

A Catholic University: Pluralism and Identity in Catholic Universities

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

There are widely varying opinions about the de facto pluralism of student bodies and faculties and administrative staffs in most Catholic colleges and universities. Some see a conflict between institutional identity and diversity of belief, fearing that the latter will inevitably erode the former. Others see pluralism as a good because it reproduces the diversity of American society, gives voices to groups on the margins of our culture, and enriches the experience of education. Perhaps the most interesting contributions to this discussion are those which develop the view that a Catholic university needs a pluralism of views for its own good health. It achieves its distinctive purpose of promoting the interaction of faith and the varied forms of culture only if the two challenge and transform each other.

Here are several essays which explore various facets of this understanding of pluralism and diversity in the Catholic university community:

- J. Donald Monan, S.J., "[Faithful Acts](#)," *Boston College Magazine* (Spring 1992).
- William M. Shea, "[Beyond Tolerance: Pluralism and Catholic Higher Education](#)" (*Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education*, 8:2)
- Walter J. Ong, S.J., "[Yeast: A Parable for Catholic Higher Education](#)" (*America*, 7 April 1990). The essay by Ong, who taught humanities at Saint Louis University and wrote numerous ground-breaking studies in the history of culture, offers a suggestive way of thinking about the healthy tension between Catholicism and the pluralism of a university. He begins by wondering why the early Latin church did not use the vernacular word *universalis* to indicate the universal character of the church (cf. the creed: "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" in English), but instead chose a word with a Greek root, *katholikos*. Ong speculates that the reason was to avoid the etymological connotations of *universalis*—a unity achieved by drawing a circle that includes everything inside it but by implication also excludes what is outside it—in favor of those suggested by the image underlying *katholikos*—through or throughout the whole. The latter image leads him to think of Catholicism interacting with the pluralism of the university like the yeast in the parable Jesus tells in Matthew's gospel: "Yeast acts on dough, but it does not convert all the dough into yeast, nor is it able to do so or meant to do so." Its primary effect is to interact, and this interaction results in ferment and growth for both yeast and dough. A faith that sets out to engage itself with all of the real world of God's diverse creation,

he says, finds pluralism not a problem but a source of nourishment. "We cannot expect to draw from purely Catholic sources the knowledge we need for this vast enterprise."

- John Langan, S.J., "[Reforging Catholic Identity: How Will Non-Catholic Faculty Fit In?](#)" (*Commonweal*, 21 April 2000).
- William J. Rewak, S.J., "[Dissent in Catholic Universities](#)" (*Current Issues*, Summer 1987).
- Alan Wolfe, "[Catholic Universities Can Be the Salvation of Pluralism on American Campuses](#)" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 February 1999).
- John McDade, S.J., "[The Jesuit Mission and Dialogue with Culture](#)" (*Jesuit Education 21: Conference Proceedings on the Future of Jesuit Higher Education* ed. Martin R. Tripole; Saint Joseph's University Press, 2000, 56-66). McDade's title refers to one of the main documents written by the 34th General Congregation of the Jesuits (1995). He suggests that Christianity is always involved in a double activity, proclaiming to human culture the significance of the unique reality of the divine Word made flesh but also discovering in dialogue with human culture a richer account of what it means to be human. It not only draws on other anthropologies, it needs them to understand itself. "Now, if this is right, Christian truth cannot eliminate what is outside its territory without undermining itself: the non-Christian other to which we relate is the other that we need in order to be ourselves." McDade's conclusion deserves quoting in full for its nuanced linking of the imperative to take seriously the pluralist other and the need to bring a clear understanding of one's own beliefs to the conversation:

In my view, the central question which GC34 raises for the Jesuit mission is the question of how we deal positively with the phenomenon of otherness in its different forms: atheistic, agnostic, post-Christian sensibility, non-Christian religious traditions, fragmented societies in spiritual and cultural decline, narratives of secularity and the range of culturally privatised alternatives that have emerged in the Western world. Implied in this question is how we Christians configure our own otherness as a contribution to the shared, lasting human good. It is perhaps only by developing our understanding of the human and religious aspects of otherness as a condition of witnessing to the shared, lasting human good that we will be able to foster a deeper evangelical engagement with the cultures taking shape in the human city.