

A Future Worthy of Our Past

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In the interest of full disclosure, I should say that I've been privileged to watch *The Future of Catholic Higher Education* develop from its early stages, and I may be more pleased by its publication than almost anyone else but the author. I was a student of Jim Heft's as an undergraduate at the University of Dayton, and from my first days on the faculty I collaborated with him in thinking and talking and studying and writing about the Catholic intellectual tradition, Catholic universities, and many other things. I am either one of the best possible respondents to this book or one of the worst.

I want to comment on four of the book's many strengths, roughly corresponding to its four sections. I will conclude with a reflection that the title itself invites: on possible futures of Catholic higher education. The current historical and cultural moment is not a promising one for Catholic higher education, I fear, but such moments are precisely when we most need to imagine greatly and creatively.

The book's first section exemplifies one of Jim's significant gifts, which is being able to present Catholic doctrine in a way that allows university faculty to see its intellectual rigor and coherence (yes, along with its limits and contingency). Even more remarkably, faculty can apply these distinctly Catholic formulations to their own reflection on the sources of meaning and commitment that inform their work as teachers and scholars.

There is, of course, a place for explication of doctrine qua doctrine, and for explicitly devotional reflection on it. That place tends not to be in gatherings of university faculty. Jim models the power of standing at an academic distance from ideas to which he is profoundly and visibly committed. I think the effect for many people over the years has been the sense that they are being invited to stand shoulder to shoulder in an attempt to better see and understand, rather than being lectured to—even with the best of intentions regarding inclusion and “welcome”—about something to which they are presumed to be relative strangers.

The book's second section recounts key recent history that is not part of living memory for most Catholics, much less for non-Catholic faculty being hired by Catholic universities. Very few academics know just how far

outside the mainstream of U.S. higher education Catholic institutions were until the 1960s and 1970s. (An indispensable companion to *The Future of Catholic Higher Education* is Philip Gleason's history of U.S. Catholic higher education, *Contending with Modernity*.) In those decades, Catholic colleges and universities undertook an astonishing transformation that was also an intergenerational act of profound trust—transferring ownership and governance of their institutions to lay boards. As the implications of that transformation started to sink in during the 1980s, Catholic colleges and universities had to find new ways to navigate their relationships with the church—local and global—and their founding religious communities.

It was a fraught time. Catholic church authority can seem like a natural enemy to university faculty, a threat to academic freedom and freedom of inquiry. It isn't easy to articulate why there is reason and legitimate concern on both sides of a stand-off, and to justify why maintaining a relationship that includes such tense moments is worth doing. Once again, this book offers concrete reflection (and a very fine primary source for future historians of the era) on just what it takes to sustain and cultivate relationships between faculty and church authorities, while acknowledging their complexity and inherent tensions.

Being able to stand at a distance and explain both sides doesn't mean remaining neutral at important moments of decision. Along with several other colleagues, including some of the university's senior administrators, Jim and I were both signatories to an open letter in *Commonweal* in November 1999, asking the U.S. bishops to postpone approval of what ended up being the final version of the document that implemented *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the Vatican's apostolic constitution on Catholic higher education. Although we lost that battle, it was an important moment for me as a faculty member to see the authority of the institution publicly engage in a reasoned defense of the distinctiveness of the university's role. As we think through the many challenges of Catholic higher education in the current moment, the essays in Jim's book help us to see the transformations of the 1970s and 1980s in just enough hindsight to draw some tentative conclusions about them, way stations to mark as we plot the next stage of the journey.

The essays in the third section make clear something that shouldn't be controversial, but is. If it is to fulfill its potential, the still relatively new project of figuring out what the lay-led Catholic university is going to be and do is going to have to involve faculty in all departments in key, formative roles. Jim's descriptions of the practical and theoretical issues involved reflect what a challenging, long-term enterprise this is. It requires attention and mindfulness at every stage—hiring and orientation, tenure and promotion, leadership and governance. It requires study, research, conversation,

time. Done effectively, it is, however, its own reward and a life-giving current in the university. A departmental colleague asked me once, “What are those meetings you’re having in the conference room? When I walk past, people are always laughing.” It was a seminar in the Catholic intellectual tradition of the sort that Jim Heft designed and led for many years, experiences that transformed the careers of a number of faculty members and that were enriched by but also helped to shape a number of essays in his book. Those seminars seem now like an unimaginable luxury, but reclaiming their importance—the importance of sustained, intellectually engaging conversations among faculty as faculty—is as practical a necessity as keeping the lights on.

The essays in the fourth section help to clarify the role of faculty in all disciplines in a way I find to be one of the book’s key strengths, but in practice Jim’s reflections here also raise complicated questions of diplomacy (if that’s the right word) between the faculty as a whole and the units of the university charged in a particular way with sustaining the university’s Catholic character. To say that the faculty are the university is to launch a stink bomb into almost any meeting on the purposes of Catholic higher education, but, understood correctly, it’s a fundamental assertion that clarifies personal vocations as well as the role of the university in society. What differentiates a university from other educational institutions is the creation of new knowledge. To maintain that distinctiveness is not to disparage other institution’s purposes, or to defend some kind of hierarchical precedence. It instead is to guard a good that is vulnerable to threats from many quarters, with the understanding that preserving it can and should make its benefits available to all.

So, to say that in a Catholic university faculty from every discipline have roles to play that cannot be relegated to campus ministry or centers for social justice or Catholic studies programs or affinity groups animated by the charism of the founding religious congregation or even to the theology department is not to say that these units are not crucial. They are. And the point of clarifying roles is not to harden boundaries but to make their essential permeability apparent, to make crossing them not only possible but pleasant and necessary. But unless and until faculty from across the university are also engaged—as teachers and scholars, not only as volunteers and workshop participants—we are missing a crucial dimension, an opportunity to stoke a creative flame with nearly unimaginable potential.

But let’s imagine just a tiny bit of it. (Disclaimer: you really shouldn’t listen to historians when they talk about the future, so take this for what it’s worth.) One glance at the curriculum and faculty of U.S. universities (Cath-

olic and not) at the beginning of the twentieth century makes clear how different they are from the present day, but it also makes clear how decisions made then helped form the situation within which we work today. So, if I were going to use the insights that Jim Heft's experience and clear thinking have offered, what do I hope the future of Catholic higher education will look like?

First, we would congratulate ourselves on the success of one mission, success beyond the wildest dreams of our grandparents and their grandparents, and understand that there's a radically new mission we now must take up wholeheartedly. The first mission was educating generations of immigrants in ways that helped them to be successful in the industrializing economy of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. But now is the time to ask what our success is for. If it is only to safely replicate competent cogs who will fit neatly into the status quo, we are falling well short of anything we can grace with the term "mission." We could instead seek a form of success that draws on all the same expertise to re-imagine the possibilities in a way that, yes, enables our graduates to make a good living, but also animates new structures that meet the needs of the present more honestly and that make more room for humane possibilities in the future.

This new mission would be profoundly, inescapably interdisciplinary, and we need everybody. We can see some of its contours emerging in the efforts underway at many places to use the power of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* to bring together theologians and natural scientists, creative artists and social scientists, to design new curricula and research agendas that help prepare students for a world in which their professional lives will be profoundly shaped by climate change and its existential challenges.

If we trust in the power of that vision for the deep meaningfulness of curricula and research, we can also bring it to bear on other fields of study before the threat of annihilation forces the question, and I am convinced we can do it in a way that attracts students and tuition dollars and grants and donors, and prepares graduates who will be able to meet the opportunities and challenges that await them.

Some years ago, in a discussion on another campus, a colleague mentioned that, while their institution would like to enhance the role of the Catholic intellectual tradition in the curriculum, they felt pressure from the local area to concentrate on other things; for example, a program to train students to work in the baking industry. The implication was that this was a narrowing of focus and would compete for credit hours and tuition dollars with a less-tangibly useful focus on the Catholic intellectual tradition. But it seemed to me in the moment that it was equally possible to imagine a curriculum that included the biology and chemistry of farming and cooking;

the history (and art history—all those baroque flower paintings that embody arguments over the Eucharist!) of bread; the theology of the Eucharist; the ethics and politics of food justice; the practical skills necessary to open and sustain cooperative businesses that center the needs of the communities being fed and keep most of the profits there; and—

I could go on. Would this be a cartload of work? Yes. Would it cost money? Yes. Would it draw creative, enthusiastic faculty eager to put their own learning at the service of a larger, deeper, meaningful vision of intellectual and academic work? I think it would. I could (and in a longer piece would) make a detailed argument about the institutional history of the academy in the U.S. that would build a foundation for these castles in the air, as Henry David Thoreau suggested.¹ But for now, I will simply reiterate my real hope for this book—that it will be part of that foundation, preparation for a new generation of faculty from every discipline and every religious and ethical viewpoint, to bring the future of Catholic higher education into being. To launch out into the deep.

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Library of America, 1985 [1854]), 580.