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Book Review: What Are Catholic Studies All About? The Catholic Studies Reader: ed. James T. Fisher and Margaret M. McGuinness

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WHAT ARE CATHOLIC STUDIES ALL ABOUT?

The Catholic Studies Reader. ed. James T. Fisher and Margaret M. McGuinness.

New York: Fordham University Press, 2011.

By Mark Massa, S.J.

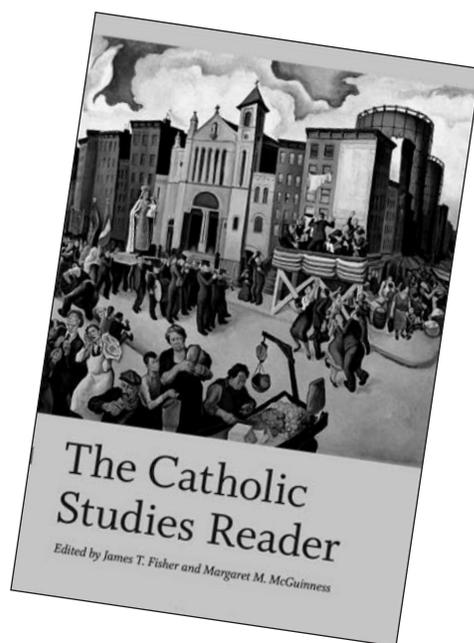
Catholic Studies programs, like Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, just sort of "grew" during the past few decades, largely without any kind of unified vision or sense of purpose. This luxuriant growth has resulted in a spectrum of types of programs that oftentimes share very little in common: Catholic Studies programs focused on the religious and spiritual formation of undergraduate students; programs focused on faculty development of new courses for institutional curricula; programs focused on professional research and the scholarly production of articles and monographs studying the North American Catholic community, etc. What has been significantly lacking in this welcome if haphazard growth are resources that bring an informed historical perspective and critical evaluation of the sheer variety of resources available to scholars engaged in this relatively new discipline.

Professors James Fisher (of Fordham University) and Margaret McGuinness (of LaSalle University)

have done all of us engaged in the Catholic Studies initiative significant service in their new reader, just published by Fordham University Press. Both Fisher and McGuinness are past masters in the field, being productive and respected scholars as well as recognized master teachers who have inspired students to follow in their footsteps in studying the American Catholic experience.

Their excellent reader is organized into five well thought out sections: "Sources and Contexts," offers four essays that address everything from how to mine the rich vein of Catholic memoirs in presenting the American Catholic past to discussing the classification of that thorniest of questions in the field – what exactly constitutes the Catholic intellectual tradition. The second section, "Traditions and Methods," offers the reader essays on the concept of tradition itself (and how one might present the varied definitions of that word to students), a helpful examination of the difference between "Catholic Studies" and "Religious Studies," and an engaging article on how one might go about defining just *who*, exactly, is a Catholic.

Three, "Pedagogy and Practice," focuses on classroom concerns by offering the insights of four pedagogues



who discuss how to include women's voices (always the majority of the faithful at any given historical moment) in a tradition presided over by men; how the Catholic social tradition, including the rich tradition of papal teaching on the social principles of Catholic Christianity, can energize undergraduate students by approaching the tradition as a living organism

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focused on *doing* rather than *believing*. The section closes with an intriguing essay on utilizing “visual literacy” in studying Catholicism.

The fourth section of the reader, “Ethnicity, Race, and Catholic Studies,” is comprised of insightful essays on the much-needed work that needs to be done on the African American and Asian American Catholic experiences, as well as a call for crafting a more inclusive North American Catholic narrative by utilizing ethnographic and interdisciplinary methods in recounting a complex past. The reader ends with a section on the “Catholic Imagination” by examining poetry, the insights of cultural studies, and exploring new directions in Catholic Humanism.

There are a number of essays that represent “must reads” for anyone involved in Catholic Studies teaching or research, but I would like to single out four essays that are especially helpful and insightful.

David O’Brien, with his wonted command of the sources and resources, offers a brilliant essay that closes the first section of the reader: “The (Catholic) Politics of Catholic Studies.” O’Brien addresses the current “fraught” political situation within the church head-on in his article by examining three contested institutional centers: first, Catholic higher education, (where the sometimes-bitter) debate tends to center around the specifically “Catholic” responsibilities of Catholic Studies within institutions claiming to be “Catholic” in some public way; second, by looking at the growing number of Catholic Studies programs in non-Catholic public and private institutions, where Catholic Studies engages the larger questions of the role of religion in both American culture and American academic life; and thirdly, by considering the contested role of Catholic Studies in “independent associations” such as free-standing research centers, learned

societies and Catholic publications. My sense is that O’Brien’s discussion would make an excellent starting point for discussion in faculty or administrators’ groups considering how their Catholic identity does (and should) shape their mission statements.

Jeannine Hill-Fletcher, of Fordham University, offers a very provocative and engaging essay addressing just what the word “Catholic” means, and who should be covered in that definition, “A Definition of Catholic: Toward a Cosmopolitan Vision.” Utilizing the insights of scholars from a number of disciplines (especially those of post-colonial theorists), Hill-Fletcher argues that the seemingly clear-cut categories of “Catholic/non-Catholic” in practice constantly overlap, so that the dividing lines that many draw are considerably less clear than might, at first glance, appear. For instance, at Tokyo’s Sofia University, run by the Society of Jesus, baptized Catholics make up at most 5 percent of the faculty and student body: how then, she asks, is Sofia a “Catholic” university? If Catholic principles are passed on and implemented by a significant segment of that community, how does one measure that institution’s “Catholicity”? Hill-Fletcher thus observes that “despite our desperate, eternal attempts to separate, contain, and mend, *categories always leak*.” That insight – that “categories always leak” – opens up a powerful dynamic in her essay, leading her to argue that the messy reality of multiple loyalties “might be reflected in a dynamic definition of ‘Catholic’” as well. Hill-Fletcher’s essay would open up interesting discussions in a Catholic Studies courses.

Richard Liddy, of Seton Hall University, utilizes the insights of theologian Bernard Lonergan to argue for the importance of “intellectual conversion” – or “knowing what you are doing when you are doing it” – in doing

Catholic Studies, “Method and Conversion in Catholic Studies.” Liddy outlines Lonergan’s now-famous process of examining data so that “one insight follows upon another until one reaches the point at which one’s initial assumptions begin to be challenged.” Liddy argues that Lonergan’s theological goal – that of attaining a “critically realist” understanding of how the real world operates – should be the goal of Catholic Studies as well. Liddy posits an essentially *intellectual* core to Catholic Studies that is not just theological; actually, it would be more correct to say that it is *pre-theological*. That core consists in “realizing that that reality is attained not just by experience, but also penetrating understanding and refined judgment.”

Liddy thus presents Lonergan’s goal of intellectual conversion as the real purpose of Catholic Studies as a discipline. And that intellectual conversion highlights “the issue of authenticity, especially the authenticity involved in coming to know ourselves. It involves dependence on an inwardly known and appropriated criterion of authentic understanding and judging, an implicit commitment to intelligence and where it leads.” Faculty in Catholic Studies programs who want students to engage the Catholic intellectual tradition —and who want to engage students on how to appropriate that tradition — will find Liddy’s essay a wonderful starting point for discussion.

Book Review

Margaret McGuinness's fine essay on the Church's "social gospel" tradition, "Afflicting the Comfortable: The Role of Catholic Social Teaching in Catholic Studies Programs," offers welcome advice to faculty who want to engage students with a view of Catholicism that emphasizes *doing* over an understanding of faith as disembodied beliefs. Many young adult Catholics "not only often disagree with church teachings but also sometimes question the traditional definition of what it means to be a practicing Catholic." These young

adults tend to be less inclined to an institutional definition of Catholic identity, as well as less interested in theological and doctrinal matters. They are, as she points out, a generation raised in "religious education programs that stress Christian behavior rather than doctrinal beliefs." The Catholic intellectual tradition as such may not inspire or interest such young people: McGuinness therefore proffers the model of passing on the Church's message through its social teaching. When the Church's message is passed on

"through the stories of hospitals, schools, universities, social welfare organizations, and labor unions, it is easy to see its importance" in witnessing to the Gospel in the world. *The Catholic Studies Reader* promises to be of singular benefit to academics and programs that span the broad spectrum of ideology and mission, and will lend cohesion to a congeries of programs that are now united more in name than in purpose or structure. I never tell people to run out and buy a book.

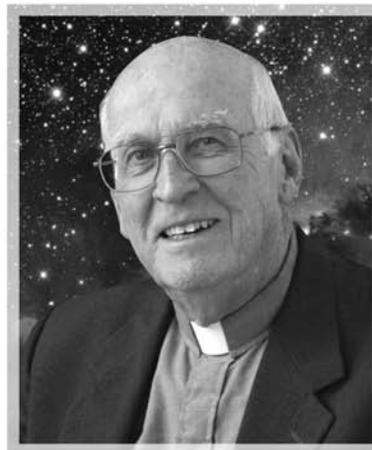
Run out and buy this book. ■

LE MOYNE COLLEGE WELCOMES ACCLAIMED SCIENTIST AND SCHOLAR
GEORGE COYNE, S.J.,
 AS THE INAUGURAL McDEVITT CHAIR IN RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY.

An astronomer by training, Father Coyne has devoted much of his life to researching the surfaces of the moon and Mercury, interstellar matter, binary stars and distant galaxies in order to gain a greater understanding of them. He has taught astronomy at the University of Arizona in Tucson, and has served as both director of the Vatican Observatory and president of the Vatican Observatory Foundation. His teaching in particular has been guided by Father Coyne's belief that studying the natural sciences allows students to gain a better understanding of themselves, and that such understanding is an essential component of a liberal arts education.

The chair that Father Coyne holds is made possible because of a \$50 million endowment that was bestowed upon Le Moyne through the estate of Bob and Kay McDevitt, longtime friends of the College. The endowment also will support chairs in computer science, information processing and physics, and will endow professorships, as well as fund related staff, research, technology and overhead costs. In addition, it will support the new McDevitt Center for Creativity and Innovation.

Father Coyne's arrival comes at a time of exceptional student interest in the natural sciences and allied health fields. Opening in January 2012, the College's new science complex will house the physical, life and health sciences. This addition is a 50,000-square-foot building that will adjoin the reconfigured Coyne Science Center for a total of 105,000 square feet of academic space. The complex includes teaching facilities to accommodate large introductory-level classes and small upper-level classes, as well as cutting-edge facilities for faculty research and faculty-mentored student research.



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