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# ENHANCING THE TRADITIONS

John C. Haughey, S.J.

*Jesuit universities should actively encourage students of all faith traditions to nurture their own critical awareness of those traditions by providing a welcoming environment.*

As I sat down to write out some of my thoughts on the Catholic/Jesuit tradition of our university, I looked out the window and saw a dozen or so of Loyola's Jewish students in front of the ministry center erecting their annual "Sukkoth" tent, a tent that symbolizes several important moments in the early history of Israel. Their little blue tent made me go back to *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican II document on the non-Christian faiths.

The Council text notes that the world's religions for centuries have been about the task of answering human questions about God and life and purpose, and they continue to do so in ever "more refined concepts and in highly developed language." It appreciatively singles out, for example, the inexhaustible "fruitfulness" of Hinduism's myths that its faithful contemplate. It affirms, too, the path by which many followers of the Buddha have been able to "attain supreme enlightenment by their own efforts or by higher assistance." The document goes on to acknowledge in great detail the close ties Catholicism has with Judaism and with those of the Moslem faith.

*Nostra Aetate* sees those particular faith traditions as different rays of that truth that have enlightened countless numbers of people, and it affirms them for what is true and holy in them. It calls on us of the Catholic faith to "acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods" of those faiths. Notice: ACKNOWLEDGE, PRESERVE AND PROMOTE! This is the line that I would like to comment on and have us take to heart even more seriously than we have been doing. There is a big push at all of our Jesuit schools, for us to deepen our sense of the Jesuit, Catholic heritage that had us come into existence in the first place. I'm certainly all for that, but my sense is that this should be undertaken as being of a piece with the many religious traditions of our student bodies. Our telos should be that a Jesuit Catholic education

would be one that acknowledges, preserves and promotes our students' commitments to their respective faiths.

I have become more and more attentive and sensitive to the priceless nature of the religious traditions of the students who come here. Granted, they often don't think of them as priceless. They usually carry them lightly, invest in them slightly, or keep them to themselves. But they are a resource of immense importance for both the students, their families and literally for the future of our civilization.

What the faithful of all the Christian traditions and of these non-Christian traditions need from us who teach, serve and minister to them is to be made welcome, and given a place -- not ignored or taken for granted or tolerated or given the silent treatment. The need is great because the most corrosive element for all of our religious traditions is the omnipresent secularization of our culture. Our students, like we ourselves, inhale secularization hourly. This ethos pervades even our university. At the conference held here a couple of months ago that kicked off the new Center for Christianity and Culture, we scrutinized the secularizing effect of specialization, of the disciplines themselves. Since these disciplines tend to reward the asking and answering of questions within a particular body of knowledge, they tend not to encourage the drive of the human mind towards ultimacy, as Michael Buckley would put it, or towards "the god question" as Bernard Lonergan averred.

Religious traditions, on the other hand, are supra-specialization; or better: they specialize in ultimacy and hence are counter-cultural. They swim against this strong secularizing and specializing tide. All the faiths represented on our campuses need to be explicitly acknowledged, affirmed, encouraged by us who bear the responsibility for the host faith, Roman Catholicism, since they are one of the most ready antidotes to secularism we have at hand.

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At the risk of preaching to the choir, therefore, let me be explicit about what makes religious traditions and their moral content and their continuance so important. They are communities of memory, Robert Bellah's famous phrase. Therefore, within a single generation they can suffer a serious loss of memory. As an educational institution we should not allow ourselves to contribute to the moral or religious amnesia of any of our students. Religious traditions have been the primary valuing resource for communities and ethnic populations for centuries. These traditions have been the primary source of their adherents' comprehensive accounts of the true and the good. Within a generation a tradition can become so distorted or diluted with the *ersatz* accounts of good from the larger culture that these once authoritative accounts about the good lose their appeal and their point.

Marquette Habitat for Humanity House



Photo Courtesy of Marquette University Office of Public Affairs

Our environmentalists have sensitized us to the impoverishment we humanoids are subjecting nature to, which is leading to the extinction of more and more species. But our moral and religious traditions are so much more rare and infinitely more precious and increasingly endangered. Once they no longer win the respect of the members of the families that had once embraced them or once those who knew them in depth are no longer around -- then the religious life of the whole planet is impoverished for the rest of its future.

It is also endangered since these traditions have answered "why" questions for all past generations. There are plenty of alternatives to these faiths waiting in the wings, but they are only prepared to answer why questions with how answers.

These traditions have invariably had their origins in the old world, whether Europe or Asia or Africa or Latin America. We have received them into this country rather than generated them. They have authored the identities of countless generations of Americans. They need to continue to be places of habitation for their faithful in this and future generations. They are meant to be inhabited, so as to give an identity and character to their adherents. These classical traditions have always been counted on to supply a canon whereby their faithful could take the measure of themselves and of all the dilemmas that flesh is heir to.

To be without a tradition is to be unboundaried. To use another metaphor: traditionless, one is left with nothing to screen out the strong rays of the mass culture which would make us all one hue. The light our culture supplies is largely generated by the market economy. Our students are increasingly products of this source of formation (or deformation!) as their counter-cultural resources of normativity lose their witnesses and proponents. I don't want to be demonizing our culture, but it contrasts poorly with religious traditions. One inhales a culture; one inhabits a tradition. This culture shapes wants; a tradition shapes character. This culture foments desires; a tradition is a process of discernment about choice. Our culture atomizes us; our traditions create community. A culture creates meaning out of the ephemera of today. A tradition's reservoir of wisdom has been developing over centuries. Our culture would, if it could, massify us, i.e. make us all the same while, ironically, affecting each to go it alone. A tradition draws together into communities of likemindedness those who have learned to envision reality through its classic texts.

To say positive things about the religious traditions does not blind us to the serious limitations of traditions. I like what Alasdair MacIntyre has to say about a tradition: it is an argument about the good carried on by those who are bearers or the carriers of the tradition in question. It goes without saying that our job at our schools is to make good arguers so that the good their traditions convey can continue to be

credible, so that they can hold their own against the forces that would trivialize them. Our contribution to this is in the many ways we assist our students to think and to discriminate between a traditioned rationality and a trendy one.

A tradition is also a set of practices. To be faithful to the practices embodies the story the tradition lives by and in. Hence the Sukkoth Tent. Hence the Mosque at the Ministry Centre. Absent its practices, a tradition too easily becomes an account of the good that will be narrated less and less well until it ceases to be a lived faith and becomes only historically interesting.

Our students face two hazards: one would be to graduate having exited the religious and moral habitations they had been raised in and entered our school with. This would leave them facing a future from a sawed-off past. Whatever else it might be called, we can't call it an education if what we do with our students distances them from their roots and induces them to become eclectics who try to put together with shreds and patches from here and there a habitation of meaning and value that is of their own construction. All of our faiths teach the futility of fashioning a god out of our own materials. That bequeaths to the next generation the myopia of this one, not the time tried dimensionality of a tradition.

A second hazard would be if our students saw no relationship between the critical processes they developed in the course of their time with us and the applicability of these processes to their respective traditions. As we Catholics are all too well aware, each religious tradition is always in need of updating, of renewal, of *aggiornamento*. That may not be directly our task, but as a Jesuit Catholic university we can and should underscore the on-going need for this while supplying to students of all the faiths the tools they will need for this delicate process. Otherwise we can be sure some of them will either jettison it or get stuck in its pest arid probably diminished by their particular faith rather than nurtured by it the rest of their lives. A tradition, to be renewing of its adherents, must be self-correcting. As I say, it is not our task to renew or correct their traditions. It is our task to show the great importance of traditions being doctrinally and morally self-correcting both for the adherents themselves and for their respective faith families. We talk a lot about ethics in our teaching and our culture. It seems to me that the primary ethical issue with all of us, students

and faculty alike, is the issue of personal identity: the key here is to see that each of us is a part of many stories. One of these is likely to be a faith story. A tradition is an authoritative story, a deep story, that would co-author the identities of its faithful. To be ignorant of or innocent of an authoritative faith story leaves the person with one of two choices: (1) to subscribe to the canon our secularized culture inculcates; (2) to make up his or her own canon -- by Canon I mean the archival trove of norms we use to take the measure of everything that touches our lives. Neither alternative is promising. The second is seductive because it invites making a god according to our own image and likeness.

The key ethical moment for our students is this one: Of these stories of which I am a part, which is my organizing story? And what effect is this organizing story having on me? Is it a comprehensive account of the true and the good as my conscience and mind understand these? Does it unify my life and give it meaning? Too many of our students invest themselves in the purchase of a pearl of great nonsense, as you know. Their organizing story, it seems to me, is the primary ethical issue in the lives of our students. The key desideratum therefore is a faculty and a ministry that is willing to bear the narrational layers in our students. By our having been made story-aware, we can assist our students in being story-critical and story-decisive. It seems obvious that to the degree we are indifferent to their faith-stories we show ourselves indifferent to the way God is at work in them. Though we do pretty well on our campuses, we still have a long way to go before the faiths of our students have the place of honor they deserve.

Practically, this means that our campuses should aim at being places where all the faiths know they are welcome, where all the faiths know they have a home, where all the faiths are assured a place at the table we host. This line of thinking doesn't "sell the farm;" it just widens the table. We widen it not to become syncretists but to become faithful to the breadth and depth of our Church's vision of the universal work of God in our world.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> An edited version of a talk given to faculty and staff at Loyola University Chicago.