



Building Catholic Higher Education: Unofficial Reflections from the University of Notre Dame

Smith, Christian
Cascade Books, 2014

Book Review

Tags: Catholic higher education | faculty development | faith in the classroom

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In this slim volume, Christian Smith, a sociologist of religion on the faculty of the University of Notre Dame, takes on a pivotal question for the future of Catholic higher education: faculty engagement with Catholic intellectual tradition. Exploring the convergence of Notre Dame's three strategic goals – to provide an unparalleled undergraduate education, to gain recognition as a globally premier research university, and to remain thoroughly and distinctively Catholic – Smith brings into sharp focus two fundamental issues: (1) that any faith-grounded university's capacity to fulfill its mission rises and falls on the knowledge, quality, and dispositions of its faculty; and, (2) that Catholic universities must wrestle with how their faculties engage Catholic intellectual tradition in their academic disciplines. His wrestling with these issues makes the book worth reading for anyone involved in faith-based higher education.

In the first chapter Smith lays out the texts from which he will work: the University of Notre Dame's mission statement, Fr. John Jenkins' inaugural presidential address, excerpts from Jenkins' annual addresses to faculty, and Provost Tom Burish's letter announcing a committee to explore hiring outstanding Catholic faculty. In four subsequent chapters Smith details the assumptions behind these texts with their implications for faculty; elaborates a range of ways that faculty, whether Catholic or not, can support Notre Dame's mission; proposes what the pursuit of social science disciplines might entail in a context where Catholicism matters; and, takes a hard look at whether it is possible for Notre Dame, or any other faith-grounded university, to pursue three goals simultaneously – unparalleled undergraduate education, premier research status, and robust engagement with the Catholic thought across all disciplines. (He doubts that it is.) A paper by John Cavadini on the role of theology in a Catholic college or university serves as the appendix.

Smith's dialectical approach emphasizes boundaries. He asserts that universities "cannot meaningfully call themselves 'Catholic'" unless "Catholicism as a distinctive approach to life and the world" significantly influences intellectual inquiry, scholarship, and teaching; initiatives in valuing social justice or in spiritual formation will not suffice (65). His chapter detailing the "tensions, trade-offs, and dangers" involved in attempting to achieve excellence in undergraduate education and premier research status "in an institutional, cultural, and pedagogical context that is robustly Catholic" is refreshingly practical and pragmatic (78). Smith recognizes the challenge involved in an academic department attempting to maintain coherence with some faculty focused on teaching, others on research, and still others on Catholic dimensions of a discipline.

At points Smith is nostalgic for an era when Catholic universities were Catholic by virtue of their enmeshment in the webs of a subculture. He is far more anxious about the prospects for maintaining the Catholic character of universities than is John Haughey, S.J., whose *Where is Knowing Going? The Horizons of the Knowing Subject* (Georgetown University Press, 2009) offers an alternative, analogical approach to the question. Still, Smith makes his case that Catholic universities cannot maintain a robust Catholic identity without a critical mass of faculty members who both understand and engage Catholic thought and life critically and faithfully. Read together, Smith and Haughey could animate a vital conversation in which Catholic college and university faculties need to participate.

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