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The Catholic Intellectual Tradition, Social Justice, and the University

Sometimes, tolerance is not the answer

By David Hollenbach, S.J.

The United States and the increasingly interconnected global society of today face daunting challenges in their efforts to secure justice for all their people. The Catholic intellectual tradition possesses some distinctive resources that can help respond to these challenges. Thus Catholic universities can draw on this tradition to make significant contributions to social justice in our nation and our world.

Responding to Pluralism

First, working for social justice means grappling with the intellectual and moral challenges of pluralism. Our planet is marked by deep religious and cultural differences. People shaped by these traditions sometimes come into conflict, even violently. The influential political analyst Samuel Huntington has projected that our world is increasingly marked by a “clash of civilizations” driven primarily by religion and culture. Finding ways to avoid such conflict is a key aspect of the pursuit of a world that is both more peaceful and more just.

The experience of pluralism through the history of the United States and the new challenges of intercultural interaction today are leading Americans increasingly to adopt a stance of live-and-let-live tolerance as the preferred way of dealing with diversity. This may produce beneficial results on matters that seem basically private, such as some aspects of sexual behavior or lifestyle. But if the questions concern how to respond justly to terrorist attacks by fundamentalist Islamic groups such as al-Qaeda, to massacre in Darfur and east-

ern Congo, or to the current financial crisis, we must inevitably confront the question of what justice really requires. Tolerance alone cannot answer these questions with intellectual seriousness. Careful response to disputed questions concerning gender equality or the rights of gay persons will call for examination of what is just and unjust in those domains as well.

Thus in important areas of our national and global life we need to move beyond a tolerance that says “I won’t interfere with you if you don’t interfere with me.” We need to engage questions that reach across the boundaries between diverse traditions. For example, we need to give deep thought to how Jews, Christians, and Muslims can be true to themselves and also live at peace in the Middle East, or what justice requires in the face of the current financial and credit crisis. On one level, peace and justice seem like ideas that everyone understands. But in the demanding contexts we face today, we need serious intellectual discussion and argument about their meaning, not the disengagement of a strategy of tolerance.

The Catholic tradition, in the better moments of its history, has engaged in successful and productive

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discussion across the boundaries separating traditions. We can surely learn from this history how to begin addressing today's problems. For example, the early Christian community entered into active encounter with the Hellenistic and Roman worlds and in the process became a major world religion. Saint Thomas Aquinas drew on ideas he learned from the "pagan" Aristotle, and from dialogue with the thought of the Jew Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides) and the Muslims Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes). In the process Thomas transformed both Western Christianity and Aristotelian ways of thinking in fundamental ways. This kind of transformation of the Catholic tradition through serious engagement with other traditions has been evident most recently in the thinking that helped create the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and in the developments since the Council.

Needless to say, these developments in tradition often encounter resistance and they are never painless, as the recent history of Catholicism demonstrates. But they do occur, and they are essential to the vitality of any intellectually serious community. We have much to learn, therefore, from what the Catholic intellectual tradition can teach us about how to grapple nonviolently with pluralism and intercultural interaction.

The forum for this discussion is primarily the university. It is the role of the university—above all of the Catholic university—to retrieve, criticize, and reconstruct understandings of the human good and thus of social justice. The Catholic university, above all, should be a place where professors and students bring their received tradition's understandings of how people should live together into intelligent and critical encounter with understandings held by other peoples with other traditions.

In particular, the university should be a place for critical exploration of the ways diverse religious communities envision our shared life with one another. This is

especially needed in a world where religious difference sometimes threatens to become violent conflict.

One of the most important contributions of the Catholic intellectual tradition to such exploration of religion is its conviction that religious faith and human reason need not conflict but can be mutually illuminating. Religion is not simply an irrational force to be controlled or eliminated from the lives of persons committed to the life of the intellect. Therefore the careful study of religion should be fully at home within the intellectual forum of the university. Such study can lead not only to private self-understanding but to publicly relevant proposals for how we can live together in peace and justice.

Inequality, Poverty and the Meaning of Justice

Our country and our globalizing world are also challenged by deep inequalities and poverty. We are in urgent need of an understanding of social justice that helps us address these problems. Our society is often quite inarticulate when it comes to expressing the meaning and basis of its fundamental moral values. The argument about the meaning of justice, of course, is as old as Western civilization itself, going all the way back to Moses and the prophets in the Hebrew Bible and to the pre-Socratics and Plato in Greece. This argument has been brought to vigorous new life in our own day through the important religious contributions of liberation theology and in the renewed philosophical

debate launched by John Rawls. The university is a major venue where ideas about the meanings of justice and their relevance to our life together must be explored.

The moral norm of justice has deep roots in the Catholic intellectual tradition. For example, Thomas Aquinas drew on the Bible's double commandment to love God with all one's heart and to love one's neighbor as oneself to affirm that a right relation to God requires commitment to the common good of our neighbors. Aquinas synthesized this biblical argument with Aristotle's insistence that the good of the community should set the direction for the lives of individuals, for it is a higher or more "divine" good than the particular



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The university should explore the ways diverse religious communities can live together.

goods of private persons. Thus for Aquinas, as for Aristotle, justice calls for commitment to the building up of the *civitas* or *polis*. In the terms we would use today, justice requires social solidarity and mutual responsibility for each other.

When the Catholic intellectual tradition uses the term *social* justice it is calling attention to the fact that justice is not concerned simply with one-to-one relations among the individual members of society. *Social* justice addresses the economic and political structures and institutions through which our life together is organized. These structures and institutions should themselves be characterized by solidarity, i.e. they should be marked by a reciprocal inclusiveness rather than by exclusion and inequality. This inclusive solidarity is demanded by the equal dignity of every person as created in the image of God and as having a capacity for freedom and reason.

This solidarity will require cooperation across the deep economic divisions that separate the poor living in core U.S. cities from the well-off upper middle class of American suburbs. Such divisions are the very opposite of solidarity. Solidarity and social justice also raise challenges on the international level. The much discussed phenomenon of globalization points to new links among nations and peoples that are developing today on multiple levels. From the standpoint of social justice as understood in Catholic tradition, some aspects of this thickening web of interdependence must be judged negative, others are positive. The negative face of globalization is evident in the continuing reality of massive poverty in some developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. To be sure, markets and trade can be engines of improved well-being. But many people, perhaps the majority in the poor countries of sub-Saharan Africa, lack all access to these markets and so do not benefit from them. Exclusion and marginalization again appear as the markers of the injustice that causes poverty.

The alternative to this exclusion is a pattern of interaction characterized by inclusion and reciprocity. The

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United States Catholic Bishops have called such inclusion the most basic requirement of justice. In a just society all persons and groups should be able to attain at least “minimum levels of participation” in the life of the community. Put in negative terms, the ultimate injustice occurs when persons or groups are treated as if they were not members of the human family. Inclusion and participation based on equality are the

fundamental requirements of social justice as these are understood in the Catholic tradition.

Suffering and Hope

Ideas such as these can open the minds of those who grapple with the Catholic intellectual tradition to hope for a more just society. They can also help us see and take seriously the stark realities of human suffering in our world, such as grave poverty, massive displacement of refugees by war, and tragic levels of HIV-AIDS infection across much of Africa. These are but a few manifestations of the long history of human beings’ sinful propensity to treat each other in inhuman ways. The Catholic intellectual tradition is deeply committed to the conviction that a Christian humanism is both possible and required by Christian faith itself. But as Michael Buckley pointed out a number of years ago, this must be a humanism that pays serious attention not only to the heights to which human culture can rise but also to the depths of suffering into which societies can descend.

There are strong currents in American academic life today that insulate both professors and students from experience of the human suffering in our world and rigorous reflection on it. The Catholic intellectual tradition is actually inseparable from a broader and deeper spiritual tradition that includes mercy as one of its central virtues. Aquinas saw prudence and justice as the central moral virtues in the moral life of all humans. But he saw mercy—the ability to feel and respond to the suffering of a person in need—as the most God-like of virtues. The Catholic tradition, therefore, in both its intellectual and spiritual dimensions, calls all those who share it to open their eyes to see and their hearts to feel the pain that mars the lives of so many men and women in our world today.

In Catholic universities this will mean serious efforts to link rigorous academic programs with carefully designed service learning. It suggests that professors in at least some areas will be engaged in both teaching and research that seeks new understanding of the suffering in our world, what its causes are, and how to begin to alleviate it. Such endeavors are underway already in many Catholic institutions of higher learning.

The Catholic tradition makes the extraordinary claim that the ultimate ground of meaning for all human struggles is a compassionate God who both understands and even shares human suffering. This belief can sustain hope and courage in the face of the conflicts and injustices of our world. In my judgment, this is the deepest source of the Catholic tradition’s contribution to social justice. It is most relevant to the task of the Catholic university today. ■