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### Review: Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom*

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Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1998. xiii + 224 pp.

WILLIAM M. SHEA

A good number of the Catholics of St. Louis take a healthy interest in my university. In one case, just before Christmas 1999, I got into a bit of a row with one person who called into question the Catholicity of the university on several grounds. In the past, in situations like this, I bridled and bit my tongue. But as I advance in age and decrease in grace, I react. This time I reacted for half an hour or so, and I was only on my first drink. At one point (in the middle of the second drink) I realized that my devoted Catholic interlocutor supposed that a university is Catholic only if the bishop or the religious order or the pope holds the deed (if not legal, then supernatural!) and that anyone who acts as if the bishop doesn't hold the deed is a bad Catholic. Therefore, Father Lawrence Biondi, the president of Saint Louis University who recently sold the university hospital to a corporation against the public objections of Archbishop Rigali, is a bad Catholic. When I finished explaining that SLU doesn't belong to the bishop, the order, or the pope legally or supernaturally, the anticipated question popped up: then how is it Catholic? I did not go for the third drink as I should have. I did my best to answer the question and then, staring failure in the face once again, headed for the coffee pot and the cookie plate.

Now I wish Michael Buckley had been at the party with me. Father Buckley's contribution to the rapidly growing pile of printed pages on the American Catholic universities is significant. It is a collection of what he calls fragments. The essays included were penned between 1970 and 1993, all published elsewhere. I am sure he chose them for this volume because they are timely in this season of contest between bishops and presidents over just who holds the deed. But they are also courteous, entirely constructive, systematic as far as the essay form allows, always learned, straightforward in confronting problems and fair in defining them, and full of convictions strongly held and well argued. Any one who has read or heard him over the past quarter of a

century has come to expect all this. In addition, several of the essays reach a depth of spirituality and Catholic spirit that other authors in the field might well emulate.

The questions he addresses include the following: What makes a Catholic university Catholic and a university? Why should the Church get into the work of higher education in the first place? Can a university itself be Catholic or should it rather be a university which contains a vibrant Catholic subculture? What did St. Ignatius in the Constitutions envision in embracing university work? What sort of humanism is Jesuit humanism and what shape should it take in contemporary culture? What does the search for justice have to do with universities? Can the Catholic university accept and affirm diversity and pluralism and yet remain Catholic? What sort of service does philosophy offer to other disciplines and to theology in the contemporary university? How does theology serve the contemporary university?

This is a very interesting and complex set of questions. Every one of them is controverted, and Buckley accordingly writes dialectically as well as historically and systematically in answering them. The advantages of the book are these: several excellent historical studies (Philip Gleason's and Alice Gallin's) are complemented by Buckley's systematic discussions of carefully delineated issues; jeremiads on the declining Catholicism of the universities (James T. Burtchaell's) are met with a carefully modulated explanation of progress and decline; and the Catholic liberal construction of the transformation of Catholic higher education in the past three decades (David O'Brien's) is subsumed into a theologically and philosophically different and perhaps sounder view of Catholicism and culture. This is an academic book for an academic audience. Now it would be helpful to have a book advancing the same line of argument for a wider audience.

A number of Buckley's lines of argument seem to me to be particularly helpful in the current situation of the colleges and universities. They are argued in different chapters, and sometimes in several. For convenience

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sake I will put them in summary thesis form and count on the reader to recognize their value as provocations to a revision of current terms of argument.

**Thesis 1:** *A university can be Catholic because the academic and the religious are intrinsically related:*

The fundamental proposition that grounds the Catholic university is that the academic and the religious are intrinsically related, that they form an inherent unity, that one is incomplete without the other . . . . [They] do not simply exist juxtaposed to one another in influential contiguity . . . . Any academic movement toward meaning or coherence or truth . . . is inchoatively religious . . . [and] the commitments and the instincts of faith are inescapably toward the academic . . . towards the understanding both of itself and of its relationship to every other dimension of human life . . . . If allowed their full development, then, the religious intrinsically engages the academic, and the academic intrinsically engages the religious. (15-16)

**Thesis 2:** *The identity of the Jesuit and Catholic character of the university is appropriately but not adequately expressed in such slogans as “men and women for others” and “educating the whole person.” There is nothing even particularly Christian about these. Rather, it must be stated “in terms of Christ”:*

The Catholic university is to realize this intrinsic relationship of culture and gospel in the many ways it is a university: in the research and instruction and conversation that give a peculiar expression to its spirit; in the service and symbols and collective life and richness of an ecumenical Catholic culture; in the intellectual growth of its students and faculty and in the sharing of the diverse traditions out of which they come; in the passion for a just society that must characterize its graduates and that will in turn measure the religious and humane quality of their education . . . . The Catholic university exists to deepen the unity between Christian faith and all the forms of knowledge. No other institution within human culture can render this unique and critically important contribu-

tion to the church and to the contemporary world. (20)

**Thesis 3:** *Jesuits universities arise from a spirituality rather than a philosophy of education. There is a radical transformation of Renaissance humanism in the Constitutions and in the colleges set up by the Society. The humanism of Ignatius is utterly theocentric, and is based on his theology of the Incarnation and the divine instrumentality of all created being:*

First, all things are seen as gift . . . . Second, God dwells within the things that he has created, especially within human beings . . . . Third . . . God is seen not only as immanent within all creation, but at work within it, and at work for human beings . . . . Finally, the relationship between God and all things is one of descent . . . . One can find God in all things because all things descend from God and speak of God. (82-83)

**Thesis 4:** *Commitment to justice is necessary to the university as such and not just to Jesuit institutions:*

What is at stake is more than the Jesuit or even the Catholic university, though the question has been occasioned by events within the Society of Jesus and within the church. What is at stake is the relationship between the university itself and the exploited throughout the world, between the students, the faculty, the administration and the hopelessly poor. What is the responsibility of the university as such before the pain of the world? . . . [T]he university fosters “the arts of humanity,” a humane sensibility and an educated awareness, to be achieved anew within the demands of these times as a product of an education whose ideal continues to be that of the Western *humanitas* and whose fundamental proposition is *res sacra homo*. (111-112)

**Thesis 5:** *The university is a forum for argument over every issue, even doctrinal ones:*

A university is essentially an open place. It is ideally a forum for discussion, mutual collaboration and debate, where any position may be

considered and evaluated and any significant tradition welcomed . . . . This does not mean that the university is a place where convictions are absent. Just the contrary. Convictions [e.g. Catholic] are strongly present . . . . [I]t is important that faculty and students not only question, but profess. If the professor refuses to profess, he or she courts or idealizes a moral nihilism, one that would subject a university to its own destruction in the conflict between loud fascist voices and an academic community that itself stands for nothing. (134-135)

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If injury to the church and the university is to be avoided, the discussions between bishops and the Vatican, between the bishops and the presidents, and the discussions within the colleges and universities will have to be charged with deeper, self-critical, and historically grounded understandings such as those posted by Father Buckley in this book. Very few participants in them understand the terms “church” and “university” as well as he, and few seem as free of bias and partisan spirit. I hope the colleges and universities, and indeed the bishops, will call on him to do more thinking and speaking and writing along these lines, and I hope that the book is read widely (and peacefully) in the Vatican.

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