Responses: Collegium, Catholic Identity, and the Non-Catholic

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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."

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Collegium, Catholic Identity, and the Non-Catholic

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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 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...
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about feeling myself to be in alignment with what I perceived to be the intellectual and humanitarian values of the Jesuits. It was a careful question, and a careful reply. Apparently it was enough.

But was it enough? Should it have been? When the Dean got back to me about “Collegium,” he said he had checked with its director, Tom Landy, to make sure that someone with more “questions than belief” would have a place at the conference. The answer from Tom Landy was yes, with the warning that I would be in the minority, and the hope that I would come anyway.

I did go, with considerable angst and trepidation. On the train down from Boston to Fairfield I spied two or three others with the same distinctive notebook of readings we had been sent in advance, but I stayed buried behind my New Yorker, putting off the inevitable as long as possible. It was just as well that I conserved my energy, for the eight days that followed were all-consuming. Each day held a major presentation by a distinguished theologian, one or two small-group sessions for discussion, panel presentations by “mentors” (senior colleagues), spirituality sessions, and a liturgy.

Although I was certainly in a minority and a non-believer, I soon discovered in group and personal discussions that almost no one’s faith was seamless, or unchanging, or without internal challenges. The small-group sessions fostered a sense of acceptance and exchange that left no one out on the sidelines, and began conversations that continued as people strolled outside after supper, pausing in twos and threes on the grass until the late June darkness pushed us inside—where the talk still continued sometimes until midnight. It was as if once the topic were broached—how one’s spiritual and intellectual life intersected—no one could get enough of comparing experiences, sharing ideas, articulating why and how they had come to an academic vocation and what that had to do with fundamental questions of meaning for them.

By the end of the week I was exhausted, stimulated, and felt mentally more energized for a summer of my own writing than I had been before I came. The theologians who addressed us offered ideas on sacramentality, community, and social justice that seemed important, generous, and hospitable, ideas that in one way or another have become part of the texture of my own thinking. I didn’t leave “Collegium” vowing to convert to Catholicism or ready to reclaim my Protestant heritage. I did leave with some defenses evaporated, a new feeling of identification with my home university, and a lot of things to keep thinking about.

In retrospect, it was risky to give up the privacy of silence on the subject of religion, especially in a professional context. It was possible to lose the compartmentalization that allowed me to think that matters of religious doubt could be kept quite separate from everything else in my life. I still have more questions than belief, but I no longer fear the conversation that talks about and probes the shape of faith.