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**"Finding God in Some Things:  
Unintended Consequences for the  
Academy of the Faith That Does Justice"**

Paul G Schervish  
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# *Finding God in Some Things: Unintended Consequences for the Academy of the Faith that Does Justice*

Paul G. Schervish

I am concerned that the implementation of the Jesuit summons to a faith that does justice has, in higher education, unintentionally done an injustice to the more fundamental invitation to find God in all things. I have no quarrel with the prayerfully adopted Jesuit formulation linking faith and the practice of justice. Infusion of the faith that does justice into the personal and academic vocation of the university has been on balance salutary and transformative. I do argue, however, that too narrow a focus on the meaning and practice of that injunction has impaired both faith and justice. A one-sided emphasis on certain types of service has inoculated those associated with the university from the full potency of the Ignatian prescriptions of religious indifference, finding God in all things, and discernment.

For me, the faith that does justice is about how spiritual life is linked to the creation of rightly ordered relations in the material world, social institutions, personal interactions, and moral sentiments surrounding our souls. The faith that does justice is a seamless garment. It should be recognized equally under the rubrics of the faith that does research, the faith that does counseling, the faith that does homework, the faith that does administration, and the faith that does dishes.

My thinking grows out of what I have learned, intellectually and emotionally, over the past thirty-five years of uninterrupted exposure to Jesuits, their spirituality, and their institutions. For the best part of my life, one of the best parts of my life has been learning and being animated by Jesuit spirituality. Still, even this extended residency within the Jesuit biosphere does not endow me with any authority -- other than what I have learned and can communicate -- about the content, interpretation, and application of the Jesuit legacy. I am not a member of the Society of Jesus and

do not deign to speak as an insider. I recognize that my ideas may not accurately reflect the contemporary convictions of the Society of Jesus or, for that matter, what my Jesuit mentors, friends, and professors intended to teach me. It is, however, what I learned.

## Finding God in All Things

The crux of what I learned can be summarized in four guiding principles. These principles give rise to my doubts about the current approach to the faith that does justice and they undergird my appeal for a fresh course. These principles are largely embodied in the meditation from the *Spiritual Exercises* "On the Three Classes of Persons." The situation, according to the translation by George E. Ganss, S.J., is that each of three persons "has acquired ten thousand ducats, but not purely or properly for the love of God. Each desires to save his or her soul and to find God in peace . . . by discarding the burden and obstacle to this purpose which this attachment to the acquired money is found to be."

The points of the meditation ensue:

*The Person Typical of the First Class* would like to get rid of this attachment to the acquired money, in order to find God in peace and be able to attain salvation. But this person does not take the means, even to the hour of death.

*The Person Typical of the Second Class* also desires to get rid of the attachment, but in such a way that she or he will keep the acquired money. No decision is made to dis-

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*Paul G. Schervish is professor of sociology at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts and this year Fulbright Professor at University College, Cork, County Cork, Ireland.*

pose of the money in order to go to where God is.

*The Person Typical of the Third Class* desires to get rid of the attachment, but in such a way that there remains no inclination either to keep the acquired money or to dispose of it. Instead such a one desires to keep it or reject it solely according to what God our Lord will move one's will to choose, and also according to what the person himself or herself will judge to be better for the service and praise of the Divine Majesty.

The first spiritual principle I garner from this is the presence of God in any thought, emotion, or behavior--including sinful ones which, I have learned, offer the face first of an intrusive and then a forgiving God. The third class of souls, says Ignatius, is to have "no inclination either to keep the acquired money or to dispose of it." Indeed, emboldened by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's verdict that "nothing is profane for those who know how to see," I am willing to embrace the coarser maxim of "finding God in anything." Baker or book writer, sociologist or social worker, hand-rail polisher or Greek student, wealth holder or wealth disposer -- no path is higher or lower in and of itself; each is a window onto God.

Second, although the Divine Presence is enmeshed in anything, for a particular individual, at a particular time, and in a particular place, it is to be found most profoundly and fruitfully through a process of discernment and subsequent choice by which one becomes a bearer of God's presence through a biography of care. When it comes to finding and serving God, we are to eschew all presumptions. No one, not even the religious mentor, can tell another person what it means "to go to where God is."

The third guiding principle I have acquired from my contact with the Jesuit way is that "service of God" is the most desirable project of the soul. But what constitutes this service is not made known simply by following what others have found that service to be. Service of God is not achieved by aligning oneself to the lights of others -- as noble as those lights may be. The call to a faith that does justice is only one way to frame the project of the soul, and perhaps no longer the most fortuitous one given the temptation on all sides to identify the doing of justice with certain economic analyses and partisan policy initiatives.

BAKER OR BOOK  
WRITER,  
SOCIOLOGIST OR SOCIAL  
WORKER,  
HAND-RAIL  
POLISHER OR GREEK STUDENT,  
WEALTH HOLDER OR  
WEALTH  
DISPOSER--NO PATH  
IS HIGHER OR LOWER  
IN AND OF ITSELF;  
EACH IS A  
WINDOW ONTO GOD.

The fourth guiding principle I have appropriated is that we are to be fixed on *finding* rather than *bringing* God. As we learn from the early Jesuit missions to China, India, Japan, and the New World, and to the Alpha Centauri system and the planet Rakhat in the year 2021 (as depicted in *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell) the Jesuit enterprise is preeminently first to discover rather than to import, the presence of God. To continue this tradition requires a less certain disposition about what service of God means than we currently tend to enunciate at our Jesuit colleges and universities.

I believe that today we have forgotten some of the essence of these four principles and have come to define certain paths of service as more worthy than others. We have unintentionally withheld the spiritual counsel that could guide every member of the university community to search out and be consoled by the *munus suavissimum*, that most congenial burden of finding God in the everyday round. Graham Greene's "whiskey priest" defines love as wanting to be around someone. Have we

not been subtly distracted from revering the "breadth and length and height and depth" of what Karl Rahner terms the "ever-receding horizon" of the Divine Presence as it emanates from the quotidian activities of studying, teaching, building, coaching, cooking, managing, and writing?

## Daily Life as Spiritual Exercise

A Sufi aphorism recommends that before we can learn, we need to unlearn. As to unlearning, the main thing is to grow detached from the strangely seductive temptation to steer others to God's presence in one place rather than another. The grand irony is that in the university, where the heart of the matter is making known what is unknown, we have not widely promulgated the insight that God is found in pursuing insight.

In this section I will describe several manifestations of this irony and indicate how, when unfettered, Jesuit spirituality offers a sense and sensibility able to nourish the university as a self-reflective domain of the sacred. I address four specific circumstances where the one-sided application of Jesuit spirituality has undercut a fuller flourishing of its generative power and how a more indifferent approach would be more faithful to Ignatian discernment.

## Academic Majors and Career Choices

A major accomplishment of Jesuit universities and colleges, at least since 1970, when the academic terrain became more universally technical and specialized, has been to make sure that they are in fact first quality colleges and universities.

Despite the elevation of the academic caliber of Jesuit colleges, a troublesome cultural specter has snuck up on the hallowed theory and practice of academic excellence. This cultural phantom implies that while all academic and professional pursuits are noble, some are more noble than others.

Students enrolled in arts and humanities are regarded, not necessarily by society's dominant culture but often within the academic culture, as having chosen a more commendable educational track than those in business. More noble still (if not in theory, at least in regard) are those students leaving our colleges and going into volunteer work or service professions. A related specter haunts our decisions in regard to which students we target for ethics courses. It seems the more strongly identified a course of studies is with potential financial security, the more we think its students should be preemptively rehabilitated by an ethics course. Since most of our graduates end up in some form of business career or career in a business, why are not all students required to take business ethics? Better yet, what generative sea change would ensue from offering courses in the spirituality of business life in addition to business



Photo by: John Quinn, S.J.

ethics? Why not make it our vocation to help all the students make it their vocation to find God in all their prayers, works, joys, and sufferings? For it will be the encounter with God more than social ideology that years from now will motivate a business owner to support the education of inner-city kids in the hope they may enter the pipeline to matriculate at a Jesuit college.

### Scholarship as Spiritual Exercise

A second campus domain where Jesuit spirituality has lost some of its vitality is in advancing scholarship as a spiritual rendezvous with God. The connection between the vocation of study and the spiritual life -- and the temptations to avoid it -- were recounted by Ignatius Loyola as one of his own prototypical experiences of discernment. In preparing for the priesthood, Ignatius found himself studying Latin alongside boys much younger than he. He discovered that in the midst of his studies he received consoling visions and insights into the Divine Presence. These so engrossed him that he lacked the energy to learn the language of the Church he desired to serve. Discerning that for the generally virtuous soul evil arrives under the guise of good, Ignatius concluded that at his time and place God was to be found in the Latin, not in the rapture. In this case it was God, not the devil, who was in the details.

Today a new specialty in the spirituality of research and writing is particularly important because those directing most Jesuit colleges have discerned their endeavors to be an increasingly prominent part of the school's vocation. Increasingly, both we and our students will play out our stewardship in a world where ideas are the coin of the realm, and knowledge the wealth of nations. So in addition to assenting to a *theology* of the confluence of faith and knowledge, we need to be offered direction in learning more about actually living a *spirituality* of the intellectual life. The fact that many faculty repeatedly express genuine anxiety about how research interferes with the Jesuit university's calls for service, mentoring, teaching, and advising, should not be taken lightly. There is certainly a spirituality of anxiety, disappointment, redirection, and even rejection -- in both major-league baseball and in major-league universities. But now that Boston College and its sister institutions have mindfully elected to serve the world by playing in the big leagues of research, we need to develop a pastoral specialty that uncovers and airs a spirituality of scholarship.

It is not that the vocations of teaching and advis-

ing are to be ranked low on the educational status hierarchy. It is only that at this specific time, and in this specific place, our need is to explore, offer to others, and then pursue the spiritual terrain where research, teaching, and service are organically enmeshed.

### The Infinite Countenances of God

A third terrain fertile for a refreshed Jesuit spirituality is in enlarging the range of activities that constitute the faith that does service. While there are three privileged faces of God, there are also an infinite number of faces, each with an infinity of additional visages. One such face we all encounter, sometimes discuss theologically, but seldom offer to each other as a campus spirituality appears in the quest for, discovery of, and communication of the rightly ordered relations we call insight. The problem is that we too often speak as if the principal spiritual countenance of physics, biology, and chemistry is to be found only in their application, not in their doing.

This too is the central point of a luminous essay about the faith that does physics by Timothy Toohig, S.J., an internationally recognized physicist. In his essay, "Physics Research, a Search for God," Toohig states that "the pursuit of physics is, at root, a spiritual endeavor . . . an intuitive search for God" (1999: 1). This experience, he explains, is "an understanding of reality that is always beyond our current understanding." It corresponds to Rahner's notion of "transcendental experience," in which knowledge of the ultimate and knowledge of "every conceivable object" are "present together and in identity" (Toohig 1999: 21, quoting Rahner, *Foundations*, p. 20).

The transcendental experience Toohig describes in the realm of physics is the heart of what Jesuit spirituality has to offer to all fields of learning and communication listed in a campus directory: from finance and accounting, to nursing and secondary education, to art and science, to literature and language. That "openness to God's presence and the sense of mystery," which Toohig finds in the intellectual life, is a countenance of God that is to be explored and offered as constitutive of every dimension of a college spirituality.

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Physics Research, A Search for God, in *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* 31/2 (March, 1999), St. Louis: Institute for Jesuit Sources.

## Students and The Land of Unlikeness

Another symptom of a truncated campus spirituality is the tendency to align the service component of the faith that does justice with what turns out to be a partisan social analysis. Students in our flagship courses integrating theology, philosophy, and material life properly hear that what they are learning implies a "service component." After all, spirituality is a way of life-- a way of thinking, of feeling, and of doing. But I am concerned that the range of what constitutes the content of that doing is often too narrowly defined. By too narrow, I do not mean that our consciousness and conscience have as their horizon those who are most in need. What I mean is that there is the temptation to too readily elevate one side or the other of identifiable partisan social policies and cultural logics to frame how our students and faculty are encouraged to be of service.

To prepare for a complex life that will see our students visit realms they have not yet imagined, our best counsel is to help educate their "eyes to see and ears to hear." "He is the Way. / Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness; / You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures," is one strophe of W. H. Auden's triple blessing at the end of "For the Time Being," a meditation on the dialectic of blessing and curse for those living the incarnation in ordinary time. For us, this means learning and teaching a sensitivity to the presence of God in far more varied and far more subtle ways than those defined by the seductively fashioned ideology of both so-called progressives and conservatives.

## Spiritual Archeology

I want to stress what I said at the outset of this essay. I am not calling for things to be dropped from the faith that does justice. My hope is for things to be added. I hope that we pause, at least for a while, to consider how the spirituality of finding God in all things-- particularly in the discovery and communication of knowledge and all the daily activity surrounding and supporting those tasks-- will deepen the vocations of both faith and justice at the university.

Perhaps the dominant assumption in all of this is that there is a genetic unity to the Divine Presence. Discovering God in one realm is gracefully an opening to the experience of God in other realms. No matter where the enmeshment of God and us is first knit, we



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are led to other mutual engagements. Finding the countenance of God in all of the basic and applied arts and sciences inclines us now and later to find God in "meeting the true needs of others," the phrase by which Jules Toner, S.J. defines "care" or "the implemental aspect of love."

### *Agere Quod Agis*

For starters, this means a renewed emphasis on attending to the spirituality in what we are doing rather than what we are not doing. The Jesuit maxim, "*agere quod agis*," (do what you are doing) has moved uncomfortably close to "*agere quod non agis*" (do what you are not doing). Often faculty and students receive more heartening counsel about finding God off campus than on it: to become involved in community partnerships rather than assigning and poring over an additional paper; in reading to students in Brighton rather than in reading to oneself in the library.

### Hearers of the Word

To help reinvigorate finding God in what we are doing, consider two potential changes in our own vocations. The first is dispositional. It is to approach our pastoral work of formation for faculty, students, and staff more as archeologists than architects. As archeologists our craft is to help excavate and then piece together the spiritual artifacts that comprise the city of God in which we, our colleagues, and our charges live and work. In carrying out this archeology, we need to be cautious to resist the temptation to move too quickly and too assuredly to a spiritual architecture for others. As archeologists, we need to be more certain about the fact that God is to be found in and around scholarship; but less certain about the specific activities and policies that constitute service, care, and justice.

The second change is pastoral. It is to undertake a methodology of exploratory conversations as a way to conduct the archeology of the Divine Presence. I view such pastoral conversations as a way of excavating a spiritual resumé. I realize it is often difficult for people to talk about their spiritual life. But I have found in my research that the methodologies of intensive interviews and conversational focus groups produce a remarkable depth of willingness, honesty, and insight among those invited to such formal or informal conversations.

### Neither Is It Far Off

Much of what has made our task feel like the

uphill curse of Sisyphus is that through no fault, and often with great generosity, we simply do not offer nourishing enough bread. Perhaps we make this all too difficult. The Book of Deuteronomy reminds us that the commandment to abandon the curse and choose life "is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deut: 30:11-14).

### Bearers of the Word

Some of Karl Rahner's most compelling explorations of the coexistence of the supernatural and the existential are the essays in his book, *Hearers of the Word*. Rahner, despite his Black Forest heritage, taught an optimistic theology in which the human soul is mystically attuned, like a sensitive radio telescope, to hear the faintest tidings of God. Living as such hearers of the Word is the *faith* that does justice. As this faith seeps into our consciousness, it turns us into *bearers* of the Word. Having heard the voice of God, even as an inchoate or ineffable utterance, we become carriers of the Divine Presence. In every ordinary and extraordinary task we face an opportunity to create the rightly ordered relations of care. Living as such bearers of the Word is the faith that does justice. Faith is about finding God in all things; justice is about bearing God to all things.

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## Challenge Questions

1. How should the joint vocation of encounter with God and service to others be framed if it is to affect the majority of faculty, students and staff engaged in Jesuit higher education?

To ask this question is not to deny the validity of a vocation revolving around "the faith that does justice," as it is perceived by those who adhere to it. The challenge, rather, is to consider thoughtfully two questions: (1) whether there is a subtle tendency in attitude and in practice to undervalue the primary responsibilities of campus life as being already part of the faith that does justice; and (2) whether more effort should be devoted to an *archeological* pastoral approach, by which I mean, an approach that inquires about how people experience the Divine Presence in their daily lives. In what way, for example, is the choice of a job by faculty and staff or the decision by a student to attend college already an act of faith and justice? What positive benefit would accrue, if those who foster the Jesuit character of higher education were to focus (1) more on advancing the commitments that members of the academic community view as their primary responsibilities; and (2) less, at least at first, on recommending that those working and studying in colleges and universities should move beyond what they are doing around the campus, in order to take up the cause of justice?

2. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of granting equal prominence to "finding God in all things" as we do to "the faith that does justice"?

As Ignatian spirituality teaches, the central religious task is to locate and respond to the Divine Presence. By restoring the idea of "finding God in all things" as the primary tenet of the Jesuit campus, would we be better equipped to incorporate a wider range of students, faculty, and staff into the vocation of Jesuit higher education? Would doing so encourage a broader array of individuals to reflect more deeply on what they discern to be their questions and insights, desires and fears, accomplishments and failures? Does finding God in the world close at hand, incline or disincline us

beyond our immediate horizons?

3. What, if anything, may be gained by understanding "justice" as rightly ordered relations of care, or service?

Is the current conception of the tasks and training of justice too narrow? Is there a political bias among us that leads us to value some majors and career trajectories above others? Is it true that we tend to view one group of students as more in need of ethics courses than others? Is there a tendency to portray the work of justice as occurring off-campus and outside of business hours, rather than first and foremost in the primary responsibilities of faculty, students, and staff? How important is it to offer students a spirituality of learning that identifies their insights as an encounter with God and their schoolwork as a path of service? Does identifying justice with "extracurricular activities" contradict our hope that our graduates will exercise care and be of service in the workplace?

4. What new dispositions and practices are needed to better instill the Jesuit character in an organizational setting where there are ever fewer Jesuits and where fewer faculty, students, and staff arrive with an explicit commitment to that character?

The answer to this question depends in large part on whether one believes that the faith that does justice is already manifest on campus in a well-conceived health plan, in the discovery of a carbon-nanotechnology, or in the planting of flowers. If these too are manifestations of the faith that does justice, then more pastoral effort should be devoted to an archeological ministry of inquiry and conversation, whereby members of the campus community are invited to recount what they do in and around the campus, and what they think and feel about what they do. In fact it is reasonable to ask, whether the existence of such an archeological ministry can be a defining characteristic of a Jesuit campus. If so, then there is one more reason to accentuate the adage of "finding God in all things": for this phrase, more than any other, lends itself to a ministry of inquiry that guides individuals to a vocation of care.



SOCIAL WELFARE RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
BOSTON COLLEGE  
MCGUINN 515  
140 COMMONWEALTH AVENUE  
CHESTNUT HILL, MA 02467  
TEL: 617-552-4070  
FAX: 617-552-3903  
EMAIL: [swri508@bc.edu](mailto:swri508@bc.edu)  
WEBSITE: [www.bc.edu/swri](http://www.bc.edu/swri)