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# Teaching the Tradition: Catholic Themes in Academic Disciplines

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## Teaching the Tradition: Catholic Themes in Academic Disciplines

John J. Piderit and Melanie M. Morey  
New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2012.  
504 pages, \$99 Hardcover, \$45 Paperback

*Reviewed by Daniel P. Justin, Boston College, Massachusetts*

The arrival of *Teaching the Tradition: Catholic Themes in Academic Disciplines* is a timely one. Catholic higher education administrators have never been more intentional in ensuring the identities of their schools. Yet it is faculty—those who are more often hired for their expertise in a given field than for dedication to mission—frequently have more immediate access to and influence over the educational experiences of college students. Realizing the full potential of the Catholic intellectual tradition in higher education is impossible without the understanding and commitment of this constituency. To address this need, John J. Piderit, S.J. and Melanie M. Morey (President and Senior Director of Research, respectively, at the Catholic Education Institute) invited nearly two dozen authors from across the spectrum of academic disciplines to reflect on how they have integrated Catholic themes into their research and teaching. The resulting collection of essays is a sweeping exploration of the many avenues available for incorporating a deliberately Catholic perspective into one's research and teaching.

The book is broken into four sections, with the first offering an overview of Catholic thought through three essays on theological foundations and two on the relationship between theology and philosophy. Though closer collaboration among authors in this section would have likely avoided some unnecessary overlap and repetition of themes, the result is a rich presentation for those less familiar with the topic. The close unity of Catholic theology and spirituality is stressed, comprising a unique perspective from which to view and engage the world. Yet while the contributors offer a succinct overview of Catholic theology and philosophy for the newcomer, this section likely does little to assuage some of the more immediate concerns of professors contemplating how to incorporate a Catholic perspective into their teaching and research. The less glorious side of Catholicism is seldom mentioned and

never truly addressed. The only discussion on the actual beliefs and practices of college students is buried much later in Jeffrey Adam's chapter on psychology in a Catholic framework. Moreover, issues such as the authority of the Magisterium and academic freedom are never raised. For many reluctant and skeptical faculty members, issues such as these likely present much more of a stumbling block for educating in the Catholic tradition than an inadequate understanding of Thomistic metaphysics.

The subsequent 16 chapters, broken into sections covering the humanities, sciences, and professional schools, offer a range of reflections on differing attempts at incorporating Catholic themes into secular disciplines. The approach varies by author. Some essays examine explicitly Catholic subjects (theater, art, political theories), whereas others focus more on identifying points of theoretical convergence between their discipline and Catholic theology. Still others offer more practical strategies for incorporating Catholic themes into classroom pedagogy.

The assumption in these essays is that the author is writing to an audience of peers who are already familiar with the discipline, which can make for a difficult but exhilarating experience for the uninitiated. In even the most esoteric musings, the passion of these authors as they articulate to their colleagues the spiritual dimensions of their work shines through. Nowhere is this attitude more evident than in Paul Schweitzer's essay "Mathematics, Reality, and God." One need not be fully versed in the theories and proofs that he names to appreciate his spiritual delight in the simple beauty of mathematics, which, he observes, "has escaped from original sin" (p. 233).

Taken as a whole, this collection offers a robust view of how faculty envision and practice the Catholic intellectual tradition today. Throughout the array of perspectives, a few key themes and figures recur. The goodness, intelligibility, and revelatory nature of creation are affirmed throughout. The Catholic imagination is one of rich imagery and careful attention to the fallen but graced human condition. Many, such as Oliver Putz's chapter on evolutionary biology, draw attention to ways that their own discipline raises new questions for theological reflection. The Catholic figures identified in the essays are perhaps not surprising. Though the shadow of Thomas Aquinas looms large over the entire work, Hans Urs von Balthasar's aesthetic perspective is frequently cited in the humanities section, while Teilhard de Chardin proves to be a favorite of those in the sciences. While it is easy for the reader to identify many of the overarching themes, one wonders what would be gained were the distinct disciplines to not only engage Catholic theology, but

also each other. Regrettably, this volume reflects the contemporary reality of most Catholic colleges and universities, in which an array of perspectives is offered, but it is up to the individual to construct any sort of synthesis.

One theme this volume intentionally excludes is the connection of Catholic thought and social justice. Observing that “many Catholic colleges and universities devote considerable academic resources to assuring that these topics are covered well from a Catholic perspective in a variety of course” (p. 5), the editors instructed contributors to focus on other aspects of the Catholic tradition. While this is a positive indication of the progress advocates of social concern have made on campus, this editorial decision carries with it the troubling implication that justice as a characteristic of the Catholic intellectual tradition can be bracketed off and set aside without adversely affecting the other core themes. When the overarching goal of the volume is integration, the absence of social and political considerations causes the collection to feel at times abstract and ungrounded. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that those authors who disregard this request (such as Sheehan’s essay on medicine) also offer the clearest articulation of their work as vocation.

This critique should not negate the great contribution that this volume makes, however. The scope and diversity of this work offers something for everyone and very much to those directly engaged in the work of mission and identity. As a resource, *Teaching the Tradition* should remain within easy reach of anyone tasked with ensuring the Catholic identity of her or his school. The hard reality is that for many faculty members, the strongest authority is that of others within the discipline. There is no substitute for the voice of one’s peers affirming the rich potential that the Catholic intellectual tradition presents. The book offers many opportunities to generate conversation on the role of the Catholic perspective in an array of disciplines. This reviewer, for example, anticipates assigning readings relevant to the majors or intended careers of undergraduates in core theology classes.

Beyond these practical applications lies the sheer joy of getting lost in the insights and ruminations of a professor in love with his or her work. The tendency toward specialization leaves us with too few opportunities for encountering and engaging other disciplines, particularly through a theological lens. Wandering through this volume is a strong reminder not only of the grandeur of the Catholic intellectual tradition, but also of the Truth that it investigates.

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