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How does the Catholic public intellectual or scholar combine intellectual engagement and the faith? For people of faith working in Catholic higher education, this is an important question. The present anthology collects the answers of ten “Catholic intellectuals,” each a recipient of the University of Dayton’s Murniaist Award. As Father Heft explains, the award recognizes Catholic intellectuals “who have made a major contribution to the intellectual life.” Their contributions cover a range of areas: theology, philosophy, history, anthropology, law, and journalism. The answers are likewise diverse.

One might expect the theologians to have the easiest time with the question. After all, as Avery Cardinal Dulles explains, theology is inherently at the service of faith. For Dulles, this inner connection also has a personal meaning: his coming to the Catholic faith as a young man west hand-in-hand with his growing love of theology. So the real challenge posed by the question for theologians lies in developing a theology that serves the contemporary Church by confronting the “needs and problems of the day.” For Dulles, cultural and theological relativity poses the most serious challenge: “the question of theology,” from below,” and his emphasis on eternal truths and fidelity to the magisterium.

Following that magisterium but speaking from a Latin American context, Gustavo Gutiérrez is led in a different direction by John Paul II’s call for a “preferential option for the poor” in Terzo Millennio Adventium. In his very illuminating clarification of that phrase, Gutiérrez links the option with an “ethics of solidarity” grounded in God’s preferential love of the poor. Are these two theological emphases incompatible? Not necessarily. David Tracy’s dense reflection on the challenges of modernity and postmodernity suggests a broad framework that might contain both. According to Tracy, theology today must draw on two basic biblical forms: the prophetic form “speaks on behalf of the other,” especially the poor, whereas the mediatic reflects on the perennial features of human existence: death, anxiety, pain, hope, and so on.

Other areas of intellectual endeavor are not so inherently linked to the faith. For intellectuals in these areas, personal history can have a decisive effect on the choice of research agenda. Anthropologist Mary Douglas, for example, traces her interest in social hierarchies to childhood experiences of hierarchy—in her grandparents’ home and at convent schools in France and England. In her spirited defense of the value of hierarchy, Douglas demonstrates the importance of the dialogue between anthropology and religion, both for her own work and for the Church’s understanding of itself as an incarnate social reality. Jill Ker Conway integrates her interest as a historian in autobiography with her own narrative. Fascinated from early on by the question of what virtue is specific to women, Conway studies autobiography as a religious document, in which the writer confronts questions about her vocation and relationship to God. Journalist and editor Margaret O’Brien Steinbrück’s account of her experience of the “women’s revolution” supports Conway’s conclusions. As an undergraduate at Loyola University Chicago, Steinbrück found Catholics, especially Catholic women but also men, who accepted that revolution. The official Church,
Students follow a Jesuit-led discussion on the campus of Saint Louis University.