

## ARE THERE ANY (REALLY GOOD) CATHOLIC SCHOLARS OUT THERE?

### FURTHER THOUGHTS ON THE FACULTY ‘PROBLEM’

WILSON D. MISCAMBLE, C.S.C.

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

---

Raising questions concerning faculty hiring and commitment in Catholic universities is a somewhat risky business. To address the matter in a forthright manner—and here I speak from the experience of some years ago—invites criticism that one is intolerant or divisive or narrow or unappreciative of the contributions of non-Catholic colleagues or unconcerned with academic quality or other labels which carry limited cachet in university circles. Perhaps, therefore, it is hardly surprising that this crucial issue—the elephant in the room when considering the character and identity of Catholic universities and colleges—receives such little direct public discussion and attention.

Yet, the overall reaction to my recent article in *America* [“The Faculty ‘Problem’”—September 10, 2007] made clear to me that serious participants in and observers of Catholic higher education know that this is an issue that must be faced if the atrophy in the distinctive character of Catholic universities is to be arrested and reversed. I am grateful to all those who took the opportunity to offer comments on my essay either in the letters gathered in a recent “State of the Question” compilation in *America* or in discussions on various blogs—most notably those of *Commonweal*, *America*, and “Mirror of Justice.” I am especially appreciative of the response of my department chair John McGreevy that appeared in *America*’s sister publication *Commonweal* under the title “Catholic Enough? Religious Identity at Notre Dame.” His article provides my point of departure for some further comments, in which I have tried also to deal implicitly with observations raised by other respondents.

Here I explore three crucial issues—(1) what number of committed Catholic faculty is needed to assure fulfillment of mission in a Catholic school; (2) the available supply of such dedicated scholars; and (3) the intellectual needs of Catholic students. But, I must first emphasize that nothing in my piece should be read as showing a lack of appreciation

for non-Catholic faculty who support the mission of a Catholic university. I bow to no one in my appreciation of the wonderful efforts of colleagues like David Solomon and George Marsden who contribute so effectively to the fulfillment of Notre Dame's mission as a Catholic University. Dare I say some of my best personal and professional friends are non-Catholics, and I am grateful to non-Catholic scholars who respect and, in multiple ways, contribute to the university's mission. Not surprisingly then, I take exception to John's suggestion that on my "abacus" such faculty "do not count," with its implication that I dismiss the contribution of such folk. I don't. But, let me clear, while I value the contribution of my non-Catholic colleagues, I hold that a Catholic university can be securely maintained and effectively developed only if there is a predominance of committed Catholics on its faculty. My most thoughtful non-Catholic colleagues hold the same position.

### **THE QUESTION OF NUMBERS**

This leads to the questions of numbers. John accuses me of avoiding facts "less congenial" to my thesis and offers a litany of worthy developments—note all those excellent courses available in the history department etc—which would form a fine basis for one of those 'reassuring' presentations that administrators are so skilled at presenting to boards of trustees and advisory councils. Of course good things happen at Notre Dame. But in his effort to paint an upbeat picture of the current situation at Notre Dame John neglects to address directly my point of whether a "tipping point" is at hand. Nor does he indicate his agreement with the university mission statement's declaration that the "Catholic identity of the University depends upon . . . the continuing presence of a predominant number of Catholic intellectuals" on the faculty. These omissions are telling and perhaps point to a significant disagreement between us.

I hold that Notre Dame's integrity as a Catholic university and the furtherance of its mission will be secured only with a solid majority of committed Catholic faculty. I infer that John, while not objecting to this as a goal and while undoubtedly working hard to attract strong Catholic faculty to Notre Dame, likely could live with a smaller proportion of Catholics—let us term it a 'critical mass' of say 40 percent. But having a 'critical number of Catholic faculty' is the strategy that a number of other Catholic colleges and universities adopted in the recent past and the path they have trod is hardly reassuring. Regrettably, it leads inevitably to attenuation of mission as the 'critical mass' percentage regularly gets revised downwards. It is a course Notre Dame cannot take if it wants to preserve its treasured heritage and build upon it.

Now I readily will concede that numbers are not everything and have to be treated with a certain wariness. I suspect John and I would agree that it is numbers of committed Catholic faculty who embody the fundamental purposes of the institution that matters. Having a majority of folk who answer "Catholic" on the faculty questionnaire but who are either ambivalent or even hostile to the fundamental mission of the school hardly suffices. There are doubtless departments that score high in those 'numbers' but fall short in commitment to mission. But the remedy here is certainly not to let the numbers

slip still further, but rather to evaluate carefully the role prospective faculty members can play in fulfilling the mission.

### **ARE THERE CATHOLIC SCHOLARS OUT THERE?**

Are there sufficient numbers of such committed and capable Catholic scholars available to constitute a solid majority of the faculty at Notre Dame and other Catholic institutions? This is a central question. John McGreevy is rather pessimistic. He notes that “only 6 percent” of faculty at the top fifty research universities “self-identify as Catholic.” That figure may seem low relatively—and, incidentally, might prompt a curious person to wonder why Catholics (and religious believers in general) are so under-represented at the supposed top schools—but it actually represents a substantial raw number of faculty who are possible recruits to Notre Dame. Moreover, John substantially limits the recruiting pool by referencing only these major research schools. First-rate Catholic scholars also ply their trade at fine liberal arts colleges and at so-called second-tier research institutions, a group which includes Notre Dame itself. Furthermore, the community of Catholic intellectuals is hardly limited to the United States. Notre Dame has a valued tradition extending back for decades of recruiting non-American Catholic scholars like Waldemar Gurian and Stephen Kertesz which surely must be continued. (Of course, it still continues the practice of recruiting overseas but one wonders how effectively when the avowed atheist Jill Mann gained an appointment and the renowned Catholic scholar Eamon Duffy did not.) In short, the recruitment pool is significantly larger than John implies.

I am not suggesting that hiring Catholic faculty is easy—and this is especially the case in certain branches of science and engineering—but that it is feasible and essential. It requires enhanced efforts to identify Catholic scholars and to recruit them, and a deepened appreciation of all who serve on hiring committees for the necessity for this. Without such faculty Catholic institutions inevitably will short-change their students and lose their fundamental purpose.

### **THE INTELLECTUAL NEEDS OF STUDENTS**

I wrote my initial article partly out of a concern that “students emerge from Catholic schools rather unfamiliar with the riches of the Catholic intellectual tradition and with their imaginations untouched by a religious sensibility.” So I was rather surprised to read John’s suggestion that my “preoccupation” with hiring Catholic faculty somehow or other meant I didn’t take the “intellectual formation” of students seriously. This is a canard but let me brush by it to make a larger point. John seems to think that “campus ministers” have a responsibility “to nurture the spiritual lives of students grappling with existential questions and decisions about their life trajectory,” and that “social service centers inculcate a sense of responsibility for the poor as gospel obligation, not as noblesse oblige.” And, then comes “intellectual formation” as exemplified in a Catholic school it seems by lots of courses ABOUT religion. This is an extraordinary division of responsibilities and one which I doubt John would defend on mature reflection. Intellectual formation in a Catholic university is not to be detached or separated from

faith questions or issues of morality and justice. A Catholic university exists in large part to allow for the integration of intellectual and moral and religious thinking and faculty should engage students in reflection on such matters.

Additionally, this thinking, contra John McGreevy, does have a distinct confessional dimension to it. Lots of decent secular schools teach various courses about religion. Yet in adopting the “religious studies” model they affirm little as true about religion. This should not be the approach favored at Notre Dame or in any Catholic school. In them deeply held faith convictions should be in evidence, and faculty across the disciplines should encourage students to gain a deeper knowledge of Catholic thought and teaching to aid them to confront “matters of ultimate concern.” Committed Catholic scholars serving as teachers and mentors and models must undertake this work each in their own ways. An electrical engineer or a chemist might contribute in less direct ways than a theologian, but all would respect and appreciate the intellectual relevance of faith. By words and deeds they should convey to their students that faith is not to be sequestered off in some private domain but should guide how they live in and engage our world.

### **A DISTINCTIVE APPROACH?**

There is some irony in the fact that Catholic institutions of higher learning increasingly have given up on a distinctive religious and moral approach to education and come to resemble secular institutions of higher learning right at the time when thoughtful faculty in the most elite of such institutions note the barrenness of their own educational programs. Former Harvard president Derek Bok laments that students are not even prepared to be good citizens on earth—he doesn’t worry about preparation for citizenship in heaven! Columbia’s Andrew Delbanco regrets that students are not aided to confront the “ethical issues posed by modern life.” The former dean of Harvard College, Harry R. Lewis, who titled his recent book *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education*, acknowledges that “moral education has withered” and that faculty have given up for the most part in guiding students to seek “a larger purpose for their lives.”

Catholic universities should neither follow the lead of such schools nor use them as the measuring rod for “academic excellence.” They should learn from them but have the courage and self-confidence to stay on their own distinct and professed courses. If they do so, and against the odds, they might contribute effectively by their witness to a renewal in American higher education. To play this role Catholic colleges and universities will require faculty truly committed to their mission. The crucial priority today is to identify, recruit and hire them. Let me say again this will not be accomplished by minor measures but will require vigorous action by those entrusted with leadership in Catholic higher education.

