Shared Presuppositions?

Nancy A. Dallavalle
Fairfield University

Preparing "first day" remarks for this semester, I rehearsed a few comments about class etiquette. No phones. Beverages, yes; food, no. The importance of attending class, and the many different ways to demonstrate "class participation." Which assignments are time-sensitive, which assignments can have deadlines extended.

And, as always, a word about class culture, about how we will proceed as we discuss heated topics: we will assume the best of one another, allow one another to amend statements, and give everyone time to think and speak with care.

In a February 2023 lecture to Fairfield students, Michael Carnes, S.J., of Georgetown University suggested similar guidelines for university life in a time of conflict, reminding the audience of the "Presupposition" from Ignatius Loyola's classic handbook for retreat directors, the *Spiritual Exercises*. Setting the stage for this prayerful series of reflections designed to draw the retreatant more deeply into the Christian life, Ignatius counsels that "it should be presupposed that every good Christian should be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor's statement than to condemn it."[1] Carnes suggested that this "Presupposition" would be a good touchstone for the culture of academia, so that the university would model an alternative to the polarizing tone of our current public discourse. I could not agree more.

Reading James Heft's *The Future of Catholic Higher Education*, however, I began to wonder about the *de facto* "presuppositions" of our colleges and universities. Are we presuming too much?

In the context of the *Exercises*, both parties already have much in common. They have agreed to assume specific roles: the retreatant chooses to be subject to this direction in a humble fashion, seeking to be closer to Christ; the director serves as a trusted spiritual guide, one with a certain level of experiential wisdom and pastoral training. Both find Ignatius' approach to be of value; both seek the same goal. This direction often takes place in a common space in which the two are face-to-face. Further buttressing the endeavor may be many shared cultural touchpoints—movies, family patterns, liturgical practices, coffee shops. The assumed good will each

brings to the encounter is a product of an extensive, generally unacknowledged network of presuppositions.

So too, to some extent, at the level of the classroom community on many residential campuses. There, this spirit of common pursuit, imbibed deeply, can lead to the development of a cycle of intellectual virtue for both student and teacher. Jesuit schools might name this "Ignatian pedagogy," an approach marked by its iterative process of experience-reflection-action; elements of the same, however, are found in many other student-centered contemporary theories of education.[2] As the teacher, I set the tone for the class each semester, but the ground rules are already in place: everyone in that room has been doing some version of "school" for years.

Outside of the classroom, however, the most notable feature of Catholic higher education today is a struggle for shared presuppositions. The world that Heft describes—of a vigorous Catholic intellectual culture animating an ecclesially-identified institution—is often asserted but rarely embodied. Some would say it is gone. More gently put: "Catholic" and "higher education" are terms that are currently up-for-grabs, with little resolution in sight.

This would not be news to Heft, a seasoned observer of Catholic higher education. He knows well the practical forces that have increasingly come to bear on this model in the U.S.: an erosion of public support for education across the board; the loss of a strong Catholic subculture; the pressure on admissions and financial aid models; and a demographic downturn in the traditional age college-going population.

Most potentially eroding, however, is the loss of shared cultural presuppositions. The generational distance between senior and junior faculty is not just about musical styles and comfort with digital pedagogies. Outside of a few financially solid institutions, changes in the world of academic labor have created a dividing line that has economic and ethical ramifications. Younger faculty are facing an uncertain future; in a world of shifting academic priorities and thus contingent employment options, the job market has become a casino where the house always wins. In addition, the pandemic has frayed the ties of common labor that knitted faculty together in the lunchroom or across the hall, as newer faculty come to our campuses already expecting their ties to the institution to be lived at a distance that is both geographical and emotional. Overall, younger faculty do not expect the kind of linear career or predictable scholarly trajectory that many senior colleagues enjoyed. To be sure, younger faculty want the financial security of tenure, but, even when that happens, the world of their senior colleagues is not their goal: it fails as a narrative for the world they inhabit. Will these faculty see the Catholic university as a place to flourish?

And who will mark the university as Catholic? Catholic universities did not ask this question in the days when the "presupposition" was visible, marked by the presence of religious order members among the faculty and administration. Today, however, our schools are increasingly led by lay people, sometimes with only two or three aging members of the founding religious order gently in residence. Some institutions may have larger communities, but with only a handful of their members active, their loss of dominance at the institution speaks clearly to the decline of a way of life. I share Heft's concern that these religious communities have not formed "the next generation of lay leaders." Yet, how would this happen? A few seminars on the Catholic tradition, spiced with the observations of the local religious community, do not result in the kind of visionary "builders" of Catholic education, intensively formed in the ethos of a lifetime religious order commitment, that brought us to the moment immediately preceding this one. The presupposition has changed.

Further, we now have to ask questions about the unspoken assumptions embodied in the "our" of our institutional presuppositions. While some Catholic campuses are vibrantly diverse, many have lower-than-representative numbers of minoritized persons among their students, faculty, and staff, leaving persons of color feeling isolated and demoralized in a sea of white faces and white culture. Moreover, the values professed at our schools do not match our institutional histories or present practices. The road to a genuinely diverse campus requires a careful institutional reckoning as well as policies that lead to new inclusive practices, a process that may well lead to significant questions about the institutional narrative itself. Indeed, for all of these "presuppositions"—about faculty, about founding communities, about an inclusive campus—the key question is not about continuity, but rather about the catholicity of our present and our future: what if "they" don't want to be "us"?

This opening of the "presupposition" is intellectual as well. The liberal arts have been under fire, as economic anxiety about the future of work shapes education choices by young adults—and their parents—leading them to view the humanities in particular with skepticism and to favor programs in the health sciences and business. Heft observes that the curriculum for these professional schools is often set by national accrediting bodies with non-negotiable benchmarks. These substantial curricular requirements, in turn, often require a reduction in the liberal arts core curriculum, which lacks any parallel national accrediting body that would wield an equally persuasive carrot and stick.[3] Yet the self-understanding of the Catholic school as an intellectual force rests on the breadth and integration of a rigorous

core curriculum, set in well-developed disciplines that offer majors and minors in philosophy and religion, the natural and social sciences, history, literature, and the arts. The need for this forward-thinking intellectual force, in the face of the homogenizing and meme-ifying language and logic of social media, cannot be overstated. Today's products of AI are "original" in that they are "one-off": they do not simply copy an earlier work. But they are, by their machine-crawling through the digitized world, derivative. My concern is not merely that we will lose the "patrimony" of the past; it is that we will not transcend the present with the best of human insight and vision. The presupposition of teaching and learning is human growth, not repetition.

A renewed understanding of "Catholic" could reframe this moment, from a narrative of decline to a trajectory of self-transcendence. In Heft's mind, the Catholic university of the future needs faculty animated by "Catholic intellectual life," an institutional culture that is in a "real…relationship with the Church," and a system that forms academic and faculty leadership for tomorrow.[4] This starts with Heft's chapter on the necessary interplay of teaching and research, which would be good reading for the academic committee of a board of trustees (and has a classic riff on confession). His chapter titled "Humility and Courage," which unpacks and contextualizes Charles Taylor's "Catholic modernity," offers a nuanced but accessible treatment of "faith and reason" for a mixed group of humanities faculty, particularly those who could use the nuance of analogical thinking.[5]

But it is Heft's promotion of the value of a Catholic frame for the liberal arts that animates the whole of his argument and lights the possibility of a way forward.[6] While not having an exclusive claim on the liberal arts,[7] the Catholic university remains a place where important questions can be fully engaged—and, in the classic formulation, "the Church can do its thinking" as well.

Thus, if an ossified understanding of "Catholic higher education" no longer serves as our "presupposition," perhaps a renewed and kenotic understanding of the catholicity of human knowing can call us forward in shared purpose. Catholic schools can demonstrate this commitment by listening to younger faculty as insiders and not outsiders. Faculty and staff can examine policies anew, allowing an inclusive future to write a new institutional narrative. And Catholic colleges and universities can rightly celebrate their founding orders, now shaping their mission conversation with honest accounts of complex histories, and taking as our own the hope, if not the clothing, of these forebears.

The Catholic character of our universities can and should mean that these are places where the entirety of human knowing is encountered and

makes a difference. Sharing *this* presupposition and open to the future, they will thrive as truly catholic—places where the dynamism of Heft's "open circle" is lived and celebrated.

---

[1] Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises,* annotation 22, cited at 44:29 in Michael Carnes, S.J., "Forging Hope, Reforging Democracy: A Contribution of Jesuit Universities to the Future" (lecture, Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT, February 15, 2023), online at https://youtu.be/HocVRyBgjzQ?list=PLqEW8Ktbvf0elW-NnpU465l55ktso2N4t.

[2] See Stanisław Gałkowski and Paweł Kaźmierczak, "Pedagogical Relevance of the Ignatian Presupposition," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 82 (2021): 193–203.

[3] James L. Heft, S.M., *The Future of Catholic Higher Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 56.

[4] Ibid., 79.

[5] Ibid., 167.

[6] Ibid., 172.

[7] See, for example, Michael Meranze's review of Julia Schleck's *Dirty Knowledge: Academic Freedom in the Age of Neoliberalism*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 21, 2023, online at lareviewofbooks.org.