

4-1-1999

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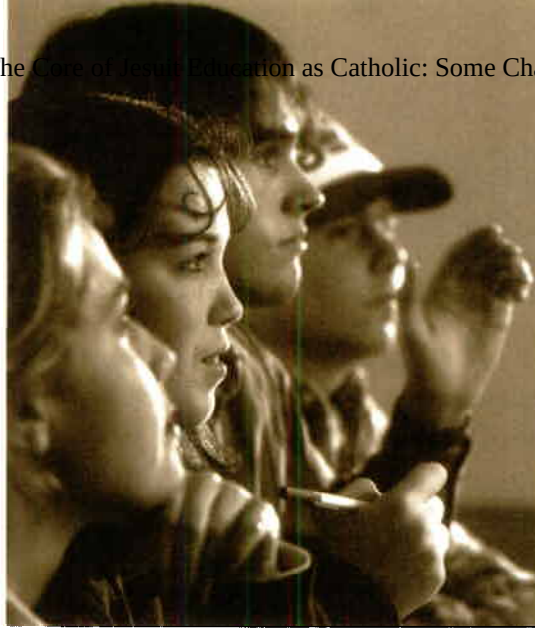
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Recommended Citation

Feeney, S.J., Joseph J. (1999) "The Core of Jesuit Education as Catholic: Some Challenges to Faculties," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 15, Article 7.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol15/iss1/7>



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The Core of Jesuit Undergraduate Education as Catholic: Some Issues for Faculties

JOSEPH J. FEENEY, S.J.

In *The Chronicle of Higher Education* Boston University's Alan Wolfe celebrated "A Welcome Revival of Religion in the Academy." But despite his warm welcome, he made his own position clear: "As a parent, I would not want to send my child to a church-related institution. The whole point of a college education is to teach an appreciation for skepticism and an exposure to unfamiliar ideas" (B4).

Some weeks later a "Final Report" of the Committee on Professional Employment of the Modern Language Association held that "the object of institutions of higher education is to acquire and disseminate knowledge as well as, most importantly, to develop in students sophisticated intellectual strategies they will use for the rest of their lives, in and out of the workplace" (4).

From a different perspective, Robert Bellah of the University of California at Berkeley wrote in *Academe* about the "Class Wars and Culture Wars in the University Today." He grouped professors into three incompatible ideologies or "paradigms": (1) the old paradigm of "tradition," rooted in theology and the Classics, which prevailed for centuries and affirms the objectivity of knowledge; (2) the paradigm of

"science," the only valid form of knowing since the Enlightenment, which drove "tradition" into divinity schools yet still affirms the objectivity of knowledge; (3) the paradigm of "postmodernism," rooted in contemporary doubt, which denies the possibility of objectivity and sees "tradition" and "science" as mere expressions of a will to power. Given such incompatible paradigms, writes Bellah, higher education has lost all "common ground" of agreement even on basic issues (22, 25).

Such definitions stimulate Catholic undergraduate education to check its own goals. Is the purpose of college "an appreciation for skepticism and an exposure to unfamiliar ideas"? The desire to "disseminate knowledge" and "develop in students sophisticated intellectual strategies"?

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To proclaim that there is no “common ground” of agreement? What are the goals of Catholic undergraduate education? Job-preparation? Teaching a field of knowledge? Presenting a worldview? Forming values? Seeking wisdom? Offering a sense of God and of God-in-the-world? Understanding Catholicism? Being ecumenical? Being honest to Jesuit education as *Catholic*, how might faculties talk about Catholic education in terms of our students, today’s Catholic church, and our curricula?

Our Postmodern Students

Some months ago I wrote an essay for *America* on “Students and Postmodernism.” Asking “Can a Worldview Be Healed?” I quoted my own students. An eloquent senior had recently written, “Probably only one thing out there . . . causes me to feel as if there is any hope” and “keeps me from just wanting to leave this existence.” Then he told about meeting a Polish boy in the Auschwitz train station:

I sat with my friend and we discussed where we would go next. At the same time a little boy, probably ten years old, rode his bike up to us and said hello. We refrained from saying anything back to him, because we thought he was only going to beg for money. He then said “Hi” and introduced himself and asked our names. He told us he knew that we were Americans because we wore baseball caps. He told us he learned English in school and that he lived right around the corner. He then excused himself and rode his bike over to a stand in the train station. When he came back he had a bag of candy; he told us we looked hungry and then gave us most of the candy. After we were done, he hopped back on his bike and rode off, because it was dinner time.

This boy, whose name I don’t even remember, taught me more about life than any book or any teacher or class, and he said very little. He wasn’t afraid of us; he didn’t think that I was some thief because my hair was eight inches long and I had a goatee that made me look like Satan. He didn’t want anything from me, and he gave me more than all the money I had in my pockets could buy.

My senior was a typical postmodernist: his emotions were exhausted, his expectations minimal, his hopes few. Though not all students are like him, many—often the brightest—share his worldview. A woman writes, “I view most subjects as having no meaning. I do not find either

an abundance of sadness or element of surprise in this idea Everything has to be taken for what it is—chance. Life has to be viewed from a certain distance, or seriousness will set in and kill all the fun. Life is meant to be lively.” She concludes, “No reason can be found in the world. This is a comic state.” A sophomore, though seeing himself as largely traditional, chimes in, “Parody is my life. I never take anything seriously. Not myself, not even literature papers about myself.”

When my article appeared in *America*, responses flowed from the U.S. and Europe by mail, e-mail, and conversation. A Chicago professor thanked me: I had helped him understand his students. From New York, a high-school teacher agreed with my portrait, and a CCD teacher found it valid for his eighth-graders (here I shuddered a bit). A Boston administrator wrote, “I have not seen a better statement of the problem anywhere. I wish I could believe as you do that Jesuit education is a sufficient response.” New England bishops discussed the essay, some agreeing, some not. A director of Jesuit Volunteers International saw postgraduate service as a solution. A Flemish theologian sent his essay on “Youth, Liturgy, and Postmodernity.” An Irish theologian realized that postmodernism was not just a construct of intellectuals. A Connecticut group thought their children saw *Titanic* over and over because “they’re getting weary of overblown realism. They want romance! They want idealism!” A California university asked me to speak with campus ministry and some trustees. A Philadelphia psychologist described his therapy of “narrative practice”: asking his clients to describe the effects of the “dominant text or story in their lives” (usually a postmodern one), he asks them to recall “challenges” to this text and then consider how they might construct “alternate texts” that might serve as a new worldview for their lives.

The responses convinced me: my essay spoke the truth. In whole or in part, students are postmodern. Nothing surprises them. Their emotions are exhausted. They desire hope and meaning but find only meaninglessness. And life is a game of chance. An article in the computer-magazine *Wired* summarizes their heritage:

The quantum. World wars. Elvis. Lennon and McCartney. Woz and Jobs. Yahoo! and Wired. WorldCom. Java. A carnival of bombs and music, wires and switches, and technologies of sand, glass, and air (Gilder 40).

No wonder parody is their common response.

How can Catholic education heal such students? And help our more traditional students?

MIGHT THE
INTEGRATING ASPECTS
OF CATHOLICISM—
THE CATHOLIC
WORLDVIEW—COUNTER
STUDENTS’
CENTRIFUGAL
POSTMODERNISM?

The Catholic Framework

Today’s Catholic situation is difficult: in a conflicted Church, groups fight about how to be Catholic. The “right” reads others out of the Church (the sad controversy over television’s *Nothing Sacred* was a near-comic symptom). The “left” so presses issues that instability reigns: why *not* have married priests, why *not* ordain women? And though John Paul II is rightly *esteemed*, he and the Vatican have so moved centrist thought to the right that old centrists seem suspect. The “Norms” of *Ex corde ecclesiae* trouble universities. Roman authorities lessen the role of the local church. And both right and left so urge moral issues—important moral issues like abortion and peace—that the Church can seem more a power group than a way to God.

Yet this is the Church I love, the Church to which I give my life. I worship God in a believing community that supports my thinking faith. I live in a Church human in its sacraments, divine in its call to holiness, God-bringing in its actions. My church stands in the intellectual tradition of Aquinas and Dante, of Thomas More and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. And I ask: cannot *all* orthodox varieties of Catholicism be accepted and taught? Cannot God’s holiness be more central than morality or power? Cannot Catholicism be an intelligent, vibrant way of life and a church to love? Might the *integrating* aspects of Catholicism—the Catholic worldview—counter students’ centrifugal postmodernism? Or might we develop—with student help—a postmodern theology of belief perhaps from St. Paul’s concept of “folly”?

Again: how can a *Catholic* education help our students? And what do they *understand by* the word “Catholic”?

Curricula, Courses, Classes

A curriculum is a college’s major statement of identity and mission. My consequent question is simple: what statements do our curricula make as *Catholic* education?

Quite correctly, religion or belief are not issues in every course; each discipline has its integral methodology. (I myself do not teach literature from a Christian perspective; for me, *King Lear* is a deeply skeptical play. Yet I also teach the Catholic Literary Imagination.) In any case: are Catholicism and Catholic culture absent from much of the curriculum? Or are they relegated to a Catholic Studies Program with relatively few students?

What is the role of a liberal-arts core? Do professors *profess* a position? Do philosophers offer unity and mean-

ing? Do theologians present God and Christ as sources of unity, hope, and redemption? Are there courses in Catholic social thought, or spirituality, or an Introduction to Catholicism? And what is the role of other departments? To introduce moral dimensions into a course on intimacy or on macroeconomics? To offer students a sense of wonder? To show God as discoverable where the divine meets the human—in the “sacraments” of the world? Can our curriculum and courses, while teaching students to question and doubt, also help them to hope, to expect meaning, to be able to believe? And to be wise, good, even holy? I think of Isaiah 50.4: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, and skill to console the weary with a word in the morning.”

I end with three bold questions: (1) *Should* Catholic education survive for undergraduates? (2) If it should, in what form? (3) How can the liberal arts help students—postmodern or otherwise—to live a human life? These are compelling issues for undergraduate faculties.

* * * * *

Amid all this talk of “Catholic” and “Catholicism,” I do not ignore professors and students of other religious traditions: we surely all work together before God. And other traditions are needed: needed for ecumenism, needed to show how God speaks in many ways, needed to manifest the diversity of the intellectual life, needed to care for academic freedom, needed to engage students in multiperspectived discussions, needed surely to keep Catholics honest.¹ And, I add with affection, needed because you are splendid colleagues.

I end with a note on the “Jesuit” style of Catholicism. This style is intellectual, humanistic, generous, questioning yet affirming, God-based yet in many ways “worldly.” It has high intellectual expectations. It prizes human freedom. It cares about justice. It offers ultimate meaning and an integrated worldview—both by virtue of its Renaissance roots and by virtue of the life, death, and rising of Jesus. And its final goal is service—service of God and of others.

¹ Nancy Ruth Fox, and economist who teaches at my university, has eloquently expressed a Jewish perspective in a letter to *Conversations* (Fall 1998).

It is the role of the faculty to keep this tradition alive. Meanwhile, entropy—a favorite word of postmodernism—is at work among us, wearying, wearing down, wearing out . . .

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