

A Catholic University: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition

Exploring the Jesuit and Catholic dimensions of the university's mission

Let us start with a very broad sketch of what this might mean. For Christians, the dialogue of faith and culture is as old as the earliest efforts to articulate what it meant to be a distinctive faith community. The first Christians—drawn together by their faith in the significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth—were members of Jewish communities embedded in a Roman political system and in a linguistic and intellectual culture that was largely Greek in origin. As the Christian “way” moved beyond these Jewish communities, attracted Gentile converts, and spread across the known world and beyond, a Christian intellectual tradition or, better, a constellation of traditions developed, which were the product of a continuous dialogue between faith and cultures. With the fragmentation of the Christian churches, especially in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Catholic intellectual tradition in the West developed its own characteristics. Since the medieval period, one of its principal venues has been the university.

To use Michael Buckley’s words, this dialogue between faith and culture reflects two essential characteristics of the Christian, and especially the Catholic, understanding of human experience: faith necessarily seeks understanding, and all intellectual inquiry leads eventually to questions of ultimacy that invite faith responses. The Catholic view sees no conflict between faith and knowledge; it looks to how they illuminate each other.

Nonetheless, getting hold of this “Catholic intellectual tradition” is a challenge. It seems to contain a vast repository of theological thought; philosophizing; devotional practices; works of literature, visual art, music, and drama; styles of architecture; legal reasoning; social and political theorizing; and other forms of cultural expression that have emerged in vastly different parts of the world in the course of two thousand years of Christian religious experience or five hundred years of a specifically Catholic sensibility. Can one even synthesize the meaning of this vast archive, sum up its principles, and make them relevant to contemporary intellectual life in a way that would justify speaking of “a tradition”? What kind of tradition are we talking about and what role can or should a tradition play in a contemporary university?

A help in sorting out some of these questions is Terrence W. Tilley’s *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Orbis Books, 2000). Tilley’s title plays on the two meanings of “inventing” in the word’s Latin root—making and discovering. His thesis is that Catholic tradition is neither totally fixed nor completely malleable, but that in important ways tradition is both discovered—given, received, handed on from the past—and invented—made new, constructed, re-shaped. He proposes five rules of grammar or general principles that shape the Catholic tradition: 1) the predominance of an analogical imagination that looks for similarities and unities

(both/and) over a digital or dialectical imagination that looks for distinctions and differences (either/or); 2) a universal hope that everyone and everything can be redeemed; 3) an inclusive community of saints and sinners; 4) a conviction of the worldliness of the church, that the church is an agent in the secular culture and religion a public practice which cannot be privatized; 5) the belief that a gracious God is the source and creator of all good things.

Needless to say, others would describe the principles that shape the Catholic intellectual tradition differently. See, for example, the references cited above in the section on “Catholicism” to the ways in which Richard McBrien, Michael Himes, Thomas Groome, Rosemary Haughton, Monica Hellwig, and Lawrence Cunningham have summarized the distinctive characteristics of a Catholic worldview. These differences notwithstanding, there has been a persistent conviction among Catholic thinkers that they have been dealing with a body of ideas, practices, and ways of thinking rich enough and consistent enough to be called “a” tradition, and more importantly that it has enough of a purchase on their minds and hearts that it has to be brought into conversation with their current experience in order to yield the kind of meaning that points fruitfully ahead.

Four collections of essays survey recent thinking about what the term “Catholic intellectual tradition” might mean and how it might function in different academic fields:

- *The Challenge and Promise of the Catholic University*, ed. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1994) contains a number of essays that explore the links between a Catholic intellectual tradition and the academic disciplines of the modern university.
- *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, ed. A. Cernera and O. Morgan (Sacred Heart University Press, 2001). A collection of essays by many authors. Especially helpful is the essay by Gerald A. McCool, S.J., [“The Christian Wisdom Tradition and Enlightenment Reason.”](#)
- A useful collection of essays that covers more than the Catholic intellectual tradition but also sheds light on this particular topic is: *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life*. Ed. Thomas M. Landy (Sheed and Ward, 2001). The essay by Richard M. Liddy, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: Achievement and Challenge,” 3-16, is especially helpful.
- *Higher Learning and Catholic Traditions*, Robert E. Sullivan, ed. (Notre Dame University Press, 2001). A collection of essays about various aspects of the Catholic intellectual tradition in relation to the disciplines of the contemporary university.

“Jesuit Schools and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition” is the title of an issue of *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education* (Fall 2009, No. 36) devoted largely to a number of articles on this topic.

Catholic Studies

A recent development, related to the project of studying a Catholic intellectual tradition, is the appearance of "Catholic Studies" as a field of academic research and as a rubric for curricular programs on university campuses. Typical programs explore Catholic imaginative, devotional, and intellectual life through literature, history, and the arts, with a strong component of philosophy and theology. A number of universities offer programs and even graduate degrees. The oldest of these programs is at the University of Saint Thomas in St. Paul, MN, but Georgetown, Loyola Chicago, John Carroll, and other institutions also prominently advertise their programs. "[Catholic Studies in Catholic Colleges and Universities](#)," by Thomas M. Landy (*America*, January 3, 1998), reports on the growth of these programs.

Collegium

This might be the place to mention a noteworthy program that fosters the development of a religiously oriented view of the intellectual life among faculty from Catholic colleges and universities and among graduate students who are interested in teaching in Catholic institutions of higher education. Called Collegium, the program is supported by 68 Catholic colleges and universities, who see it as an opportunity to encourage their younger faculty to reflect on how a Catholic intellectual tradition might fit into their professional lives and the project of forming students. It also offers participating institutions information about graduate students who envision careers in Catholic higher education. Each summer Collegium gathers several dozen faculty members, graduate students, and senior mentors for a week of reflection and spiritual growth on a campus of one of the member institutions. [Collegium's website](#) provides detailed information about the program and also offers a handy list of links to other sites dealing with Catholic intellectual life.

For some perspectives on Collegium see: James Kelley, "[Collegium and the Futures of Catholic Higher Education](#)," (*America*, 11 Sept., 1993); Suzanne Matson, "[Collegium, Catholic Identity, and the Non-Catholic](#)" (*Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, Fall 1994, No. 6); and Tom Landy, "[Collegium and the Intellectual's Vocation to Serve](#)," (*Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, Fall 1996).