

# **BUSINESS EDUCATION AT CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES**

## **A Response to Father Robert Spitzer**

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I would like to begin by thanking Father Spitzer for his very helpful paper on mission driven business education at Catholic universities. I was struck by his treatment of a number of themes but perhaps most directly by his reflections on the importance of personal identity and of his descriptive account of the four levels under which that identity might be viewed.

It leads me to suggest, however, that there are considerable obstacles to a clear understanding of human identity today, especially but not uniquely, among our students. This is expressed, I think, indirectly in John Paul II's insistence that the chief mark of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite its remarkable economic and technical achievements, is fear.

There are multiple sources for this fear but perhaps all of them have something to do with this issue of personal identity. On the one hand, we begin with the fear or at least a prevailing uneasiness, at the fact that we remain a great mystery to ourselves, that as Walker Percy once provocatively put it, we know more about Jupiter than we know about ourselves.

But there is more than mere mystery involved. When Newman was created a cardinal in 1879 he gave the customary short address in which he insisted that his entire life had been spent in fighting the liberalism of his day, by which he meant of course not political liberalism but that utilitarian and relativistic counterfeit of what Newman called true or dogmatic religion.

But as Christopher Dawson later warned, we should be more than slightly ambivalent about the loss of that 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal culture, because despite its manifest limitations, it had retained, largely as a result of its Christian sources, a common vocabulary and set of principles which made possible a dialogue with the Church. What replaced it, Dawson argued, was a culture both more pervasive and more monolithic, one which is unique in human history in dispensing with religious foundations altogether.

He called this post liberal culture technological. Father Spitzer's first two levels of personal identity may be compatible with the insistent assumptions of this culture but I suspect that the latter two are not and we should be attentive to why that is the case.

The technological culture instrumentalizes life, work and thought in unprecedented ways and rewards efficiency, functionality, influence, power, tolerance, flexibility and openness, at least on the level of appearance. It tends to be both unhistorical and irreligious in its basic presuppositions. As Russ Hittinger has noted, what is striking from Dawson's point of view has been the power of this culture to instrumentalize four aspects of culture that historically seemed immune from such a reduction: sexual intercourse; religion, family and economic exchange.

Of course human sexuality has always been a source and sign of contradiction as well as of love and union but Dawson insisted that the modern world has reduced sexual expression to a

technique in radical ways and has thus obscured the mystery of human love and sexual desire. In the same way he argued that religion had been reduced to instrumental terms, largely a matter of social utility and therapeutic self discovery. In contrast, classical religion, however varied in its manifestations and doctrines, presupposed that the deepest truths of life are received rather than invented and thus are the proper object of veneration rather than the subject of manipulation. Older notions of the family, even in liberal culture, had assumed that we are marked by ties of blood and commitment, based on some shared notion of natural law and social obligation that we did not choose but that constitutes us in fundamental conditions of obligation and gratitude. He also insisted that the exchange of goods is never merely economic but entails profound interpersonal and social costs and benefits that are not entirely quantifiable.

I suspect that for many people in our own time the problem is not so much the separation of faith and work or of an essential distinction between private and public senses of the self but rather the instrumentalization of both aspects of life which for the first time erects its major monuments to material goods.

A younger Joseph Ratzinger also noted the danger of this cultural shift in his ongoing reflections on the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council. He especially warned of the danger of a technological culture in moving us from the deep sense of wonder, of the profound need for contemplation, at the heart of the human condition. What he warned against was not social or corporate activism but rather an impersonal instrumentalism of life and action that was beginning to emerge in the hothouse of the 1960's. In one of the great ironies of modern culture, one noted by critics as disparate as Kierkegaard, and Camus, we find a profound emphasis on activity and achievement and an equally pervasive sense of final futility.

I don't want to overstate the depth of this problem which is after all in one sense a constant in human history but its modern expression is perhaps more pervasive than ever before. I do want to suggest that we can no longer assume that the basic problem is merely the instrumentalization of work and its consequent sense of anomie and boredom for both personal identity and the deepest cultural traditions of history are equally threatened.

This recognition ought to bring not pessimism but rather a clearer commitment as *Gaudium et spes* underlines, to confront not only the joys and the hopes, but also the griefs and anxieties of the men of this age. In doing so we might be in a better position to realize the broad vision which Father Spitzer has outlined in his paper.