

A Catholic University: Framing the Conversation

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

A Debate about Identity

As the Catholic population of the U.S. grew through immigration in the 19th century, Catholics founded their own colleges and universities, beginning with Georgetown in 1789. Unlike the numerous Protestant institutions that slowly shed their religious affiliations in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Catholic colleges and universities, if they survived the economic vicissitudes of their early years, generally retained their church connections, in part because Catholic culture, especially in the cities and areas where Catholics were predominant, built high walls around itself. Its educational system was focused on maintaining a strong sense of Catholic identity. And authority and discipline exercised from the center played a much greater role in Catholic institutional life than it normally did among Protestants.

In the aftermath of World War II, Catholic higher education was transformed by the GI Bill and by the explosion of growth it made possible. In 1959, Pope John XXIII summoned the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), saying that he hoped it would open windows in the church. The tumultuous years that followed, coinciding with social and political upheavals in U.S. culture, brought Catholic higher education fully into the American academic mainstream, with all its strengths and challenges. A strenuous debate began and, in many respects, continues about what makes a university Catholic. A helpful overview is Alice Gallin, O.S.U., *Negotiating Identity: Catholic Higher Education since 1960* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2000). One way of framing this debate is to cite four influential documents.

John Tracy Ellis's challenge

The first document had a deep impact on the thinking of an important generation of Catholic educators. It was a paper given in 1955 by one of the leading Catholic scholars of the day, the historian John Tracy Ellis, "[American Catholics and the Intellectual Life](#)" (printed in *Thought* 30, Autumn, 1955, 351-388). In it he pointed out that few Catholic scholars were listed in standard indices of achievement, that Catholic colleges were more interested in the moral development of their students than in their intellectual growth, that they sent relatively few students on to graduate studies, that the proliferation of graduate programs in Catholic universities amounted to a perpetuation of mediocrity, and that generally American Catholics seemed to have little sense of dedication to an intellectual ministry as part of church life.

Jencks and Riesman: “The important question”

If Ellis seemed to challenge Catholic universities to meet the same standards as the leading universities of the day, the second document put a quite different question to Catholic higher education. Christopher Jencks and David Riesman in their 1968 book, *The Academic Revolution*, included a chapter on "Catholics and Their Colleges," an analysis that repays reading more than thirty years later. The closing pages of the chapter were devoted to "The Future of the Catholic Colleges." In the final paragraph, the authors wrote:

The important question...is not whether a few Catholic universities prove capable of competing with Harvard and Berkeley on the latter's terms, but whether Catholicism can provide an ideology or personnel for developing alternatives to the Harvard-Berkeley model of excellence. Our guess is that the ablest Catholic educators will feel obliged to put most of their energies into proving that Catholics can beat non-Catholics at the latter's game. But having proved this, a few may be able to do something more. There is as yet no American Catholic university that manages to fuse academic professionalism with concern for questions of ultimate social and moral importance...(405)

This challenge matched perfectly the spirit of self-questioning and of searching for a clear articulation of what constitutes a specifically Catholic character in a university that would flourish in the last three decades of the 20th century.

Autonomy and Perceptible Presence: The Land O'Lakes Statement

The third document, and the event that gave rise to it, sums up one of the central issues in the conversation about a Catholic university, its relationship to church authority. In 1967, Rev. Theodore Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame and serving then as president of the International Federation of Catholic Universities, convened a regional meeting of representatives from IFCU institutions at Notre Dame's conference center at Land O'Lakes, Michigan. The IFCU had been created by Pope Pius XII in 1949 as an entity to connect and regulate the variety of Catholic institutions of higher education around the world, but twenty years later it had become a body to some degree opposed to those in Rome who wanted to exert control over the actions of Catholic universities. The leaders of American Catholic higher education gathered at Land O'Lakes produced a dramatic document entitled ["The Nature of the Catholic University."](#) Its opening statement was much quoted: "To perform its teaching and research functions effectively the Catholic university must have a true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself." Less often cited was its second paragraph, which offered something of a counterbalancing statement: "Distinctively, then, the Catholic university must be an institution, a community of learners or a community of scholars, in which Catholicism is perceptibly present and effectively operative."

In a *Boston College Magazine* article ("[The Land O'Lakes Statement](#)", *Boston College Magazine*, Winter 1998), historian David J. O'Brien recalled the importance of this document thirty years after it was written.

Ex Corde Ecclesiae

A fourth document that helps frame the conversation about the Catholic university is the best known recent official church document on the subject, Pope John Paul II's apostolic constitution (1990). Often taken to have been occasioned by Rome's concern about the state of orthodoxy and orthopraxy in Catholic universities around the world, the document, in fact, was the result of a normal process of applying the lessons of a church council to the various areas of the church's life in turn, in this case, universities. It sets out, in a style of discourse familiar from Roman documents, the principles that govern the identity and mission of a Catholic university and then a number of norms that apply the code of church law to Catholic universities. The bishops of each country or region around the world were then charged with formulating regulations applying the principles of *Ex Corde* to their own areas. In the U.S. the document embodying these regulations went through several iterations and a heated debate broke out over the meaning of a stipulation that anyone who teaches Catholic doctrine needed to have a "mandate" from the local bishop. The debate over the latter effectively precluded the possibility of a profitable conversation about the text of *Ex Corde* itself.

Joseph O'Hare, S.J., when he was president of Fordham University, wrote a [helpful short history](#) of the genesis of this document and of the controversy surrounding its reception in the U.S. A convenient one-volume edition that contains both commentaries on *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and the Apostolic Constitution itself is *Catholic Universities in Church and Society*, edited by John P. Langan, S.J. with a Foreword by Leo J. O'Donovan, S.J. (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1993). This volume has a number of fine essays by first-rate scholars: Philip Gleason, Joseph Komonchak, Michael Buckley, James Provost, and Jaroslav Pelikan, covering the historical, ecclesiastical, theological, and canonical issues occasioned by the Vatican's document.

With the passage of time, *Ex Corde* seems to have taken its place among many documents that have contributed to the conversation about Catholic universities, their distinctiveness, and their mission. It is sometimes asserted that Catholic colleges and universities were nudged into this conversation by *Ex Corde*, but as we have seen the conversation was well underway in the sixties and shows no sign of flagging. For an overview of it, the stages it has gone through, and some of its unresolved issues, see J. A. Appleyard, S.J., and Howard Gray, S.J., "[Tracking the Mission and Identity Question: Three Decades of Inquiry and Three Models of Interpretation](#)" (*Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education* 18, Fall 2000, 4-15). For another view of why this discussion of mission has occurred, see "What Made Catholic Identity A Problem?," by Philip Gleason (in *The Challenge and Promise of A Catholic University*, ed. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., Notre Dame:

University of Notre Dame Press, 1994, 91-102). On a broader canvas Gleason has told the story of Catholic higher in the first half of the 20th century in *Contending With Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1995).

Two weighty studies have recently fueled the debate about the Catholic character of Catholic universities. One is by James T. Burtchaell, a former Notre Dame faculty member and administrator, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities* (Eerdmans, 1998). By 1994, when George Marsden published his account of what had happened to the Protestant Christian religious identity of most nineteenth-century American colleges and universities, it was a plausible question whether his thesis described what was happening in the contemporary world of Catholic higher education. (Marsden himself reflected on the question, "[What Can Catholic Universities Learn from Protestant Examples?](#)", in *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1994.) The title alone of Burtchaell's book leaves no doubt that he thinks Marsden's story has been repeated in Catholic institutions. He traverses much the same ground as Marsden but with detailed case studies of particular colleges and universities and their changing relationships to the church denominations with which they were originally identified. Unlike Marsden, he included Catholic institutions in his study, among them Boston College. His conclusion is that these institutions have blurred the religious identities they once had through links to their sponsoring denominations and have uncritically assimilated the values of their secular peers. For reviews of Burtchaell's book, see [Neal Coughlan](#), [John Peter Kenney](#), and [Michael Beaty](#).

A more recent study is *Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis*, by Melanie M. Morey and John J. Piderit, S.J. (Oxford University Press, 2006). The crisis the authors focus on is one of leadership—occasioned by the large-scale replacement of priests, nuns, and brothers from the religious orders that founded most of the Catholic institutions by arguably less well prepared lay men and women. The heart of the book is an analysis of the data collected in a detailed survey of 124 senior administrators at 33 Catholic colleges and universities. While the authors believe this is a genuinely critical moment in the evolution of these institutions, they are moderately optimistic about the future of their Catholic character and offer four different models that could support this identity.

For a collection of documents from this period that deal with church officials' and university presidents' joint efforts to answer the questions: What does it mean to be a university or college? and, specifically, what does it mean for such an institution to be Catholic?, see *American Catholic Higher Education: Essential Documents, 1967-1990*, ed. Alice Gallin, O.S.U. (Notre Dame, 1992).