

# Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

---

Volume 6

Article 5

---

10-1-1994

## Responses: Hiring Catholics?

Elizabeth Linehan, RSM

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

---

### Recommended Citation

Linehan, RSM, Elizabeth (1994) "Responses: Hiring Catholics?," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 6, Article 5.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol6/iss1/5>

### *Hiring Catholics?*

*Sr. Elizabeth Linehan, R.S.M.*  
Associate Professor of  
Philosophy  
Saint Joseph's University

David O'Brien suggests that effective strategy to maintain Catholic identity involves "deliberate action to influence faculty hiring to insure a critical mass of faculty in all disciplines committed to the mission of the school and alert to the agenda of the American Church." He was not present for the meeting of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education with faculty, staff, and administrators at my institution this past spring, but I wish he had been. The opening comment, made by a Saint Joseph's Jesuit faculty member, was (roughly), "On my darkest days I think we have about ten more years of Jesuit identity, and the problem is hiring." The group was off and running, debating with one another in a way we seldom can in our ordinary lives.

I agree that hiring is a central concern, and will comment on one aspect: the relevance of *being a Catholic*. O'Brien stops short of claiming that those who constitute the "critical mass" must actually *be* Catholic, but surely some members of the group would have to be. To be fully engaged with the traditions and tasks of the Church would seem to require identifying oneself as a member of it. Assuming—at least for the sake of argument—that some critical mass of actual Catholics is necessary, I offer some cautions.

In the years that I was Philosophy Department Chair at

Saint Joseph's, we carried out five or six searches. Support for the university's mission was important to us, and we struggled with how to make it a criterion for candidate selection. Ultimately we developed this formula for our advertising: "Essential: ability to contribute to the mission of a Jesuit, Catholic institution in a deliberately diverse department." Having stated this requirement in our ad, we were in a position to question candidates about their potential contributions. In addition, some applicants addressed it in their initial letters, often by stating that they were Catholics. (Others said they had been "raised Catholic," or listed Catholic or Jesuit schooling they had had.)

In these particular searches, we were not making Church membership a requirement for our positions. However, we counted indications of Catholic background or commitment a "plus" in selecting candidates to interview at our major convention, and we asked each to discuss how he or she could contribute to our mission. We got a variety of answers. At one extreme were people who had not taken that part of our ad very seriously and had given the subject no thought. To the extent that these responded at all, they endorsed the liberal arts or expressed respect for those (others) who have religious beliefs. Some thought the question could be answered simply by stating that they were Catholics. At another extreme, some had taken the statement very seriously indeed and feared we had a hidden agenda ("only Catholics need apply"). Others were eager to

demonstrate just how orthodoxly Catholic they were, including the strongly fundamentalist Catholic who promised large numbers of conversions. In sum, our questions uncovered a great variety of relationships to Catholicism; among Catholics, the variety mirrored the pluralism within the Church itself.

It is not easy to specify what we are looking for in "Catholic" faculty, or to say how we'll know

---

*In sum, our questions uncovered a great variety of relationships to Catholicism; among Catholics, the variety mirrored the pluralism within the Church itself.*

---

when we find it. It's tempting to finesse the issue by pointing to a PCP (Perfect Catholic Professor) that we know. She is a practicing member of the Church, a woman of notable religious devotion, with an intellectual appreciation of Catholic traditions, a respect for diversity without compromise of fidelity to the Magisterium, and a commitment to social justice. Moreover, she is at home in a university and treasures the freedom of inquiry it protects. Like Justice Potter Stewart (in quite another context), we might want to say that, while we cannot give a definition, we know it when we see

it. We'll just go hire one of *those*. However, these wonderful attributes are not always—perhaps not often—found in one person. One can be a deeply committed, practicing Catholic and know little about the intellectual traditions of the Church; and, obviously, one can have profound scholarly appreciation of those traditions yet not be a member of the Church. Some Catholics are committed to the Church yet not “in good standing” within it, for example because of marital status. Others are at odds in one way or another with Church policies, e.g., priestly celibacy and the ministerial roles of women. And so on.

In this area as in the others Professor O'Brien has identified, “the Catholic problem is not so easily dealt with.”

### *Collegium, Catholic Identity, and the Non-Catholic*

Suzanne Matson

Assistant Professor of English  
Boston College

As a non-Catholic teaching at a Jesuit university, it is hard to know what my place is or should be in the discussion about the nature of Catholic higher education. Though in my teaching and academic life I feel myself to be a fully participating member of my institution, calls to action in O'Brien's article such as his general urging for “deliberate action to influence faculty hiring to insure a critical mass of faculty in all disciplines committed to the mission of the school and alert to the agenda of

---

*The word “faith” started me checking my mental pockets with alarm: I don't have it, I don't think I've ever had it. Have I?*

---

the American church” make me, first of all, wonder what some of those phrases mean, exactly; and second, to feel suddenly not part of my university's “critical mass” if being so means being Catholic, or being even a professed Christian. That sentence alone in O'Brien's essay shifts me from feeling myself to be integral in my university community to being someone on the non-“critical” margins.

I first confronted this issue of my “university identity” when my Dean invited me to be Boston College's faculty representative at an eight-day conference called “Collegium,” the first of three planned summer institutes founded by Thomas Landy, S.J., on the topic of “Faith and Intellectual Life” (O'Brien mentions “Collegium” in a footnote to his essay). The invitation filled me with distress. Here I was, a tenure-track assistant professor being asked not only to attend a conference on the “Christian academic vocation,” but to reveal, by accepting or declining the invitation, something about my spiritual positioning—an aspect of self which to me felt profoundly personal. Never before had I needed to face so pointedly my position as an agnostic within a Catholic university community. I found “Collegium's” stated goals to be

appealing: discussions of and encounters with particular forms of Christian spirituality, as well as opportunities in the week for reflection and writing. Yet the word “faith” started me checking my mental pockets with alarm: I don't have it, I don't think I've ever had it. *Have I?* Such is the position of the agnostic: nothing is final, not even doubt.

I wrote the Dean that perhaps I wouldn't be the best faculty member to “represent” Boston College. I explained why. I didn't refuse the invitation, but I clarified who it was he had invited, and in writing that letter felt uncomfortably exposed. I also began questioning my relationship to the university in a way I never had, even upon being hired. What was I doing on a Jesuit campus, anyway? Was accepting the job at B.C. some monumental act of hypocrisy? At the time I thought not. The question of religion came up not at all during departmental interviews and only in the most diplomatic of ways in the Academic Vice President's office. I was asked, “How do you see yourself fitting in at a Jesuit university?” In its simplicity and openness, the question allowed the candidate wide scope. I said something