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FINDING 'THE CATHOLIC THING'

In Aquinas, Marx & Billie Holiday

Paul Crowley

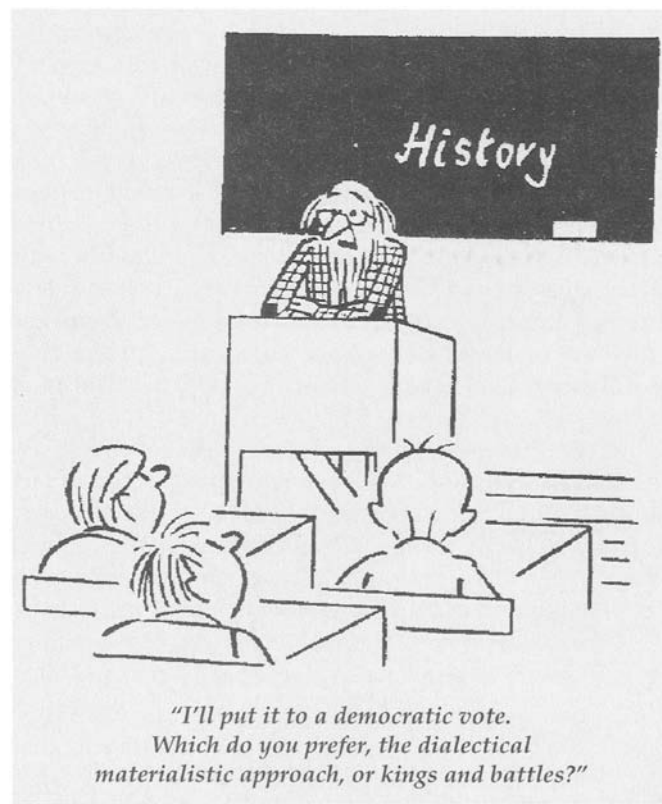
Catholic studies programs seem to be springing up like mushrooms all over the country. Typically, these programs involve the awarding of a certificate or a minor, and in some cases bachelor's and master's degrees. They range from well-funded and highly developed enterprises such as the program at the University of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota, to modest interdisciplinary programs such as the one at Santa Clara University in California. Not only Catholic universities, but some secular ones as well, are in the process of establishing some kind of Catholic studies program or chair. Some of these programs signal a healthy reinvigoration of Catholicism and interest in the Catholic faith tradition at a time when many people inside and outside the church question some of the directions taken by the Catholic church in the past few years. In many places, these programs are attracting students who are eager to learn more about their faith and to delve into it more deeply, even in places where there already seem to be many excellent existing resources for the study of Catholicism. The existence of these programs is already generating a cottage industry involving conferences, publications, research grants, and academic working groups at national academic meetings of theologians and religious scholars.

Yet, after serving for five years as director of the small interdisciplinary program at Santa Clara University, I am led to ask: Why? To what needs do these various programs respond? What has given rise to them? And if we are to have them, then what should they be doing?

The why question calls for a complex answer, because each of these collegiate programs has a distinct history. I attended my first Catholic studies conference, sponsored by the University of Saint Thomas, four years ago. Scores of schools with various types of programs were in attendance. What struck me was how widely divergent these programs were in their origins, goals, and modes of operation. It was clear that "Catholic studies" did not describe any single model of an academic field, much less any unified view of Catholicism itself. The Santa Clara program, for example, was the result of a discussion among some faculty in the religious studies department more than ten years ago, when

a Protestant faculty member proposed a concentration in Catholic studies for students interested in pursuing a high school teaching career. Gradually, faculty from other departments were brought into the conversation. Concurrently, Santa Clara, like other Catholic universities, was engaged in a long-range process of articulating its Catholic character and Jesuit mission. Some faculty involved in the initial conversations about Catholic studies were involved in these discussions as well. A further factor was the existence at Santa Clara of a number of small, interdisciplinary minors (Medieval/Renaissance studies, classical studies, women's and gender studies) created by faculty interested in establishing a focused yet interdepartmental scholarly community around topics of shared interest. Finally, there was a perceived need to offer students a venue within the university where Catholicism could be studied even more richly than within the religious studies department.

The result was an interdepartmental minor, run on a very modest budget, borrowing from much existing course stock,



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and offering students an intellectual and at times social community within which they could join faculty in the pleasures of delving into various dimensions of Catholicism. While the faculty involved hoped that the program might have a ripple effect throughout the university, encouraging the further development of courses in Catholic heritage, all agreed that this should occur organically and over time in ways congruent with academic life, and not through any administrative fiat. There was no hidden hand guiding the project, no big money coming from outside patrons, and no explicit ecclesiastical ideology shaping the outcome. The project depended almost wholly upon the enthusiasm of a few faculty members and students. Once approved through normal committee channels, it earned the attention and support of the administration. The aim was to grow, but gradually, and not to become too large. Catholic studies would assume a respected role alongside other established interdisciplinary minors at Santa Clara.

Modest programs like this could be a sign that Catholicism, and perhaps more generally, “the Catholic” as an idea, is worth studying in and of itself, at least as a religious phenomenon, but not only that. At least in the Western cultural context, Catholicism as a religion finds itself to be a modern development, that is, a religion whose main lines were established in the sixteenth century after Trent but which now faces a crisis at what could be called the closure of modernity. Especially in the United States, it is a religion of theological and cultural boundaries in an environment where older boundaries of all types—ethnic, racial, gender and sexual, political, religious, even sacrosanct national borders—are dissolving in the search for a new human constellation. Yet, North American Catholics have been living in a cultural mix for the past three hundred years, and have a long experience of pushing beyond a Catholic provincialism toward a Catholic cosmopolitanism in a culture that was not established by the church itself. And as a world religion, Catholicism finds itself cheek by jowl with other world religions, a fact that should not only challenge Catholic theologians to specify the parameters of orthodoxy, but encourage an understanding of Catholicism precisely as a religion among the religions.

As an academic field, then, Catholic studies would do a disservice to the reality of Catholicism if it saw all of these (and many other “postmodern”) developments as enemies to be fought in a countercultural war rather than as the reality within which Catholicism can be understood anew. Of course Catholicism faces many crises from within and severe challenges from without. But Catholic studies programs would do well to transcend simplistic within/without, “us-against-the-world” binaries, if indeed one of the aims of a Catholic studies program is to pass on a living tradition, one incarnated within the cultures in which it is lived. If Catholic studies is to have any apologetics edge, it cannot be a purely defensive one.

Some academics, such as Tom Ferraro of Duke, have ap-

proached Catholicism as a cultural phenomenon, studying how people “do” this religion: their liturgical, devotional, and prayer lives; their ethnic and cultural practices and traditions; their art and music and food. In his anthology, *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America*, Ferraro describes a “mysterious catholicity” that includes but extends beyond theology: “I am especially interested in how fundamental Catholic discourses—iconicity and ritual, Original Sin and sacramentality, intercessory mediation and Corpus Christi—function in social and cultural contexts beyond the narrowly religious, including where least expected. To me, cultural as a qualifier to Catholicism does not necessarily mean dilution or dissolution—a draining of the religious imagination into banal secularity—but can in fact signify the opposite, a form of transfigurative reenvisioning that refuses to quarantine the sacred.” Ferraro is talking about what scholars since William Lynch and David Tracy have called the “analogical imagination” of Catholicism—the ability of the believer to root understanding in faith but also to extend beyond the boundaries of church itself in a grasp of the larger world.

Ferraro may be on to something here. Perhaps Catholic studies could lead to such a transfigurative reenvisioning of “the Catholic” within the academic setting. In this scenario, Catholic studies seek not to defend Catholicism from a threatening secularist academe, but rather to understand Catholicism as a religious and cultural phenomenon within the spectrum of realities that compose the subject matter of the contemporary university. Catholic studies would not propose an integrating vision for the university (something only faith itself could do); rather it would try to open up Catholicism in an academic way, and, as an interdisciplinary field, even to invite other than Catholic “experts” to explore it.

How would we do this? I would argue for a Catholic intellectualism that turns Catholicism outward to the myriad manifestations of a religion that lives in a world of many sensibilities, rather than inward toward a conceptually clean point of convergence. At Santa Clara, we have tried to take a page from the writings of the late William Lynch, the former editor of *Thought*, who spoke of the “prismatic motion” of the Christian imagination. An idea enters reality through the imagination, but then changes shape: “Do anything. Say anything. Let anything happen. Whatever it is, it cannot keep a pure or abstract shape. It moves into a surrounding world... The original word or event becomes splashes of fragmentation and sorrow, diverted from its pure lines and intentions by the rougher lines of the people in between the pure idea and the world.” So, too, the idea of “the Catholic.” Catholicism will then be understood as prismatic, diffractive of its own light, and Catholic studies will be the study of a spectrum of Catholic phenomena, some of them extending beyond the boundaries of the Roman Catholic church as such.

It is virtually a truism that the so-called “Catholic imagination” is incarnational, but the expression of the Word in the flesh may result in an unruly display of what Newman called the “Idea of Christianity.” As Lynch warns: “This is

the moment most feared by many minds, this very beginning of the drama of the mind. It is the fundamental fear of entrance, of birth, of movement into the world, of 'happening.' For with it begins this diffractive process" ("Theology and the Imagination II: The Evocative Symbol," *Thought* 29/115). Catholic studies programs that take seriously the incarnationalism of Catholic imagination in this way might lead to far more exciting ventures than those that begin with a narrower theological vision. One question people involved with Catholic studies need to ask is whether they will fear or embrace this Spirit-filled movement which lies at the heart of Catholicism itself—a tendency toward diffractiveness that balances out the equal and opposite tendencies of institutional Catholicism toward unification and even centralization of focus.

If we were to adopt this approach to "the Catholic," then we might be able to avoid in Catholic studies what Lynch called the "manichaeism" of our time, the habit of mind that would create wide gulfs between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the religious, the Christian and the non-Christian. Instead, an "analogical imagination" would see different aspects of reality operating within a single image. For example, one could see the impulse of human spirit in the inventive spatiality of the Pazzi Chapel and of the later baroque, but also in the Pantheon (a pagan temple), and, lately, in Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao (a secular temple). Or one could find it in the pure forms of chant, but also, building from there, in the polyphony of Palestrina, and beyond him, in the adaptations of Duruflé or Pärt or Leonard Bernstein or even Billie Holiday. Or one could study the political trajectory from Augustine to Aquinas to Machiavelli, and in conjunction with it the theories of Marx, Gramsci, and Zubiri on religion. Or one could engage in a comparative reading of Graham Greene and Gabriel García Márquez on the Catholic struggle between love and lust. The possibilities are virtually unlimited.

Lynch warns against "those Catholics who would reduce Christ or Catholicism to an ideology, or some identification of the Good Tidings with a tribal instinct..." Efforts to limit the horizon of Catholicism (and of students) to a fabled golden age can seriously undercut the historical edge of Christian experience and the sense of irony that should attend it. When we look at the facts of church history, we are forced to step outside ourselves and even to laugh at the magnitude of what we claim whenever we succumb to an absolute of our own creation. For example, an honest reading of

Catholic history, including the soaring egos and human failings of Renaissance popes, helps to put into perspective the overblown cults of personality that have come to surround the modern papacy. And a study of Catholic prayers for the blessing of power plants and typewriters might bring a smile even to the most pious face. Catholicism, as Hollywood long ago discovered, is fun and is given to both reverence and laughter. Comedy, Lynch observes, "seems anarchic (and indeed it does have a propensity for thieves, villains, drunkards, fools, idiots, lawbreakers, and other people like the reader and the writer)." Catholicism and comedy go hand in hand.

Yet comedy is the flip side of tragedy, of life's darkness. The Cross forces the Catholic imagination to drive into the real, life as it is, to encounter the sacred, even (or especially?) in the sublime depths of what is dark, painful, or ugly, as novelist Georges Bernanos saw. An acquaintance with the "joyful wisdom" inherent in suffering and in tragedy is the *sine qua non* of the Catholic universe. But this openness to the darkness of reality will require, too, an intellectually honest look at the shadow sides of Catholic history, including the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the history of anti-Semitism. It will also move our gaze beyond the formal classroom into the communities where people live and "do" their religion, and to people often hidden from Catholic parish life: gays and lesbians, prisoners, street people, and society's forgotten.

A Catholic studies program can open students to an exploration of "the Catholic" that is also by analogy "catholic," through engagement with Catholicism's familiar and classic forms, but also with the unfamiliar and the new. It will involve, of course, an encounter with such Catholic greats as Aquinas and Newman, Greene and Endo, and, more ecumenically, T.S. Eliot or C.S. Lewis; but also a recognition of "the Catholic" in forms not immediately obvious, for example in what Richard Rodriguez has dubbed the "heretical cultural Catholicism" of Warhol or Madonna, and in the ecumenical spirituality of Simone Weil or Denise Levertov. In addition, it will pitch us beyond our North Atlantic axis to the "Catholicisms" of other cultures and the often-unrecognizable forms that Catholicism assumes in them.

It is this "mysterious catholicity"—a prismatic, diffractive Catholicism, one which crosses borders and resists mapping—that Catholic studies can help uncover. This is why it may well be worth our while to continue to pursue Catholic studies at places like Santa Clara, and elsewhere. □

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