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## SHORT TAKE

# Catholic Enough?

## RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AT NOTRE DAME

John T. McGreevy

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A surprise in my morning e-mail: an article by my friend and colleague, Fr. Wilson Miscamble, CSC, criticizing his own academic department-History, where Miscamble is one of my predecessors as chair-and our own university, Notre Dame, for not hiring a sufficient number of Catholic faculty. The article, "The Faculty 'Problem,'" subsequently appeared in America's September 10 Education Issue. It was soon zipping around the Web, and even got noticed on this magazine's blog ([commonwealmagazine.org/blog](http://commonwealmagazine.org/blog)).

On first glance, the accusation that Notre Dame is not Catholic enough strikes most people as odd. I graduated from Notre Dame in 1986 and returned as a faculty member a decade ago out of sympathy with the university's effort to at once work toward academic excellence and sustain a serious commitment to Catholic intellectual life. I've found the place even better than advertised. But apparently not everyone agrees, and beneath Miscamble's manifesto lie two important issues.

The first is numbers. As Miscamble knows, more than any other Catholic university during the past thirty years, Notre Dame has made a serious and concerted effort to recruit Catholic faculty. The percentage of Catholic faculty at Notre Dame is indeed decreasing, but primarily because most faculty members who retire are Catholic. This past year more than 50 percent of the faculty hired were Catholic.

That our students need the witness of Catholic intellectuals attempting to live out faith commitments in the modern world is true. That the academic job market if left unchecked will simply replicate at Notre Dame the faculty of other universities of its rank is undeniable. Miscamble is right to remind Notre Dame, and other Catholic universities, of this fact.

Unfortunately his rush to paint the glass as more than half empty means Miscamble must avoid facts less congenial to his thesis. Though he retails partial versions of old faculty squabbles about appointments, he neglects to mention the superb Catholic scholars who have joined the Department of History in recent years, including tenured faculty from Stanford and Michigan, a story that also holds true in other departments in the university.

Nothing about this recruitment, I must emphasize, is simple. Miscamble cites a study from the 1960s and his own apparently heartfelt conviction that "Catholic scholars there are aplenty." Well, no. The best data on religious affiliation among faculty at the top fifty research universities-a 2006 study conducted by Harvard's Neil Gross and George Mason's Solomon Simmons-suggests that only 6 percent of tenure-track scholars in the arts and sciences or business self-identify as Catholic. (The figure is slightly higher at lesser ranked universities. The authors excluded law schools and medical schools from their survey, where, historically, greater numbers of Catholics have obtained faculty positions.) Add this to other challenges-notably two-career couples reluctant to relocate to a small city such as South Bend, a problem disproportionately affecting women faculty-and one might applaud Notre Dame for doing so well at Catholic recruitment instead of bemoaning what Miscamble terms a "Catholic façade."

Framing the problem simply as recruiting Catholic faculty is also ungenerous. Conspicuously absent from Miscamble's essay are other faculty-Protestants, Muslims, Jews, unbelievers-enthusiastic about the university's mission. The History department recently hired Mark Noll, a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and perhaps the nation's leading evangelical intellectual. (It has long been the home of George Marsden, another evangelical and the Bancroft Prize-winning biographer of Jonathan Edwards.)

On Miscamble's abacus they do not count. But they make Notre Dame not just a better university but a better Catholic university. Failing to recognize the complexity of this task-recruiting Catholic faculty, yes, but also attracting scholars from all backgrounds sympathetic to Notre Dame's mission-diminishes the chance that the church will benefit from the first-rate scholarship it needs. The hope-and in many departments the reality-that Notre Dame might capitalize on its distinctive identity to make a contribution to issues of concern to scholars around the world would also wither. Our graduate students-not mentioned by Miscamble but deserving (and now receiving) top-notch professional training-would apply for their own academic positions and fellowships with trepidation instead of confidence.

Miscamble's preoccupation with the numbers also comes at the expense of ideas. Surely one responsibility of the faculty at a Catholic university is to cultivate possible areas of expertise that resonate with the long, rich heritage of Catholic Christianity.

This is not a confessional task. An appealing dimension of intellectual life at Notre Dame is that scholars from all backgrounds introduce our students to a range of subjects and areas not studied in such depth at other universities. We are strong in medieval philosophy. Sacred music is thriving as is the sociology of religion and political theory. In History this means scholars disproportionately focus on the history of medieval Europe and Latin America as well as on environmental thought and the religious history of Modern Europe and the United States.

What does this look like in practice? Our history majors and other students learn about medieval religious life from John Van Engen, author of a forthcoming book on the late medieval *Devotio Moderna*, the Dutch movement that produced Thomas à Kempis; they learn about Christians, Jews, and Muslims in medieval Spain from one of that subject's most distinguished students, Oliva Remie Constable; they study the abolition of slavery with Tom Slaughter, author of a forthcoming book on the important Quaker abolitionist John Woolman; they ponder the cross-confessional dimensions of the Reformation with Brad Gregory, author of a prize-winning book on martyrdom in early Modern Europe; they learn about the Catholic evangelization of Latin America with Sabine MacCormack, a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; they study world fundamentalism with R. Scott Appleby, editor of the standard overview on the subject; they probe the history of early Islam with Paul Cobb, now working on an Oxford history of the Crusades and their impact on the Muslim world; they learn about modern European religious history from Tom Kselman, a specialist on France, and Alex Martin, a specialist on Russia, and about the interplay of religion and science in Britain from Chris Hamlin; they think about the Renaissance with Margaret Meserve, editor of the Harvard edition of Pope Pius II's commentaries.

I could easily go on. Is this scholarship and this teaching a decline from past glories? Hardly. Instead, these areas of special focus within the department, along with the many other historical subjects we study and teach, constitute a serious historical education. It is an education built upon the university's Catholic identity, not a repudiation of it.

Isn't this the goal of a truly Catholic university? I know Miscamble's desire to reform Catholic higher education is sincere. But I am also struck by how detached from the needs of Catholic students his reform proposals are. Catholic college leaders often talk about forming undergraduates, and so they should. (Miscamble himself has been an excellent mentor to many students over the years.) Campus ministers attempt to nurture the spiritual lives of students grappling with existential questions and decisions about their life trajectory. Social-service

centers inculcate a sense of responsibility for the poor as gospel obligation, not noblesse oblige.

But students need intellectual formation too. We can't guarantee faith. But we can help students learn. And a test of a serious Catholic university is whether we can cultivate the intellectual abilities of our Catholic students so that they become thoughtful, reflective Catholic adults. Most of this is the ordinary hard work of teaching students to write, paint, measure, build, experiment, and think. Some of it is more specific: some students at Notre Dame enter the university unable to locate a Bible passage, much less identify Augustine. They don't know that Thomas Aquinas immersed himself in Islamic texts, or that the work of Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo is inseparable from his Catholicism. They are unaware that American Catholics are not a majority in American society, or that American Catholics are a tiny percentage of Catholics in a global church.

Here, oddly enough, lies an opportunity that all of us concerned with Catholic education should seize. As institutions that take religion and matters of ultimate concern seriously, in an academic world often content to bracket these subjects as mere matters of opinion, Catholic universities can contribute to the wider world of learning in unusual ways. At the same time, they can attempt to nurture the future leaders that our church, and for that matter our society, so desperately need.

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## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

### **John T. McGreevy**

John T. McGreevy is professor of history at the University of Notre Dame and author of *Catholicism and American Freedom* (Norton).

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