

The “Open Circle” and Mature Secularity

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Speaking to the assembly of the International Association of Jesuit Universities in August 2022, Arturo Sosa, S.J., the Superior General of the Jesuit order, called upon his audience to consider the challenging question of what the present state of continuous, rapid cultural change may imply for the future of Jesuit—and, it may be appropriately added, Catholic—education. One aspect of the cultural transformation taking place today, he claims, is the attainment in many cultures of what he terms “a mature secular society,” i.e., one that “has overcome ideological extremisms, religious and cultural sectarianisms, the hegemony of the market and the market’s homogenizing dynamic.”¹ It is a society where the secularism of an earlier epoch, with its antagonism to religion and to religion’s influence on public life and culture, has given way to a form of secularity less threatened by religion, perhaps even a form of secularity willing to reexamine the meaning and worth of religion for society. Such a mature secular society holds out the possibility of a newly imagined cultural space in which Catholic colleges and universities might flourish—the reason for much of the optimism of Sosa’s address. A mature secular society may also recast the challenges that institutions of Catholic higher education have been grappling with for the past generation.

That Catholic higher education in the United States, even with the undoubted success of so many institutions, stands in need of renewal probably does not need to be argued. For every school flourishing with a strong enrollment and secure endowment, there are many more struggling with low student numbers and meager financial resources. But whether rich or poor, virtually all Catholic schools face the challenge of retaining their religious character in the midst of the competitive market that is higher education. Although it may be debated how and to what extent this is the case, it must be admitted that the secularizing influences that transformed Protestant colleges and universities in this country into the secular institutions they are today have caught up with their Catholic counterparts. If Catholic schools have not yet reached a point of no return, what form might they take in the space opened for them by a “mature secular society” to renew or reappropriate their religious character and thus to offer the society in which they exist a distinctive contribution to the educational landscape?

To that question, James Heft, S.M. answers with admirable insight and candor with his model of the Catholic university as an “open circle.”

I find much that is agreeable in Heft’s description of a Catholic university at once explicit in its religious identity and receptive in its relation to people and ideas from the wider, secular society it serves. Yet, perhaps nowhere do I find it more helpful than in responding to a newly emergent challenge posed by mature secularity: what might be called the “formalization” of an institution’s Catholic mission and identity. For at least the twenty-five years that I have been involved in Catholic higher education, at schools sponsored by the Jesuits as well as at those that are not, there has been vigorous debate over the appropriate ways the institutions’ Catholic identity is to be expressed. At Jesuit schools, this discussion has often occurred with the recognition that while, generally speaking, faculty and administrators were comfortable with talking about the institution as “Jesuit,” they were far less comfortable with calling it “Catholic,” and so they tended to emphasize the former while downplaying the latter. Over time, however, that formula proved itself to be lacking, and even those comfortable with the name “Jesuit” grew to be uncomfortable with the lack of regard for the name “Catholic.” The diminishing significance for what those terms meant for a school’s character began to weigh on the minds of those who worked at the institutions, regardless of whether they related positively or negatively to them. I know from experience that this happened at Jesuit schools, and I am confident that it happened, in analogous ways, at schools founded by other orders and Catholic schools not associated with any order. These conversations led to a commonly held conclusion: some way was needed to speak meaningfully about the Catholic character of an institution in a way that the largely secularized community of the contemporary university would not find objectionable.

What has developed in the intervening quarter century, I believe, is an increasing facility and sophistication by those at Catholic colleges and universities in articulating the institutions’ mission and identity formally with religious language and imagery, even as any explicit connection between the language used and the content of the Catholic faith becomes attenuated or outright erased. It is a sort of development of the distinction mentioned by Heft (pages 144–145) and still heard in campus conversations between “Catholicism with a big ‘C’” and “Catholicism with a little ‘c,’” only now “big ‘C’ Catholicism” has at times largely dropped out of the picture. For example, it may be possible to speak about a school’s mission to educate students in a “sacramental imagination,” as I once heard at a faculty workshop a number of years ago, to seek to convey a worldview in which reality is suffused with meaning and may even be open to the transcendent. But to

speak about the actual Sacraments themselves or their role in campus life, by which a Catholic sacramental imagination is formed and nourished, should be kept discreetly to theology electives and the campus ministry office. Or an institution might invoke its Catholic mission to lend credence to its commitment to promoting social justice, or to serving underrepresented populations, or to sustaining an inclusive campus community. All of these goals, I firmly believe, are aligned with fundamental Catholic values and should certainly be pursued by any institution that purports to be Catholic. But, tellingly, the question of whose understanding of social justice is to be operative, or which groups and individuals are to receive greater attention or concern, is often left unasked. In these ways and others, the explicitly Catholic values that inform the church's social teaching and its long pursued concern for education at all levels are rendered mute, even as a "Catholic" rhetoric is deployed to advance various—usually secular—ends at the institution.

The emergent mature secularity of today's culture makes this kind of formalization of institutions' Catholic mission and identity only more ambiguous. On the one hand, it opens a broader space in which religious, Catholic language may be more freely used to articulate an institution's character and purpose than was possible even ten or fifteen years ago. And there is wider acceptance of that articulation by Catholics and non-Catholics alike at many colleges and universities, where the leadership, in whatever sector of the institution, makes use of that language. Many people at these schools, whether they identify themselves as Catholic or not, share and actively contribute to their institution's commitment to social justice, social mobility, and even to the formation of a sacramental imagination and to many other causes and values that may be said to derive from the institution's Catholic foundation. All of that is to be lauded. Yet, this seeming quite positive acceptance of Catholic language in the traditionally more secular halls of academia also requires caution.

The danger with this kind of reliance on a verbally sophisticated but conceptually vague articulation of an institution's mission and values is, of course, that the mission and values become rather vague in the culture of the institution. That can and does occur, I would hold, even as their presentation to internal and external audiences appears more vital and relevant than ever before. Taken further, the articulation of the institution's mission and values in this formalized manner, decoupled from their original content, may finally misrepresent or even thwart the Catholic (with a big "C") values on which the institution was founded and for which, in some way, it is still responsible if it is to retain the name "Catholic" with any authenticity. Sooner or later some flashpoint issue will arise that tests the institution's

commitment to some explicitly “Catholic” value or that at least demands a more explicit definition of the institution’s commitment to the values it claims it holds, and in that moment the divergence between the formal articulation of the institution’s identity and its operative content will be revealed and its measure taken.

But more than that, it is simply hard to see how over time an institution may retain its identity, Catholic or otherwise, unless its present reality maintains an explicit connection with the heritage of its past reality, the formal expression of its mission and identity, and the values on which that mission and identity are founded. The loss of religious identity, experienced by Protestant colleges and universities in a period of more antagonistic secularism, may be the same outcome for Catholic colleges and universities in this more benign period of mature secularity, if they do not possess an honest self-understanding that clearly connects who they are with who they say they are.

It is here that I find Heft’s proposal of a Catholic university as an open circle to be quite helpful in imagining an institution suited for the present reality of a mature secular society. The content of the Catholic faith, expressed not only in theology but also in the church’s social teaching, its liturgy and life—in the entirety of the Catholic intellectual tradition, as Heft repeatedly underscores—needs to inform in a meaningful way the culture of the whole university, so that the articulation of its mission truly arises from a real set of values held and understood by at least a core of the university’s community. At the same time, the fact that those ideas are made explicit, and are in some way understood by all to possess a primacy at the institution, does not imply that other ideas and values—even some quite contradictory ones—are not permitted on campus or are not allowed to enter into the conversation and activity of the university. As Heft insists, there must be a “circle” constituting the university’s Catholic identity, but that circle is to be an open one, and thus the university’s identity can and should be challenged by ideas from all kinds of perspectives.

Still, none of what has just been said changes the fact that for a university to have that defined, yet permeable, identity, it must have among its community individuals engaged with the Catholic intellectual tradition, a curriculum that involves faculty and students with the ideas of that tradition, and all the other features Heft includes in his vision of a thriving Catholic university—elements in discouragingly short supply today, and a reminder that the “open circle” is a plan for the solution, not a description of our present reality. If Catholic colleges and universities are to sustain, let alone recover, their religious identities in the future, they will surely need to engage the openness to, and interest in, religion that the present moment of

mature secularity affords. Their mission, if it is to flourish, cannot rest solely with the religious orders that founded the schools—those days are long in the past—nor even the Catholics who inhabit and maintain them today, but surely must include all those drawn to serve in the uniquely placed institution that a religious university in a secular society is. An open circle, indeed.

¹ Arturo Sosa, S.J., “Discerning the present to prepare the future of the university education of the Society of Jesus,” address made to plenary session of the International Association of Jesuit Universities, August 4, 2022, at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, <https://iaju.org/official-documents>.