches to things that tend to be somewhat individualistic and that the Catholic approach can be more social?

A: A good pastor probably uses a lot of evangelical strategies while trying to preserve a kind of Catholic center in the liturgy, for example. My daughter has this excellent parish in Maine, and we weep when we go there, because the pastor actually does middle-class ministry well. Phil Murnion, who was a really good friend of mine, knew that this is not rocket science; it can be done. But you've got to think it through. This guy in Maine has this great parish, and other people do all the work and give him all the credit. He gives them a good homily and they have a rich liturgy. He thinks about that homily, and because he's with them a lot and he listens to them, his homily speaks to them. And they just love him. And this place is just rich—you go to RCIA and the Easter Vigil and there are 25 or 30 people. It's just amazing.

Q: Maybe the key here, educationally speaking, is that to reach people you always have to go to where they are. I think this tallies very well with your point during your talk that God's already there. And you go to where they are, as Americans.

A: Yes, and you listen to them. There are things about the culture you don't like, but there's always something wrong wherever you are. I'm not implying a kind of super-patriotism or something like that. What's important to me is a sense of responsibility, as Pope John XXIII said. You're in the middle of this world. You're not outside. Pope John's whole thing was that the church could let itself get outside, standing in judgment on the world, and then the world fell apart. So you had the Paris thing at the end of the war with we're going to get back into the middle; we're all in this together. I think that's the stance.

Q: You're really answering my next question, which was to ask you about the theological roots of your position. Weakland says that faith should be practiced seven days a week. The worst error of our age is that we go to church on Sunday and think that's it. Do you agree?

A: Yes, and there's where there's a Catholic difference. Evangelical thinking says that too, but the great thing is the Catholic idea, Weakland's idea, that we're the body of Christ all the time, and not just when we're at Mass. That's a startling thing to think about. As far as my theological roots, I'm no theologian, I'm an historian, but one of my favorite theologians is Godfrey Diekmann, the Benedictine liturgist and one of the architects of the modern liturgy—a great man. We heard him in his very old age, and he said that he regretted that the “people of God” language had displaced the “body of Christ” language—the mystical body. Not entirely, but I know from the work we did on the Call to Action in the mid-'70s, that that image of the people of God was the single most widely understood and used thing of Vatican II. Vatican II meant people of God—people knew that. Diekmann's sense was that for Americans, that almost became social contract theory; it was filtered through American individualism, whereas the body of Christ is that solidarity piece. I believe that is one of the fundamental things we have to offer and need to hold onto; this is where the Catholic vision is solid. And I think David Hollenbach is wonderful that way, explicating the notion of solidarity. So are Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II.

I think there are a lot of people like me; we didn't pay any attention to theology until Vatican II. So our whole understanding of theology was primarily out of Vatican II, and of course we heard what we wanted to hear in that particular time and place, right? That's both our strength and our weakness. I'm on the board of Voice of the Faithful, and I visit a lot of Voice of the Faithful groups, and these people are really Vatican II Catholics. They don't have any other sources, and when they hear these other voices, their reaction is to say, whoa, where's that coming from? They get very defensive.

Gaudium et Spes was like a charter, a Magna Carta of Catholic higher education. It affirmed what guys like Hesburgh and Reinert were doing. They didn't change things because of Vatican II, but Vatican II lent legitimacy to what they were probably going to do anyway, which was to modernize certain aberrations. They had a sense of responsibility for this institution. Paul Reinert had actually gone to Chicago and gotten a degree in administration. He came back and Notre Dame was run like the corner store. And it was much too big now to be run like the corner store. He was really modernizing and professionalizing, so he asked for help from lay partners—people who loved the school—and they helped him. A decade before separate incorporation, they'd been building these lay advisory boards and working with them and getting the experience of working on them. Hesburgh was the same way. This place had gotten really big, and had a vision of itself that was really big, and it couldn't go there. Every decision had to be referred to the Provincial Office. Hesburgh couldn't run the place this way, and of course he was turning into a world figure, so it was really modernization. Now, Vatican II was important to them, and as I say, it gave them legitimacy, but it was really the progress of these institutions that concerned them.

There's also a book about the Jesuits that says it's a revolt of the presidents against the provincials. And then when I first got into this stuff right after separate incorporation, you'd visit these schools and they would refuse to talk about the school in the community. So there was great tension between provincials and presidents. The presidents had emancipated themselves with separate incorporation. That's one way to look at it. To some extent, it was a case of practice coming before theory. And of course for them, the whole Americanization process was a good thing. It was what their students were going through, but they were going through it as well. They were all going through it together. And there was race and war and all that stuff. I don't want to say there was an edge, but there was anxiety about the country at large, and that anxiety was broadly shared.

Q: What is the role of these new "conservative" Catholic colleges like Ave Maria down in Florida or St. Thomas Aquinas in New Hampshire that have recently been founded? Is there a place for these conservative institutions, or do you think the liberal ideal is preferable?

A: A long time ago, I wrote something in which I asked, where are those schools? In my reading of American social and cultural history, they should have appeared a long time ago. They certainly appeared in the Protestant world; there's a great variety of religious-sponsored Protestant institutions. I will say that I'm enough of a traditional Catholic to think that things have gone pretty far in some of these liberal Catholic schools.

When Steubenville happened, I said, well, of course. Why aren't more people doing that? Why aren't people more entrepreneurial? I thought there was a market a long time ago, and the market has certainly grown. In the great scheme of American higher education, these schools enrich the process. Diversity is a virtue. These are small schools; they do things that big schools can't do. They create a kind of subcultural world. When I did my book, I discovered the Protestant liberal arts colleges – the good ones like Wheaton and Calvin - and then I went to some of these real little ones like Gordon up here. It was a discovery for me. Most of them were interesting: the confessions of faith that are stipulated sometimes for the faculty, renewing them every three years and writing reports about how your teaching and research are growing with your faith. It's a market, and American Christian diversity is here to stay, so I don't see anything to worry about with it. The bigger schools couldn't do what these small ones do. I thought maybe there'd be more like San Francisco's, where they have the conservative college within a larger one, but that got too much into divisive politics and today things are so polarized that you'd have a hard time. So there'll be these splits.

But I don't think the polarization is going to last. It just won't work. I'm amazed that Rome hasn't taken a more creative kind of intervention to dampen down some of the passions, especially over the sex abuse follow-up. I'm just amazed they've let them go off on their own. If we had resources, I would say that the pastoral needs of the church would pull them back to more of a center, but maybe not. Maybe the whole thing's going to disintegrate. But it'll be after I'm gone, hopefully.

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