

“A Collegiate Conversation”

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(Prenote: in the May 29, 1993 issue of *America*, Michael J. Buckley, S.J., professor of theology and director of the Jesuit Institute at Boston College, published a stimulating article entitled "The Catholic University and its Inherent Promise," in which he expressed reservations, worries and hopes about the present and future character of American Catholic higher education. Prof. David J. O'Brien, professor of history and occupant of the Loyola Chair in Roman Catholic Studies at the College of the Holy Cross, took exception to several of Father Buckley's cautions and challenges. Consequently, *America* encouraged Prof. O'Brien to articulate his objections at greater length and invited Father Buckley to respond. Their educative exchange follows.)

Prof. O'Brien to Father Buckley

No one describes "the inherent promise," and responsibility, of the Catholic university more eloquently than Michael J. Buckley, S.J., most recently in *America* (5/29). Still, even those of us who share Michael Buckley's hope for Catholic intellectual and academic life should take a second look before making his argument our own.

For one thing, Father Buckley, along with many other recent commentators, sees U.S. Catholic higher education as caught in an almost suicidal (the Catholic university "can destroy itself") repetition of the "secularizing history" of other, once church-affiliated American universities. His reading of recent experience is decidedly negative, conveying a "sense that the *decline* in some Catholic institutions may be already advanced, that the



conjunction of a vibrant Catholicism and these universities seems *increasingly* faint, that vision is *fading*" (emphasis added).

No one familiar with Catholic higher education can deny a measure of truth, though a small one, to these stock arguments. But Father Buckley knows very well that there was no golden age of "vibrant Catholicism" from which Catholic higher education has declined. Once upon a time, a few isolated idealists inspired by Christopher Dawson or Jacques Maritain may have run highly selective honors programs or discussion groups that manifested Catholic integration, but most of what passed for philosophy and religion (theology was rarely taught before Vatican II) was by general admission awful. Students may at some point (this is far from proven) have been more Catholic, but they were probably no more Christian than today's undergraduates. And it would not take long to persuade Father Buckley that the education dispensed when Catholic colleges and universities were supposedly most Catholic seemed quite well suited to the economic, political and social integration (could this be secularization?) of Catholics into American society. No decline there.

The sister- and priest-president reformers who changed these schools, almost singlehandedly, were driven by a vision at least as noble as any now available: to enable the faith to renew itself and the church to reform itself at the center of--which means with shared responsibility for--U.S. society and culture. What the presidents and the religious orders of the last generation, in men's and women's colleges alike, did that almost no one else dared to do was to trust the church and its people. They took the risk of turning their colleges over to lay boards of trustees (it is worth repeating: they gave them the schools!) and turning their academic work over to faculties and staffs that were increasingly lay, professional and religiously diverse. To make this move to real shared responsibility, so different from the options in most Catholic parishes, dioceses and parochial schools, they had to affirm academic freedom, and, with some pain, they did. Eventually, in most places, they also learned to accept academic self-government as well, with the faculty ordinarily dominating matters of curriculum and academic personnel and sharing responsibility for overall institutional policy.



What this came to mean, of course, is that the Catholic intellectual ideal, if it is to remain a vital part of the self-identification of an institution, will have to enjoy the support of trustees, administrators, benefactors and especially faculty. Some of us who believe in that ideal occasionally get frustrated and demand that "the institution" or "the administration" fulfill its Catholic responsibilities--say, by hiring more Catholic theologians (with emphasis on Catholic). But, when pushed, we admit that we will have to do a better job of selling the Catholic idea to our colleagues, usually as hard a sell with Catholic as with non-Catholic faculty and staff.

So that brings us to the second problem, the image of integration that measures change as secularization and therefore decline. Anyone who has served on a faculty committee charged with reforming the core curriculum could only smile at Father Buckley's eloquent summary of the Newmanesque ideals of John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*: "the integration of the disciplines with the aid of philosophy and theology; the dialogical integration between faith and reason, both bearing witness to the unity of truth; the unity of the ethical and the scientific, and the synthetic function of theology." More cynical professors might say: "Good luck!" Others, not unsympathetic to the yearnings of Catholic colleagues, might wonder what one does with such aspirations. They seem so removed, so detached, from American intellectual life, with its hyperspecialization among and within disciplines and its clashing plurality of voices on every element of metaphysics and epistemology, and on the content and methods of general education. Perhaps contemporary debates about the canon are perverse, as many Catholic commentators believe, but organizing and implementing a core curriculum, much less a theologically grounded core curriculum, was problematic long before deconstruction and multiculturalism became academic buzzwords.

Father Buckley would probably say that this chaotic fragmentation makes it even more important to hold up the wondrously unifying Catholic banner, and that sounds right. But is it? Will we privilege--in budgets and symbols--theology, Catholic theology (not religious studies)? What else? Required Catholic theology courses? Hiring more Catholics? In all



departments? How decide who's Catholic? Will we develop graduate programs in theology that will produce identifiably Catholic theologians? Will all or any of this do the trick? And even if it will, how is it to be done? By persuading colleagues of all its wisdom, or by persuading administrators and trustees to mandate integration, with or without faculty consent?

The fact that many readers might well tell the dwindling number of religious who still hold high office on many campuses to do their duty, is one reason I suspect that Michael Buckley's appeal to raise the banner is not quite right. For it is simply not that easy. The problem of disintegration, the absence of meaning and common ground, is not a problem caused by the Catholic pursuit of false gods, secularization, to be solved simply by an act of will: recommitment to the authentically Catholic.

As University of Michigan historian James Turner insisted at an important Notre Dame conference last fall, Newman's ideal of philosophy relating the disciplines to one another and to some common core of knowledge was once everyone's ideal, and its loss is everyone's problem; indeed, it is *the* problem of contemporary academic life. For us Catholics it is now *our* problem because John XXIII and Vatican II in a big way, and those reforming academics of the last generation in small ways, helped us move out of the Catholic subculture and relocate ourselves out there in contemporary culture with everyone else. I am sure that's where Michael Buckley wants us to be, but his argument, with its disdain for secularization and its insistence on the really Catholic, might not keep us there.

Let me put the issue sharply. Separate incorporation, professionalization, internal diversity, all make it difficult to articulate a compelling Catholic position *for the Catholic university as a whole*. To the extent one disdains the loss of control (and the bland mission statement) that comes with the increased numbers of non-Catholic faculty and staff, and demands that explicit Catholic ideals be placed at the center and in possession of the institution, then the problem of Catholic identity leads to a solution which can only sound sectarian and restorationist, whatever the intention. It is quite another thing to attempt, as Father Buckley is attempting through the Jesuit Institute at Boston College, to build a vibrant Catholic



intellectual community *within* a school, hoping first of all to bring a Catholic voice to the common problems of meaning and value in our culture and in every serious academic community, only then hoping that such dialogue will sustain a positive sense of Catholic identity for Boston College when the Jesuits are finally without power.

Like Peter Steinfels in a widely reported commencement address at Fordham this year, Father Buckley is understandably concerned that Catholics are losing their capacity to speak as Catholics. All of us need to do what we can to build a strong Catholic intellectual community. But I think we should worry even more if Catholics decide to solve the problem of pluralism, not by helping to define a common good, but by locating and reaffirming a supposedly distinctive Catholicism. The option for distinctiveness is what got us into trouble in the first place, but at least before Vatican II it reflected the outsider status of Catholics and their church. Now we occupy a very different social and cultural location, as the last generation's reformers knew we would. We are now too far inside this culture, and share too much responsibility for what it has become, to think we can solve its problem, or ours, by symbolic options for Catholicism.

A few years ago people like Buckley and Steinfels and the readers of *America* thought distinctiveness was not such a hot idea unless it served wider human interests. They thought Catholic schools were called by their history to try to "do theology"--that is, to think through the meanings of experience with God in the midst of those wider communities within which we must live. For such schools, the most important thing to say about the world outside the church is not that it is secular, or that it is not the church, but that it is ours. Such schools might value Catholic theology tremendously and cherish a close association with the Catholic tradition. But even its Catholic faculty might argue that one must find ways to speak of God, and connect with the Catholic tradition, while standing outside church, in the various "killing fields" of our century, perhaps with the poor, as some friends elsewhere suggest, at least among this people, our people, with whom our fate is bound up.



Catholic colleges and universities should continue to seek a renewal of their historic effort to integrate faith and learning, not by reclaiming the institution, but by persuading colleagues and the public that this is a worthwhile thing to do together. That option would better guarantee the choice to stand at the heart of this conflicted and contentious culture, messy as that choice might be. In the end I think it a better choice for the schools, for the students and for the church.

David J. O'Brien

The College of the Holy Cross

Worcester, Mass.

Father Buckley to Prof. O'Brien

Prof. David O'Brien has framed a forcible set of reflections, as stimulating as they are challenging--not to say eloquent! It is an honor to be in this conversation with the distinguished author of a recent, much admired biography of Isaac Hecker. Whatever our disagreements, the range of agreement stretches much further.

I wonder, however, if a curious anomaly does not subvert something of David O'Brien's diagnosis. His initial paragraphs take to task those who read serious decline in the Catholic identity of some universities; "these stock arguments" are conceded only a small measure of truth. But in his concluding paragraphs, Professor O'Brien argues that in these universities the distinctively Catholic presence has become so attenuated as to "make it difficult to articulate a compelling Catholic position for the Catholic university as a whole." This is judged acceptable because the demand (to which he joins a directive control) that "explicit Catholic ideals be placed at the center leads to a solution which can only sound sectarian and restorationist." At the end, Professor O'Brien's paper actually seems to assume a more emphatic decline than I would. He does not refute the sense of a fading Catholic identity for these institutions as a whole. He seems to confirm it.

His compass of topics and assertions is so capacious as to preclude their adequate review in the limited space available. Further, distinct issues seem confusingly merged: decline in



academic quality and in religious identity; Catholic ideals and the capacities or strategies to assert them; dangers and actualities, etc. To keep our conversation from becoming either miscast or scattered, let me sort out some of these and isolate as clearly as I can what actually stands as disagreement between us.

First, what is *not* at issue between us: that the earlier Catholic colleges and universities successfully integrated their students into U.S. society; that these institutions did not embody a golden age of Catholic higher education; that Catholic institutions of higher learning have subsequently reached an intellectual development hitherto unobtained; that a great deal of credit for this academic progress 'goes to the generation of university presidents who courageously furnished the leadership and vision for so great an accomplishment; that turning these colleges and universities over to lay boards was an enormous act of trust in the laity that was itself richly rewarded both in the freedom gained from external and sometimes damaging controls and in the academic advance of these institutions; that the Catholic university essentially includes within itself the presence and unique contribution of all serious intellectual traditions as well as the academic freedom that makes open discussion possible; that religious and cultural pluralism are a necessity within a university; that the Catholic university should help to define a common ground for the common good within American culture; that the Catholic university should attempt to speak of God in the various "killing fields" of our century, especially among the poor, with whom we should be in solidarity, and stand "at the heart of this conflicted and contentious culture," etc. There is no need to delay on these and kindred propositions--let alone to marshal them as if they fell upon my thesis with stunning force--as I have held these and written extensively on many of them over the past 20 years.

Second, what could also be *confusing*: I find that Professor O'Brien exaggerates some of my positions beyond recognition, while his reading of change in my past persuasions about distinctiveness is simply unwarranted. To assert, for example, that the Catholic university *can* destroy itself is not to say that it is "caught in an almost suicidal repetition of the 'secularizing history' of other, once church-affiliated American universities." Rather, it is



to urge that attention be paid to what is a commonplace about human projects. It is to talk about a potentiality/liability ("can"), not an actuality--a liability that has been realized often enough to warrant concern. Further, the governing noun occasioned by some mission statements was deliberate: I spoke of a "sense" they convey "that decline in some Catholic institutions may be already advanced, etc." A bland, non-committal mission statement can convey such a "sense," but only that--neither persuasion nor conviction. All that one can take from a mission statement is a suggestion of what may be the case or of what appears problematic.

Still further, a vocabulary of power and control threads its way through Professor O'Brien's comments with the implication that I am advocating an enforced settlement. That is not the case, nor did my article suggest that it might be the case. This language is intentionally absent from my article precisely because this is neither my conviction nor even the question I am addressing. The issue of my article was not about control and power. It is fundamentally about fidelity to a religious heritage and an educational mission. It is critically important to get that mission correctly. To introduce questions of control and power at this point would be to dissipate the focus of my efforts, as would be any attempt here to correct Professor O'Brien's misunderstanding of the Jesuit Institute at Boston College. Moreover, to be concerned that the Catholic identity not yield to "the secularizing history of other, once church-affiliated universities" is neither to identify secularization with cultural integration nor to measure "change as secularization and therefore decline." Finally, to suggest that one is asserting that "we can solve its [our culture's] problems, or ours, by symbolic options for Catholicism" is to erect a strawman in a field that already seems overcrowded.

Third, what may *contextualize* our disagreement and explain our different understandings of such words as "decline": a view of human progress. I think that most human development moves dialectically, advancing through contradictions to its own completion. I think that Catholic universities have exhibited--to paint with shamefully broad brush strokes--such a pattern.



Their initial stage appeared in an undifferentiated simplicity: The conjunction between the Catholic and the academic was embodied in custodial institutions, of the 19th and early 20th century, in which the Catholic inhibited a good deal of the academic in a simplicity or uniformity that belied the nature of the university. They possessed a sense of their identity in a clear curriculum, a definite ethos, a faculty generally and explicitly committed to Catholic principles, links to a supportive surrounding Catholic culture, etc. They were not as bad as O'Brien's prose paints. In many places, for example, philosophy possessed a genuine and influential vitality. But they had serious and unfaced internal contradictions. It was no "golden age." Some institutions have attempted to fixate at that stage or to return to it because of panic with the present. This seems to me misguided. You cannot repeat the past nor stay its course.

Progress consisted in moving to the negation of this simplicity, progressing into all of the differentiations that came out of a new emphasis on professionalism, separate incorporation, academic excellence, internal diversity, cultural location within the American situation, academic freedom, etc. This kind of growth can seem or may actually be a contradiction of much that has gone before--involving the rejection of many of the religious symbols, practices and demands that characterized the initial period. But it can also constitute real advance as well, dialectical development rather than final disintegration. I think that this is the present moment of a number of Catholic institutions of higher learning.

The next stage indicated for the development of the Catholic university lies neither in an attempt to return to the previous stage (restorationist) nor in a fixation in this present stage, a settling for the status quo with a "steady-as-you-go," but in a synthesis of what has been achieved over these recent decades with a much more sophisticated retrieval of what was promising in the early inspiration, practices, faith and culture of these institutions, whether in the curriculum or the concerns or the atmospheric culture of the university. This is not an attempt to recover the provisions of the past nor is such a retrieval an essay in cultural nostalgia--an academic "Dancing With Wolves." It is a transposition of fundamental



aspiration into a vastly different settlement, "to redeem the unread vision by the higher dream."

If Catholic institutions of higher learning are to develop in what they are, the next stage must exhibit the increasing realization of the mutual and inherent unity between the religious and the academic. This was the point of my remarks at Georgetown [at a Georgetown-sponsored symposium on *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* April 25-26, 1993] and the article in *America* (5/29): that rather than inhibit each other, the religious inherently entails the academic and the academic inherently entails the religious; and that the Catholic university exists to promote this organic unity in the intrinsic completion of each. This is the university's finality and its promise.

The word "decline" was used to indicate that the movement toward the differentiations that have furthered academic excellence have been attended not infrequently by a concomitant fading of the characteristic expressions and even commitments of Catholic identity. If such an "argument" is "stock," it could be because its truth is so obvious. Certainly, Professor O'Brien's paper does not lessen it, while his narrative of unalloyed progress cries out for a good, stiff shot of suspicion and a willingness to recognize with some mild deconstructionist openness the contradictory within all of this affirmation.

Fourth, what seems to constitute the precise issue between us: If an articulate and unapologetic vision of Catholic faith specifies expressly the mission of the university, does this militate against the pluralism and diversity essential for the university to be itself? Does the Catholic rule out the catholic?

The last four paragraphs of David O'Brien's paper seem to suggest that it does. Blending this issue with the divergent issue of control and power, he judges that an emphasis upon Catholic ideals "can only sound sectarian and restorationist." Why? Because such an emphasis would make for distinctiveness, and his attacks on distinctiveness are unequivocal. Historically: "Distinctiveness is what got us into trouble in the first place." In general: Catholic thinkers should be principally concerned about any attempts at "locating and reaffirming a supposedly distinctive Catholicism." Read carefully, O'Brien rejects



"distinctiveness" because it renders one "outside" the culture. We may excuse this acceptance of distinctiveness during that past in which the Catholics and their church were outside, he maintains, but it makes no sense now that Catholics are far "inside this culture, and share too much responsibility for what it has become." His argument seems to imply: A "really Catholic" university would bespeak a narrow, sectarian Catholic subculture and preclude pluralism in faculty, courses and student body by its insistence on distinctiveness. It is puzzling, however, to see distinctiveness ruled out in the name of pluralism. Pluralism is precisely the admission and celebration of distinctiveness and difference on every level of unity.

Each distinct unit makes an irreplaceable contribution to the richness of the culture. The Catholic university, precisely and self-consciously insisting upon its identity, gives to American society--as well as to the church--another voice, another criticism, service and support, that are uniquely its own and enrich the community as a result. At the same time, the university gathers to itself that great diversity which is essential to its distinctive purpose. As Peter Steinfels has wisely written: "A pluralism that requires every institution within it to mirror the pluralism of the whole is a false pluralism.... Universities should not be closed to any reasoned point of view, but that should not prohibit some of them from deliberately fostering scholarship within a certain tradition."

Professor O'Brien's apparent inclination here to read the Catholic as sectarian, because "distinct," lies at the heart of our disagreement. He has, for another set of examples, the students more Catholic in the past but "probably no more Christian," and he suggests that to stand with the poor or in the "killing fields" of our century or with the American people, could very well mean that we must stand "outside church."

For finally what we are touching upon is not simply a question of Catholic higher education. The question is larger than the academic one. It is "Catholicism" in the United States, which after the past 10 or 15 years stands in serious danger of being read as a sect and even being taken as such by Catholic intellectuals. There are influences within the church that would make it narrow, with carefully monitored speech and inhibited public discussion, negative in



so much of its focus, harshly critical of disagreement and of attempts at nuance, increasingly demanding public protestations of loyalty and right-thinking, etc. The church is losing in the popular mind something of its profound reality as church (to coopt Ernst Troeltsch's distinction between church and sect). Accept "Catholic" with this understanding and one will be ridden with the pervasive fear that being distinctively Catholic will inhibit pluralism. Leaning toward this purchase on the church, O'Brien's argument seems to frame the alternatives for Catholic higher education as either secularization or sectarianism. Either of these would spell its death. It is no wonder that in his last few paragraphs the difficulty of articulating a compelling Catholic position for the Catholic university as a whole seems so overwhelming.

Fifth, let me say only a word about another approach. The purpose that defines a Catholic university is to be that intellectual community in which the church, in the words of Vatican II, "strives to relate all human culture to the gospel of salvation." That means "all" human culture, everything that passes for serious discourse and human advancement--just as the cosmic Christ of Colossians is to bring into unity the massive pluralism of all creation. This conjunction specifies the Catholic university, a conjunction that is the fulfillment both of the academic and of the religious.

For the Church, by its very nature and at its historical best, is inclusive and pluralistic--not unlike a great net that is cast into the sea and contains all sorts of different fish. Its concerns range over all the fields of human care and achievement, from science and art to social liberation and international community. That is why a university can incorporate these concerns and become not less but more a university--the religious giving focus and priority to questions of urgent human concern, the academic catching up all forms of human inquiry and discourse, the unity of these both allowing for the most radical realization of Christ as the one "for whom all things were created," and the one in whom "all things hold together" (Col. 1:17-18). The university, with all of the pluralism that goes with it, came organically out of the needs of the church and this meaning of Christ.



One university is distinguished from another--receives its unique character--not by freedom of inquiry or commitment to diversity. Without that freedom and without diversity, there is no university at all. But universities differ according to the questions to which they give priority and the knowledge they think most worth having. Much of this is derived from the parent culture out of which they come, upon which they depend, and whose ethos they bespeak. Much of the difference between Harvard and M.I.T., Chicago and Stanford lies precisely in the questions and the knowledge regarded as fundamental and the commensurate conversations, inquiries, instruction and atmosphere these foster within the university.

This is true also of the Catholic university. It will take on its particular cast from the questions that dominate its inquiry and from the knowledge it thinks most important for the student to acquire. Much of its collective life will thus emerge, not only out of the American settlement for higher education, but also out of the richness, the concerns and the heritage of Christianity, given a focus and an emphasis honed by centuries of Catholic intellectual culture, contemporary interests and the incarnation of this Catholic spirit within American culture--which is both broader and more limited than Catholic culture.

But many of these same questions and much of this same knowledge fostered by these intersecting cultures can and do engage many who are not Catholics. If such scholars and students come to a Catholic university to teach or to learn, their reasons should include--one would hope--the recognition that their own questions and the subjects they love are fostered by and within this intellectual community, that the Catholic university, precisely because it is Catholic, sustains what is profoundly human. To this single academic community, each makes her or his own specific and indispensable contribution, as the community only realizes itself to the degree that it engages, as Vatican II maintained, "all human culture."

But is such a Catholic university possible? Are its proponents only holding up "the wondrously unifying Catholic banner" so naively that the world-weary, battle-scarred veteran of faculty committees "could only smile," and the cynical whisper (cynically?), "Good luck," while from the chorus of the enlightened falls in cadence the mournful mantra: "It is simply not that easy"? I don't think so. Nor is it easy to ascribe a contrasting realism to David



O'Brien's multiple insistence upon the persuasion of colleagues as the single strategy to revivify those institutions that have lost their sense of Catholic mission.

The *America* article did not attempt to blueprint how this integrity could be realized--that would have demanded a much more extensive discussion--but only to suggest that this was the purpose and the ideal and the justification for a university's calling itself "Catholic" without apology, and that its religious origin and character should make it more of a university, not less. If this suggestion is true, then it provides a measure with which we can consider the means by which its identity can be furthered. This further question, "how one does it," requires an enormous amount of work, covering every aspect of the university. Perhaps one only approaches an answer by fragments. But if we are at the juncture that I suggest we are and if there is an intrinsic entailment between the religious and the academic, then at least the question can be posed correctly: How does a contemporary Catholic university foster such an integrity between the religious and the academic in its pluralism and diversity? This is not to answer the question, but to get it right--and that seems to offer much more promise than writing it off.

For the stakes are very high. No other institution in the Western world can offer this unique service to the church and to the world.

Let me close, thanking Professor O'Brien for his learned and obviously provocative essay and hoping that my response has not done his comments any injustice. It is difficult to discuss an issue in this way. I should not be surprised to discover that what I have written needs further reflection, nuance or correction. But this should not be impossible. It was, after all, St. Thomas who spoke about the value of "much conversation in which friendship principally consists."

Michael J. Buckley, SJ.

Boston College

Chestnut Hill, Mass.

