

Teaching Sociology in the Catholic University: Conflict, Compromise, and the Role of Academic Freedom

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In the context of a Catholic university or college, practitioners of a wide variety of academic disciplines are often forced to ask themselves a difficult question: to what extent does (or should) the Catholic mission of an institution of higher education affect the practice of a given discipline and the teaching of that discipline to students? For some, the dilemma is minimal; the subject matter of their discipline is such that there is little potential for conflict between their teaching or research activities and a given institution's Catholic mission or philosophy. However, the content of many disciplines is such that faculty and administrators alike are often forced to exert extra effort toward maintaining that delicate balance between academic freedom and institutional integrity. Sociology could well be considered such a discipline for two fundamental reasons.

The first of these reasons is that since religion in general and Catholicism in particular are important components of the social world, they have been and continue to be the subjects of scientific study and investigation for sociologists. Some of the earliest and most influential works in the discipline (Durkheim, 1897; Durkheim, 1915; Marx, 1848; Weber, 1904-1905; and many others) have focused on the profound impact that various religious philosophies — including Catholicism — have had on the workings and structure of society. And, when cast in the often-critical light of sociological analysis, these impacts (whether the focus of classical or contemporary research) are frequently viewed in a less-than-positive manner.

Another somewhat problematic aspect of this critical view of religion is that, just as sociologists are concerned with objectively assessing the impact that religion has had upon society, they are also concerned with the reciprocal manner in which religions may be affected by society. Of particular concern in recent decades has been the modern trend toward "secularization," by which religion in general is supposedly losing power and influence in the social world because of a collective disregard for matters regarded as "supernatural" or "sacred" (Cox, 1971). In researching and teaching about this trend (and other trends related to the possible decline of religion in society), sociologists may be delving into matters that create a degree of alarm or discomfort for members of the Catholic community.

A final problematic aspect of sociology's critical view of religion relates to the basic nature and structure of religion. To many sociologists — though certainly not all — religion is viewed as a fundamentally subjective human construction that is possibly devoid of grounding in objective reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). According to such a perspective, the existence and functioning of a given religion is attributable more to the unique psychological needs of its adherents than to the true existence of a God or

Gods. Once again, it is evident that viewing God as a subjective social construction in the context of a Catholic university may present some cause for conflict.

As a result, whether sociology is focused on analyzing the impact of religion on society, the impact of society on religion, or the social-psychological essence of religion and of God, it is clear that the sociological view of religion is a fundamentally analytical one. And, since religion is viewed as the subject of social analysis (rather than as an object of reverence), in this manner, one can easily see the vast potential for conflict in being a sociologist in an educational institution with a strong religious mission and affiliation. It is rather like being an analyst (and often a very critical analyst) of one's own employer.

As problematic as this particular aspect of the relationship between Catholicism and sociology has the potential to be, an even greater potential for conflict arises over the wide array of issues and subjects studied and taught by sociologists. For example, any standard introductory text in sociology will contain discussions of controversial issues such as birth control, abortion, homosexuality, the death penalty, feminism, etc. The potential for problems therefore arises when the conclusions of sociological research call for solutions to social problems that clash with policies advocated by the Church. Hassel (1983) describes the unique dilemma that is presented to the Catholic university when faculty trained and specialized in a given field of secular knowledge are also part of a religious community: "How can the university escape a schizoid existence if it is both an institution of specialized knowledges-skills-arts and yet a community of wisdom that serves its various constituencies?" (p. 5).

Of course, differences between the official policies and stands of the Catholic Church and those supported by given sociologists are not always attributable to the Church's disagreement with the scientific outcomes of sociological research. It is generally acknowledged that, in the wake of the 1960s, sociology developed the reputation of being a somewhat "liberal" academic discipline. Therefore, wholly apart from the objective findings of sociological studies, sociologists themselves often bring a wide variety of subjective, personal biases into their teaching and research agendas.

On many issues, such as civil rights, social justice, and economic inequality, a liberal or radical sociologist may not feel too much discomfort in a Catholic academic setting, since the Church has taken what are perceived to be "liberal" stands on such issues. However, on issues such as birth control, abortion, homosexuality, etc., the views of a liberal sociologist are likely to clash rather dramatically with the official, "conservative," doctrines of the Church. The specialized knowledge of the sociologist, and the liberal norm that has apparently evolved within the discipline, therefore often put sociologists at odds with many of the official stands the Catholic Church has taken on a variety of controversial issues.

In essence then, these two fundamental aspects of sociology — its analytical view of religion in general (and Catholicism in particular), and the clash between the personal views of many sociologists (whether rooted in objective data or subjective opinions) and official Church doctrines on a variety of issues — may create difficulties between people

trained and recruited to teach and practice sociology and the religiously affiliated academic institutions that hire them. What then, is the answer to the resolution, or prevention, of conflicts between sociologists and religiously affiliated academic employers?

On the Catholic Church's part, it appears that substantial efforts have been made to balance faculty demands for academic freedom with its own desire to preserve the nonsecular essence of the Catholic university. The nature of this attempt is apparent in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities (1990):

Every Catholic university ... is an academic community which ... assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through research, teaching and various services offered to the local, national and international communities. It possesses that institutional autonomy necessary to perform its functions effectively and guarantees its members academic freedom, so long as the rights of the individual person and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good (p. 13).

A prime example of the attempt to implement John Paul II's call for academic freedom has occurred at the University of St. Thomas, in the form of the June 1994 Statement Regarding the Addressing of Controversial Issues at the University of St. Thomas:

The university exists as an environment which not only allows, but encourages, members of its community to ask questions and openly explore challenging ideas in their personal search for truth. Open forums through which controversial issues may be addressed in a responsible and educative manner will be available. More important, the university will ensure that these dialogues occur in an arena free of fear of reproach or reprisal.

Through efforts such as this, Catholic universities around the country (and world) are apparently making good-faith attempts to mediate fairly between their Catholic missions and the demands for academic freedom of faculty and students (Annarelli, 1987). Sociologists and other social scientists may feel particularly heartened by such attempts, in light of the previously discussed broad potential for conflict that affects this particular discipline. Administrators and other university officials may feel some degree of trepidation in anticipation of exactly how such policies of tolerance may eventually be put to the test.

It must also be remembered, however, that the responsibility for managing potential conflicts between the Catholic university and social scientists cannot — and should not — be placed solely upon the Church. Just as the Catholic Church has made an effort to meet and respect the needs of its faculty, faculty working in the Catholic university have a duty to meet and respect the needs and nature of their employer — a fact that apparently became lost on many in academia in the wake of the social upheaval of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Many scholars have researched the impact that the political radicalism of the 1960s has had on academia in general, and Catholic institutions of higher education in particular (Gleason, 1992; Hentoff, 1992; Kimball, 1990; etc.). In reference to this phenomenon, Gleason (1992) observes, "... the cultural earthquake of the late '60s could not help exacerbating the Catholic crisis. ... Catholics heard it said that their church was corrupt and its leaders bankrupt ... they heard that their country was a racist imperialist monster, its leaders war criminals" (p. 246). In general, it is concluded that this kind of questioning and challenging of social institutions — whether religious or governmental — led to a general erosion of the respect that such institutions had previously held in society. Academia was similarly affected by this erosion, as faculty and students alike came increasingly to question or challenge the authority and validity of various aspects of academic operation, such as institutional missions.

Accompanying this trend was/is a strong sympathy for the secularization of many religiously affiliated academic institutions (Burtchaell, 1991; Gleason, 1992; Hassel, 1983). Since religion was one of the prime social institutions called into question during this period, and since universities were often centers for radical philosophy and activity, pressures mounted to minimize the influence that "questionable" religious views could have over the operation of a given institution. Burtchaell (1991) proposes that Protestant universities were the first to feel the impact of this trend, but concludes that Catholic universities are now secularizing in a manner similar to that experienced by Protestant universities some 20 to 25 years ago. As a result of this general phenomenon, Hassel (1983) concludes, "... Christian philosophy is presently under a cloud; it is poorly known and respected" (p. 185).

Together, these social trends became a powerful force in academia, and the discipline of sociology provided fertile ground in which sentiments such as these could grow. The 1950s and 1960s saw the rise of many so-called "conflict" and "critical" theories that advocated a radical Marxian approach toward understanding and resolving a wide variety of social issues. Such theories also tended to view religion in general, and Catholicism in particular, as suspect at best, and exploitive at worst (e.g., Collins, 1975). Through the rapid growth of these so-called "critical" and "conflict" perspectives, sociology came in many ways to typify the radicalization and secularization that have become troubling for Catholic universities.

The irony in these developments is that it is often the most radical members of a given university's faculty who demand and probably receive the greatest amount of academic freedom from their denominational employers, and yet it is often these same faculty who espouse philosophies that show little tolerance for religion. When such is the case, one could well argue that Catholic universities, and other religiously affiliated universities, have accorded far more respect to their faculty than some faculty members are willing to accord the religious missions of their employers.

It is also ironic that many of these same academics have enthusiastically embraced the current movement for diversity, and yet accord little acknowledgment for the contribution Catholicism makes toward the diversity of society. Indeed, it would seem that attempts to

secularize the Catholic university are, in fact, an attack on the very diversity that such persons claim to advocate. How is diversity enhanced by imposing a homogenizing secularization upon universities whose mission and practices are guided by a unique, Catholic view of society? How is society itself improved by a reconstruction of religious institutions of higher education in the generic model of the secular public university?

It would seem that, while Catholic institutions of higher education are well aware of concerns over academic freedom and tolerance expressed by their faculty, many academics (including many sociologists) are often unwilling to accord a reciprocal level of respect toward their Catholic employers, and toward the unique contribution the Catholic university offers a society striving to accept diversity. Such may be said of the relationship between academia and Catholicism in general, and of the relationship between sociology and Catholicism in particular.

Therefore, just as the Catholic Church has acknowledged in a variety of ways that the faculty in its universities and colleges deserve academic freedom, so the faculty (of any discipline) working in such settings should accord respect toward the religious denomination that employs them. While this obviously doesn't mean that faculty could or should be forced to in some way embrace or advocate a given religious philosophy, it does mean that the employing denomination should at least be spared the scorn or derision that the more radical members of a given discipline may direct its way.

Essentially then, while the relationship between Catholicism and sociology has a great potential for difficulty, the key to preventing and working through difficulties would appear to be one of simple mutual respect. Just as the Catholic university must respect the academic freedom and perspectives of sociologists, so the sociologists teaching and researching within the Catholic university — or any institution of higher education with a religious affiliation — should accord respect to, and tolerance of, the views and missions of the institutions that employ them. If this kind of mutual respect is adhered to, it would seem likely that the delicate balance between institutional and disciplinary integrity can be achieved and maintained.

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