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The Intellectual Advantages of a Roman Catholic Education

By ALAN WOLFE

In 1998, the Rev. James Tunstead Burtchaell, a former provost of the University of Notre Dame, gave us *The Dying of the Light*, an 868-page account of how 17 colleges and universities affiliated with a wide variety of religious traditions have lost their connections to the faiths that originally inspired them. Among them were three Roman Catholic institutions, including Boston College, where I teach. As I read Father Burtchaell's account of how the lights have gone out, I could not help but think that I must be one of the fire extinguishers. For, when he discusses how an institution like Boston College has lost its Catholic identity, surely he must have in mind the fact that it had no objection to hiring someone like me -- a Jew by ethnicity and a nonbeliever when it comes to faith. (Not only that, but I was hired, in 1999, to direct a center dealing with questions of religion and American public life.)

Long ago, I learned not to take things too personally. Still, it is hard not to when I am held responsible for the presumed decline of a presumably once-great institution.

The Catholic Church is much in the news these days, especially Boston Catholicism. For the scandal involving pedophile priests, and the actions of Cardinal Bernard Law, the Boston archbishop who shifted the worst offenders from parish to parish even while cognizant of their actions, remind many people of the problems that face a hierarchically organized church that has not, throughout much of its history, responded well to outside criticism. There has been far too much anti-Semitism and far too much hostility to liberalism in the church's history. And the efforts by the Vatican to seek a mandate from theology professors at Catholic colleges suggest that, at least in Rome, there are still powerful elements in the church who have not accustomed themselves to such principles as academic freedom.

The Catholic tradition, however, also has a more positive side. And that is part of the reason that I decided to move from a large, secular institution to Boston College. Indeed, for me, the Catholic tradition offers an alternative to many of the disappointing aspects of higher education today.

Among Catholic intellectuals, as well as some who are not Catholic, the most important Catholic inheritance is the natural-law tradition, which is premised on the idea that there are certain truths in the world that remain true irrespective of whether the laws and conventions of any particular society adhere to them. At its worst, belief in natural law can lead to ideological rigidity and inflexible inhumanity. But at its best, respect for natural law gives one the self-confidence that makes possible the passion and curiosity that fuel intellectual inquiry.

No one could have predicted, 30 or so years ago, that such self-confidence would ever be necessary in American higher education. At the height of the cold war, American universities produced those intellectual figures whom David Halberstam called "the best and the brightest," and humility was not

exactly one of their personality traits. But in a remarkably short time, the culture of American academe shifted from the hubristic arrogance of those who believed they could bend a foreign country to their will to those currently ensconced in the university who doubt the possibility of will, truth, morality, beauty, or any other category that strikes them as ready for deconstruction. At a time when the only thing we can know is that we cannot know anything, the claims of natural law suggest to us not that the world is unknowable, but that we have simply stopped, for whatever reason, trying to know it.

Natural law, in short, inoculates us against postmodernism. While there are no doubt exceptions of which I am unaware, I have yet to come across all that much enthusiasm for the ideas of Jacques Derrida and Stanley Fish at the Catholic colleges with which I am familiar. Catholics are likely to hold that the truth of God's existence must mean the truth of man's reason, art's beauty, and morality's universality.

Postmodernism may no longer be all the rage in American academic life, but throughout the 1990s, when it was, the Western intellectual tradition was under attack seemingly everywhere. But at Boston College and on other Catholic campuses, one heard relatively few cries of "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western civ has gotta go." Take away all those dead white males, after all, and you would pretty much eliminate the Catholic tradition from the face of the earth. That's why I have nothing but respect for those Catholic colleges that continued to defend the humanities through the entire, but now seemingly passed, age of suspicion against them.

Another surprising byproduct of Catholicism's sympathy for natural law is the respect for liberalism that emerged in the past two or three decades on America's Catholic campuses. By that, I do not mean the everyday use of the word "liberalism" that refers to the Democratic Party and its support for social reform, although it remains true that most Catholics, and certainly most Catholic academics, remain liberal in that sense. The more important affinity in this case is the one between Catholic respect for natural law and liberal conceptions of fundamental human rights. The Rev. John Courtney Murray, certainly the greatest American Catholic theologian of the 20th century, pointed out that the great Enlightenment thinkers who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, Protestant and deist though they may have been, were nonetheless articulating Catholic natural-law principles in asserting the universality of freedom of speech, press, and religion.

It thus makes a certain amount of sense, as paradoxical as it may sound, that colleges belonging to a tradition whose 19th-century popes had little respect for liberalism typically have resisted recent illiberal efforts to restrict the free-speech rights of faculty members and students who question affirmative action or criticize hate-speech requirements. Indeed, the most egregious example of speech codes that violated fundamental rights to free speech were fashioned at public universities, like the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and the University of Wisconsin at Madison, most of whose faculty members would have described themselves as politically liberal and relatively secular in matters of faith.

Besides the natural-law tradition, non-Catholics who teach at Catholic colleges tend to be impressed by the concern with social justice that is central to the institutions' mission. The church's sympathy for the welfare state and the rights of workers, embodied in such important papal encyclicals as *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), has

left Catholic institutions extremely well positioned to offer today's students special opportunities to respond to their idealistic proclivities. That is certainly an aspect of the Catholic tradition worth celebrating, for -- as the students who attend Catholic colleges increasingly come from suburban, middle-class backgrounds, which are often a bit too sheltered and comfortable for a young person's own good -- internship programs and volunteer work provide them with perspectives they may not have gotten at home.

For some years, I was discouraged by the attitudes of many college students, whose sense of altruism seemed dwarfed by single-minded careerism. Today, I see many students, and not just Catholic students, wanting to do good things in the world, and we are all certainly the better for their instincts. As was made clear by last year's student demonstrations over the low wages paid to nonclerical workers at universities like Harvard, a concern with justice on the campus often precedes a concern with justice in the larger society.

Nonetheless, I have not been all that happy with the ways in which concern for social justice has been translated into action at many Catholic colleges. In brief, they don't always recognize that there has sometimes been a conflict between the urge to do the right thing and an understanding of the complexities of what the right thing is.

As a social scientist, I have come to appreciate the ironies involved in human behavior, especially when it comes to politics and policy. Would the interests of the poor have been better served had President Clinton's "welfare reform" never been passed? I wish I knew the answer. Certainly the evidence since then indicates that measures usually thought of as harsh and punitive have actually had positive results, encouraging people to find jobs and to better organize their priorities. And even if all such positive evidence ceases now that we face a recession, can we really say with confidence that welfare as we once knew it promoted human dignity? As with welfare reform, so with many other examples from public policy, ranging from affirmative action to discrimination against the disabled. If politics and policy were easy to understand, we would not need political scientists.

My experiences at Catholic colleges, teaching at one and lecturing at others, is that commitments to social justice are treated as if they were not intellectually problematic. Of course welfare reform was bad, many Catholic educators believe, since it was a Republican idea. Of course the Americans With Disabilities Act is good, since it sides with the vulnerable. But before one can advance social justice, one must first know what justice is, a question that has preoccupied philosophers from Plato to John Rawls. All too often, students are rushed into the field to make justice happen, without sufficiently rigorous intellectual inquiry into what justice means and how its conditions ought to be fulfilled.

Perhaps that's why students at Catholic colleges are so intent on being good that they confuse a means to an end with an end itself. Social justice is the right and proper end of human society. But there is no one correct way to achieve it. We do not automatically know, to return to the example of welfare reform, whether the means of putting people back to work or the means of providing government support is more likely to reach our goal.

Growing up in Philadelphia surrounded by Catholic colleges -- La Salle University was the closest to where I lived, right across the street from my public high school -- it never would

have occurred to me that a certain kind of liberal intellectual smugness that I associate with Ivy League colleges would come to characterize Catholic institutions or intellectuals. In those days, the 1950s, Catholicism constituted a distinct American intellectual subculture. Thomists at the University of Chicago (few of whom were Catholic), Buckleyites at the *National Review*, the anti-Communism of Cardinal Francis Spellman, even Joe McCarthy's disgraceful crusade (urged on at the time by a dean at Georgetown) -- that was the intellectual side of Catholicism with the greatest visibility.

I am hardly calling for a return to those days. But I do think that a healthy liberalism requires a vibrant conservatism. As much as they know and appreciate those aspects of the Catholic tradition that emphasize social justice, contemporary Catholic students often seem unaware that Catholic intellectuals once played a conservative role in our society, so much have the students absorbed the idea that being Catholic today means sympathizing with the most vulnerable. But that is something they ought to know; if they did, they might have been better prepared for September 11.

In the aftermath of that event, many of my students were surprised to discover that the war against Osama bin Laden could be considered a "just war," and that America, and Americans, could be considered innocent victims of an attack. Perhaps as the implications of that event reverberate, Catholic students will become more used to seeing the tragic side of life -- and that, in turn, may complicate, for the better, their understanding of justice and its demands. Post-September 11 America is a more morally serious place than the society that preceded it, and as future generations of students grapple with a world in which evil has a real existence, an education rooted in a tradition that has historically appealed to conservative principles and attracted conservative adherents will be more meaningful for them.

There is one final aspect of the Catholic tradition worthy of mention: the correspondence that seems to exist between writers who take their Catholicism seriously and those who take seriously an appreciation of the symbolic, interpretive, and meaning-creating aspects of the human species.

It is true that, as the Rev. Andrew Greeley puts it, there is a sacramental dimension to human beings that gives Catholics a distinctive imagination. Just as ordinary Catholic believers find mystery and magic in the liturgy, there has emerged a distinctive form of Catholic social thought stressing the ways in which human life involves more than just getting and spending. There would be very little of an interpretive tradition in social thought in the absence of writers influenced by Catholicism like E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Mary Douglas, and Charles Taylor, all of whom emphasize the power of symbols and narrative in the making of individual and collective identity.

That Catholic imagination is very alive at Catholic colleges. There are not, to be sure, a large number of Catholics teaching in my department of political science -- although, contrary to the impression conveyed in books like *The Dying of the Light*, there are some -- but we do political science in a Catholic way even if we may not all be Catholic. Long ago, I became a social scientist because I wanted to understand how the institutions that shape human beings function. But, at some point during the course of my career, academic political science developed instead a fascination with formal modeling, which in turn required adherence to the principle that human beings are rational actors seeking to maximize their gains and minimize their losses. Under the influence of rational-choice

theory, interest in the great classics of political thought has been shunted aside, as have those social scientists who use historical and ethnographic methods to understand contemporary institutions. By now, reading articles in *The American Political Science Review* requires far more training in mathematics than it does familiarity with politics.

Like most Catholic institutions, Boston College's political-science department holds out against that trend. Surely one of the reasons is that we teach students who find that the conception of human purpose implicit in rational-choice theory is impoverished. Rational-choice theorists want to reduce all of human activity to one dimension, a reductionism that violates conceptions of the person emphasizing our complex and often contradictory nature; if St. Augustine had been a rational-choice theorist, he never would have compared the city of man to the city of God.

Even more important, the dimension to which today's social scientists reduce human existence is to its most materialistically calculating feature, a disposition that achieves its ultimate expression in arguments in favor of free markets in body parts or even babies. One need not be Catholic, or even religious, to recognize that human beings lead richer lives than ones that put monetary value on the things people care most deeply about.

Alas, some Catholic officials, including Boston's own archbishop, seem to treat their depositions before courts and their responses to questions from the news media as if they were calculating what is in their self-interest rather than considering what spiritual leaders should do. That is all the more reason for Catholic colleges in the United States -- of which only one, Catholic University in Washington, is directly affiliated with the church -- to emphasize their commitments to natural-law truths, social justice, and their distinct view of human nature.

And so I come back to where I began. What some people lament as the dying of the light ought properly to be viewed as the spreading of wisdom. Catholic colleges hire people like me not because they have failed to achieve their mission, but because they have succeeded. It is not because they have lost their roots in Catholic tradition and joined the mainstream that they recruit non-Catholic students, but because the mainstream would be worse off without them. And it is not in spite of their histories as Catholic institutions that they have risen in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings or come to the attention of parents looking for the right education for their children. It is because of their distinctiveness that they have such a strong appeal.

Perhaps it takes a religion that has produced its share of tortured martyrs to look at the position of Catholic colleges and universities today, compared with their state in the 1940s and '50s, to conclude that something has gone wrong. If such success constitutes failure, I would hate to know what failure itself must be.

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