Academic, Ecclesial, and Civic Responsibilities in *The Future of* [*American*] *Catholic Higher Education*

David J. O'Brien
College of the Holy Cross (MA)

James L. Heft, S.M., is one of the most respected leaders of American Catholic higher education. He is a Marianist priest and a Catholic theologian, and he has been a professor, department chair, provost, chancellor, and then University Professor, all at the University of Dayton. He has just retired after twenty years as the founding President of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies. His papers collected and rewritten in *The Future of Catholic Higher Education* suggest to us what he was thinking about in each of those vocational stops—until the last one, at the Institute, a story I hope he will tell us in retirement. Full disclosure: I have been privileged to work with Fr. Heft along the way, and to benefit from his wise advice and the grace of his friendship.

This book will inform the many people who care about Catholic higher education about what the best of our leaders were working and hoping for as they led Catholic colleges and universities into what another giant of the era, Alice Gallin, O.S.U., called "independence and a new partnership."[1] After Vatican II (1962-1965), they helped move American Catholic culture and intellectual life from "contending with modernity" (as a title of a book by Philip Gleason has it)[2] to sharing responsibility with others for the human family and our common home. Religious orders of men and women turned their hard won colleges and universities over to independent boards of trustees. At the same time, some visionary bishops, college presidents, theologians and Catholic scholars, and writers and artists were renewing American Catholic intelligence and imagination. At least for a while, they provided American Catholics with multiple opportunities to help enrich their communities, strengthen their church, and serve, as well as challenge, their society. Jim Heft was there, filled with hope, and in this book he makes clear what a noble enterprise it was. And so it remains, though now beset by unexpected problems in our church and country.

Jim Heft and I discussed a lot of questions over the years, and I would like to share a few. We are both Americans and Catholics, and, in that useful

Catholic way, we are both/and rather than either/or about church and country. Still, Fr. Heft is a priest and Catholic theologian, ever ready to carry out his civic responsibilities as a man of the church. I am a Catholic layman and "a simple American historian,"[3] drawn by providential encounters and personal choices into Catholic studies and church projects. So it was that, when Jim Heft and I talked about American Catholic questions, he was a little more Catholic, I a little more American. And we both thought our questions were, and remain, important for the church and the country we love.

First among those questions is that of Catholic intellectual and cultural life, on the one hand, and Catholic higher education, on the other. Heft's model of the "open circle" makes a great deal of sense for Catholic intelligence and imagination, although the hierarchical church has had reservations about how the circle should be organized and how open it should be. But at each stage of Christian history, scholars, writers, and artists, grounded in Christian faith, have encountered the earth and the human family knowing that God's creative love embraces everyone, everywhere, and, in fact, everything. One book about Catholic ideas that Fr. Heft helped with is notably entitled *In the Lógos of Love*.[4]

The open circle image may catch the vision of Cardinal Newman's dream university, but I am not sure it works very well for American Catholic colleges and universities. As I alluded to above, Philip Gleason named his history of Catholic higher education *Contending with Modernity*,[5] suggesting the circle was not very open before Vatican II. Since then, most colleges and universities have chosen not to be "confessional." Confessional institutions make important contributions to American society, and some Catholics, and some bishops, expect or at least wish Catholic colleges and universities to be like that. But most have made other choices, to locate themselves, with their Catholic people, not within the Catholic subculture as we have known it, but within the society and culture we share with others. One reason is that, whatever was true in the past, that society and culture are now ours. In the context of those choices, the image of the open circle sounds a bit like a family firm, where the meaning and mission are shared generously with others, but possession, and power, remain with the family and its chosen, insider friends.

In other words, the image of the open circle places Catholic Christians at the center and in control of the story. But the trajectory that our colleges, and many of us, have chosen moves with our students from outsiders to insiders, from subcultures to mainstreams, suggesting a different image. Perhaps the alternative is found in turning the energy of the open circle around, as the learners encountered outside the opening become insiders themselves, sharing fully in the life of the circle. They bring with them

new learnings as well: one thinks of how research on and the teaching of war, racism, extreme poverty, gender, and so many other issues changed as the result of extra-circle experience. The College of the Holy Cross, which I know best, took the risk of renewing its mission around questions of meaning and mutual obligation, personal and public questions, with the resources of Catholic faith, pastoral care, and intellectual and cultural life available, but in service to, rather than in control of, the common enterprise.[6]

Fr. Heft and I lived through the changes associated with the Second Vatican Council and the dramatic transformation of the subculture of the immigrant and post immigrant American Catholic community. Now there is a new religious landscape, with the solidity and security of the Catholic circle put at risk by its ventures outside. What is lost, however, is not purpose or possibility—indeed these are enriched—but power. To share responsibility, to truly be open, to engage in dialogue as a two way conversation, means not being in charge, but learning to make our way, with integrity, through persuasion and witness, with, not apart from, others. Our academic responsibilities as Catholics, enriched by the circle of shared faith, encourage us to move through now opened pathways to the centers of history, but our story is no longer subcultural, about us, but fully public, about everybody. What is out there, beyond our constructed circles, actually matters. And that changes how we understand the Catholic and American responsibilities of our colleges and universities. Jim, to his credit, negotiated these developments with sharp intelligence and pastoral sensitivity, but I had questions about whether care for our Catholic responsibilities inhibited our imaginations about the history we were making, together.[7]

My second question is about the word American in American Catholic higher education: How much does America, as distinct from Catholicism, matter for American Catholics?[8] I am an Americanist. There was an Americanist movement in the U.S. church in the late nineteenth century. The Vatican thought it meant that some wanted to create a church in America different from the church in the rest of the world, and condemned that idea in 1899. Americanism went a bit underground, but it resurfaced in the years after Vatican II, when the Council endorsed religious liberty, introduced ideas about shared responsibility and self-government into the church, and indeed opened Jim Heft's circle toward solidarity with the rest of the human family. Some renewal projects like ecumenism, parish and diocesan pastoral councils, religious education in parishes instead of separate parochial schools, changing dress and greater freedom for members of religious orders, all seemed suspiciously neo-Americanist. Disagreement on matters of

sexuality and gender seemed to confirm that suspicion. Eventually, widening worries about Americanization—seen by some as secularization, by others as unchecked nationalism—led to a reaction aimed at stabilizing the church and restoring a distinctively Catholic, counter-cultural identity. The reaction had limits, for the conservative Catholic churchmen who led this reaction had no intention of challenging the country's national defense or political economy. It was a matter of subcultural reconstruction, not cultural transformation. That reaction impacted directly on two areas of Fr. Heft's ministry: Catholic higher education and Catholic theology. We both resisted simplistic and self-serving arguments about secularization, but he was more sympathetic to ecclesiastical anxieties than I was. In those areas, fully discussed in Heft's book, he tended to focus on the church, whereas I tended to ask sympathetic questions about America, even American civil religion.

What made me an Americanist in these discussions was that I believed that there was something providential in the historical experience of Americanization of immigrant, working class, and so far mostly white Catholics. Indeed, I went so far as to argue that the experience after World War II of families like mine of increased education, more secure income, greater social respect, and access to dominant institutions amounted to what some theologians called "liberation." Ours was messy, morally ambiguous, flawed, incomplete liberation, like all such movements, but liberation nonetheless. We were free from economic necessity and religious prejudice and could make decisions for ourselves, relying on conscience, in ways far less available to our parents. This freedom, with its companion of personal and shared social responsibility, was nowhere more evident than on our college and university campuses.

This turn away from contention toward shared modernity was not a departure from, much less a betrayal of, American Catholic history. Professor Gleason's evidence that Catholic colleges and scholars were contending with American modernity was accompanied by news that they were at the same time doing all they could to help Catholics become modern as doctors, lawyers, teachers, business executives, politicians, and indeed priests. After World War II, that work accelerated, and professional and public success, in modern terms, was a near unquestioned source of pride. Liberation was a matter of family and personal experience, bringing with it new questions about meaning and mutual obligation, no longer informed by economic hardship and religious and ethnic discrimination, but by Americanist faith and hope. Leaders like Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., at Notre Dame, and Fr. Heft and Brother Ray Fitz, S.M., at the University of Dayton, fully en-

couraged the movement from contention to cooperation with America's versions of modernity. Even the sharpest critics of American policies and practices, like Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day, were like so many prophets fully in love with the American people and devoted to the promises, though not the performance, of American civic faith.

For a while, from Pope John XXIII and John F. Kennedy to the era of John Paul II and President Reagan, it seemed that we Catholics were all Americanists. But Fr. Heft and many churchmen who welcomed liberation focused on Catholic responsibilities and the integrity of the church; indeed, the Vatican and the bishops ordered them to do so. Heft refers to those anxieties in the book. One stress point came with the debates around the Vatican directive *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, which he describes. Another major stress point came in 2009 when a good number of bishops and active Catholics condemned Notre Dame for honoring newly-elected President Barack Obama. The differences exposed then have only deepened since.

As an Americanist, I hoped we could answer one big question, still on the table: "After liberation, what?" Fr. Heft had answers, inviting students and faculty to find personal meaning and public purpose in their work as scholars and teachers. But many leaders, some in the highest places in the church, suspect that what Catholics have experienced in America is really not liberation, and, even if it is, it is a slippery path toward secularism, religious indifference, and moral relativism. Gradually since the mid-1980s, the story of realized aspirations by entry into the centers of American life has given way among many Catholics to darker stories of loss of integrity. Some see loss through accommodation to unjust and racist structures of the American political economy, others in accommodation to practices around sexuality and gender at odds with Catholic teaching. And more than a few churchmen fear that Catholic colleges and universities, like many Catholic people, have surrendered to secularism. Some onetime Americanists, sharing the country's loss of public faith, and never comfortable with civil religion, fear the critics might be right. After all, the American modernity that we once celebrated as providing for our liberation was and remains beset by what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the "giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism."[9]

Nonetheless, Dr. King, amid multiple disappointments, remained faithful to the dream of "the beloved community" at the heart of genuine Americanism. Take away that dream, as well as realistic aspirations for "liberty and justice for all," and then self-government and shared responsibility no longer will draw us out of our many circles, which once again will become boundaries. When that happens, a few Catholic colleges and universities may survive as confessional, counter-culturally Catholic. Far more will drift

into existing systems of knowledge in service to powers and principalities freed from American democratic faith and hope. With Americanism, as with Christianity, we may only learn how much it matters when it seems lost.

My third line of questioning has to do with politics, posed especially with respect to what should be done about our shared responsibilities for American Catholic higher education. I was attracted to my profession as an American historian by politics. When I began looking at the church in the United States, past, present, and future, I found, a little to my surprise, politics. Through the peace movement and peace studies, I learned that the alternative to war, and violent conflicts of all sorts, was politics. I had opportunities to work with the American bishops on some important projects, the development and uneven results of which were determined by ecclesiastical politics. I visited all twenty-eight (at that time) U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities and many more other Catholic colleges and universities, where I once again found that internal campus politics, the politics of the church, and the politics of higher education all shaped academic life. So, too, despite claims of innocence, did the politics of knowledge. In reading Fr. Heft's book, and recalling his remarkable pastoral leadership on his home campus, I wonder how his vision was supported in the governance, and the politics, of his university. And when he tells us the story of the wonderful Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies, I hope he will tell us about the politics that led to its creation and how politics figured in its growth.

Fr. Heft and I worked for some years with many friends to help improve the structures and procedures for governing Catholic higher education. We were hopeful that bishops and presidents would work together and that, with their authorization, trustees, administrators, and faculty and staff leaders could deliberate about how we might fulfill the promise of Catholic higher education. Ideally, the development of Catholic Studies might lift the burden of Catholic intelligence and imagination so often assigned to theologians and open space for Catholic ideas in other academic departments and professional programs. Community service and community-based learning opportunities in partnership with Catholic social services and pastoral ministries could more closely connect academic institutions and personnel with the wider Catholic community. Retreat centers and religious community houses could help provide professionals of all sorts, including scholars and artists, with the spiritual resources once available to priests and sisters with academic vocations. Think tanks might enable church leaders to develop more intelligent and effective programs and policies. And, indeed, an Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies could support research across disciplines, connect Catholic scholars in Catholic universities with

others in public or private institutions, and witness to the public that Christian faith can enrich knowledge and spark imagination to public benefit.

There is so much that can be done, but all that we talk about in discussions of Catholic life requires inspiration, commitment, and, equally important, organization. In 1986, I tried to make the case for opening up public life within the Catholic community:

> The Catholic subculture of the past [has been replaced] by a culture of voluntarism [that makes] the exercise of arbitrary authority less tenable, but imposes new obligations.... This is not a problem of left or right, but of public life and genuine shared responsibility within the church.... But there are several missing ingredients, none more important than recognition that the effective utilization of Catholic resources...requires organization, leadership, and structured, purposeful action.... In an age of freedom and voluntarism, the quality and effectiveness of Catholic institutions and organizations depends upon the commitment and intelligent participation of their members, especially those whose training and experience give them particular responsibilities for the corporate life and public witness of the church.[10]

Here I think Fr. Heft would agree that those of us who share his positive vision of American Catholic higher education have failed to persuade our Catholic colleagues and friends that the future of American Catholicism and its cultural and educational institutions will be determined in large part by organized, purposeful action. That means that we have to engage in the politics of knowledge in society, in the church, and in the university. If we fail to organize, we will lose.

In public life, we need not just good citizens but a sense of thick citizenship, which entails consideration of human dignity and the common good in households and neighborhoods, workplaces and civic spaces, and in faith-based communities and institutions. Religious communities, for their part, require a sense of thick discipleship where responsibility is personal but also public, and shared responsibility for institutions and ministries is a fact and not an option. Jim Heft's work and witness—intelligent, pastoral, and responsibly political—has helped bring Catholic intelligence and imagination, and Catholic higher education, to a point where the American Catholic community's rich resources are available for service to the Christian movement, American democracy, and the human family and its common home. The next chapter remains to be written, and that chapter will be determined by the religious faith, commitment to shared responsibility, and

purposeful politics of the people who support and share in the work of Catholic colleges and universities. Thanks to Father Heft for his clear invitation to do what we can to help shape "the future of Catholic higher education."

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[1] Alice Gallin, O.S.U., *Independence and A New Partnership in Catholic Higher Education* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

[2] Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in Twentieth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[3] This phrase often got me off the hook when asked theological questions. Friends recalled the woman who, after meeting President Franklin D. Roosevelt, stopped to visit Eleanor. "Your husband is such a good man, a simple Christian" the visitor said. "Yes, a *very simple* Christian," Mrs. Roosevelt responded, without a smile.

[4] James L. Heft, S.M., and Una Cadegan, ed., *In the Lógos of Love: Promise and Predicament in Catholic Intellectual Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[5] Professor Gleason's many essays on the changes in Catholic higher education are an invaluable companion to the work of Fr. Heft and Sister Alice Gallin. Many are collected in his *Keeping the Faith: American Catholicism Past and Present* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989). Professor Gleason, another friend, and I regularly contended over the questions raised here for many years.

[6] The story of developing that mission statement, still in use three decades later, is told in chapter 7 of my *From the Heart of the American Church: Catholic Higher Education and American Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

[7] The University of Dayton was until 1920 St. Mary's School, later College. The change in name opened up an already open circle, and few universities in recent years have worked harder at their partnerships with their city and region. Even there the question remained whether that social and civic engagement could, or should, renew, or revise, the university's understanding of its Catholic identity and mission.

[8] In 2006, I received the Marianist Award from the University of Dayton, and in my lecture I made my case for Catholic Americanism. See "The Missing Piece: The Renewal of Catholic Americanism," https://ecommons.udayton.edu/uscc_marianist_award/3/.

[9] See Dr. King's address "Beyond Vietnam—A Time to Break Silence," delivered at Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm.

[10] David J. O'Brien, "The Summons to Responsibility," *Commonweal*, June 6, 1986, 332–337.