

The Faculty ‘Problem’

How can Catholic identity be preserved?

BY WILSON D. MISCAMBLE

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES in the United States possess a certain Potemkin Village quality. While their buildings are quite real, what goes on within them has increasingly lost its distinctive content and come to resemble what occurs in secular institutions of higher learning. Students emerge from Catholic schools rather unfamiliar with the riches of the Catholic intellectual tradition and with their imaginations untouched by a religious sensibility. This reality is painstakingly revealed in *Catholic Higher Education* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2006) by Melanie Morey and John Piderit, S.J., who predict that “a crisis is looming within American Catholic higher education.” It will be increasingly difficult to maintain even a Catholic facade in the academic life of these institutions.

Morey, Piderit and other thoughtful commentators argue that if Catholic universities are to navigate successfully through the difficult challenges of the moment, they must confront the fundamental issue of faculty composition and address the need to recruit a committed Catholic faculty. Is this possible? Or is the day too far gone when an institution might renew its religiously based mission by hiring faculty members who will support and sustain it?

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At the Tipping Point?

An examination of the present situation at the University of Notre Dame suggests that the tipping point is at hand—a parlous situation that assuredly is replicated in all the major Catholic universities. Dramatic action will be required to secure the school’s Catholic identity. If even Notre Dame, with its abundant resources and its storied role in Catholic education, fails in this effort, one must wonder who can succeed. Some specific details illustrate the nature of the crisis as it exists at Notre Dame.

Notre Dame’s mission statement draws upon *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and rightly declares that the “Catholic identity of the University depends upon...the continuing presence of a predominant number of Catholic intellectuals” on the faculty. Nonetheless, the last three decades have seen a dramatic decline in the number of Catholic faculty members.



A statue of Holy Cross Father Edward Sorin, founder of the University of Notre Dame, is pictured on the campus in Notre Dame, Ind.

CNS PHOTO BY KAREN CALLAWAY

The figure as of 2006 was 53 percent, which is somewhat inflated by those who answered “Catholic” on the faculty questionnaire but for whom the practice of the faith appears nominal at best.

The prospects for the immediate future clearly worry senior administrators. Notre Dame’s provost, Thomas Burish, has explained: “When the prospective rate of Catholic retirements is plotted against the contemporary rate of Catholic hires as a constant, it is clear that soon Notre Dame will no longer have the predominant number of Catholic faculty members whom we require.”

In Catholic universities, as in their secular peers, the academic department constitutes the key entity where hiring decisions are made. Today at Notre Dame, however, few departments conscientiously and enthusiastically support the mission statement’s call for a predominant number of Catholic faculty; the theology department and the law school are notable and honorable exceptions.

In some departments, a person who tries to raise the issue in a serious way risks being marginalized. Professor Kevin Hart, a brilliant Catholic intellectual and the editor of the journal *Religion and Literature*, dared to do this in the English department. Hart objected to the appointment of a candidate he thought incompatible with the Catholic mission of the university and found himself roundly criticized for his intervention.

The issue can still be raised in the department I know best, the history department; yet that guarantees little, as is evident from the results of its recent hirings. There are now 32 members of the history department; only 12 are Catholic. This past year we hired three additional faculty members, only one of whom is Catholic. This is hardly the way to maintain a predominant number of Catholic intellectuals. In fact, we hired in exactly the reverse proportion needed. As it moves into the future, Notre Dame must hire at least two-thirds Catholic faculty simply to arrest the decline that ultimately puts at risk its identity as a Catholic school.

One sometimes hears that the root of the problem is not in the departmental hiring process, but rather that it is a “supply” problem: there just are not enough really good Catholic scholars out there. A corollary is that all the really smart Catholics have gone into law or medicine or business. But should we accept the supply-side argument? Forgive me for being a little skeptical. The Rev. Andrew Greeley’s careful research since the 1960s put to rest the canards that Catholics were anti-intellectual, overly materialistic, academically inferior and not well represented in graduate schools. He demonstrated that plenty of Catholics have pursued academic careers across a wide range of disciplines. Catholic scholars there are aplenty.

But implicitly the further claim is made that these schol-

ars just are not good enough, given the present aspirations of universities like Notre Dame. Not enough of these scholars have the right academic pedigree—they have not received the imprimatur of an elite graduate school (the Ivy League, Chicago, Berkeley or Stanford, with an occasional stoop down to Michigan); they have not won the prominent fellowships or published with the prestige presses. Perhaps there is something to this argument. Certainly a focus on the criteria of academic pedigree and prestige narrows the available pool, but forgive my further skepticism. I am familiar with too many cases in which an able Catholic did not obtain a position here.

The Cambridge Cases

My skepticism was especially heightened from a particular episode in 1999-2000, when the history department investigated the possibility of appointing the distinguished British Catholic intellectual Eamon Duffy. Duffy, who teaches at the University of Cambridge, is the author of—among other works—a landmark book, *The Stripping of the Altars*, which reframed how scholars have viewed the English Reformation. He is a historian of the first rank, known well on both sides of the Atlantic. His appointment would have done much to raise the reputation of Notre Dame’s history department.

Yet no offer was made to Eamon Duffy, so we do not know whether he would have come to northern Indiana. Colleagues worried about the “fit” (always a useful concern if you want to block something) and about the conditions of his employment, given that he would have done some significant teaching in Notre Dame’s London program. But strikingly, there was concern that Eamon Duffy was too much of a “Catholic apologist” and that he engaged in discussion of contemporary church issues, especially in the pages of the British liberal Catholic magazine, *The Tablet*. His tone was deemed rather on the “polemical side” (Duffy dared to think that Queen Elizabeth I has a few things for which to answer). The depth of Duffy’s faith commitment and the impact of it on his scholarly work and his intellectual commitments bothered certain people. So Eamon Duffy continues his teaching at Cambridge today, much to Notre Dame’s loss.

Just a year or so before Eamon Duffy’s appointment was considered, an appointment was made at Notre Dame of another Cambridge academic, this one in the English department. Professor Jill Mann was appointed for a five-year term to occupy an endowed chair each spring semester. Mann, a distinguished scholar and Chaucer specialist, served as president of the New Chaucer Society, where she gave a presidential address entitled “Chaucer and Atheism.” As she blithely revealed in the opening paragraph of her address, the “atheism” to which she referred was her own.

Notably, she appeared to want her atheism to have a major impact on her scholarly work.

Professor Mann recognized the importance of religion (both in medieval times and our own), but her intellectual suppositions were quite at odds with a Catholic worldview. Toward the conclusion of her address she said: "If you believe, as I do, that 'there's nobody here but us chickens,' then you also believe that there is no predetermined or transcendental truth. I agree with Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish that truth is not something we discover but something we make." For her, "the dangerous people...are not those who say that there is no absolute truth, but those who say there is, and that they know what it is." Perhaps she was unfamiliar with John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor*; and presumably she might have found amusing—or even dangerous—the declaration in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* that "it is the honor and responsibility of a Catholic university to consecrate itself without reserve to the cause of truth."

Professor Mann's views may have troubled some of those who approved her hire, just as they did a few hardy souls in the English department who were overwhelmingly outvoted. But the chance to make a notable appointment that would increase Notre Dame's visibility among its secular peers won out. Hiring an individual who might in certain ways undermine the school's true mission took a back seat to the payoffs in terms of academic prestige and reputation. Appointments like Mann's suggest that prestige trumps Catholic mission in the hiring process.

Needed Action

Occasionally, of course, fine appointments are made. A recent press release proudly announced the appointment of Professor William Evans, a noted economist from the University of Maryland. But no press release advised that the aforementioned Kevin Hart of the English department had decided to leave Notre Dame for the University of Virginia. Notre Dame will need many more appointments like that of Evans, while still retaining scholars like Hart, if it is to forge a faculty truly supportive of its identity as a Catholic university.

The matter of hiring Catholic faculty has been of concern at Notre Dame for some time. The Rev. Robert Sullivan, of the history department and the Erasmus Institute, now heads an effort to identify able Catholic scholars. He also heads an ad hoc committee on recruiting outstanding Catholic faculty members, appointed by Provost Burish.

One of the charges for this committee is to identify "the best practices for hiring Catholic faculty members." One can only hope and pray for the success of these endeavors.

It must be understood, however, that this is not a matter that can be massaged by minor measures. The temptation for administrators is to hope that a little adjustment here and a bit of tinkering there might improve the situation without stirring faculty opposition. Settling for minor measures in the present circumstances, however, indicates a complicity in the secularization process. A major change in the hiring process is required, and the need for it must be approved at the level of the board of trustees and implemented with courageous leadership, whatever faculty resistance it generates.

If the seemingly inevitable downward trend in the Catholic percentage of the faculty is to be arrested and reversed, a major board decision calling for two-thirds of all future appointments to be committed Catholic scholars is essential. This would require very different ways of hiring from the department-based procedures of today. The university would need to engage in what might be termed strategic hiring or hiring for mission. A recognition that this approach is crucial to its identity could drive the endeavor. It would require Notre Dame (and other schools that want to preserve their Catholic mission and character) to be truly different from their secular "preferred peer" schools. Failure to take such action, however, will lead schools like Notre Dame to merely replicate such secular institutions and to surrender what remains of their distinctiveness. This is surely a sad prospect for those who hoped, with *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, that a Catholic university might constitute "an authentic human community animated by the spirit of Christ." A

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