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# Education in a Catholic Perspective

Jill Bickett

Loyola Marymount University, [jill.bickett@lmu.edu](mailto:jill.bickett@lmu.edu)

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## Education in a Catholic Perspective

Stephen J. McKinney and John Sullivan (Eds.)  
Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013  
255 pages, \$119.95 (hardcover)  
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Reviewed by Jill Bickett, Loyola Marymount University, California

It is refreshing to encounter a written work on Catholic education that understands the challenges of the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and, more importantly, that addresses the impact these challenges pose to Catholic educators. McKinney and Sullivan have curated a volume of work that provides a solid theoretical approach to facing uniquely Catholic issues in a secular society. Each chapter posits fresh insights and difficult truths about Catholic education—past, present and future.

The book explores the intellectual history of the Catholic Church and its intersection with Catholic education. It does so by addressing the historical elements of both while maintaining a focus on the evolution of Catholic identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The book moves from the purely theoretical—discussing the theological foundations of Catholic education and the interface between theology and education—to tackling the practical aspects of translating theory into everyday experience.

The strengths of this volume are many. While it is always instructive to read edited texts for the variety of perspectives that they offer—which this book does quite well—it is rare that edited volumes have as cohesive a thread as does McKinney and Sullivan’s work. No matter the topic, each chapter clearly embraces the Catholic understanding of the formation of the human person, the importance of inclusivity in our notions of faith and education, the mission directive that Catholics and Catholic institutions must “live with pluralism in a constructive way” (p. 163), and the belief that a spiritual grounding in deep faith can help keep at bay the encroaching forces of materialism and secularism. Additionally, as noted earlier, the Catholic Church and its identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is admirably and authentically addressed. There are difficult truths that must be confronted in any honest discussion of Catholicity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and it is uplifting to read committed theologians and Catholics acknowledge these without hesitation or

blame, and then proceed to propose a path forward. The work highlights one current dilemma that all Catholic schools now face: how to balance the distinctive Catholic mission with the Gospel's call for inclusivity. As more non-Catholics enter Catholic schools, how can educators maintain the distinctive mission-driven perspective, while making all students feel embraced and included in all ways? It is, as Watkins suggests, a "delicate balancing act" (p. 140), and one that must continue to be at the forefront of our discussions. Further, another of the thorny issues addressed in McKinney and Sullivan's text is the place of women in the Church, and how male hierarchies impact women's ability to best serve out the mission of the faith. Christine Forde's chapter on "The Troublesome Concept of 'Gender': Questions from Feminist Theology" is an honest analysis of the nature of women's experience in the Church. And it is made all the more interesting when one considers the preponderance of women serving in Catholic universities, colleges, secondary, and elementary institutions. As Forde notes, "gender should have no significance in determining the educational opportunities and outcomes for women and girls and men and boys" (p. 180). And, yet, when it comes to decisions of leadership in the Catholic Church, historically, gender has made all the difference. Thus, this must be an important concept for Catholics to continue to consider, and address in both scholarly and practical ways, as Forde has done.

The inclusion of Forde's chapter on "The Troublesome Concept of Gender" is a thoughtful and well-placed commentary that addresses a phenomenon reflected in the Church at large and in McKinney and Sullivan's text in particular—the relative scarcity of women's voices in the discussion of Catholic education, despite the overwhelming presence of women in *providing* that education. The volume itself contains only two women authors. Stephen McKinney's introduction cites the "numerous theological and philosophical thinkers...who have had...an influence on education in general, and Catholic education in particular" (p. 3) but lists 26 male scholars without inclusion of any female theologians, philosophers, or educators. To the extent the list is reflective of who is shaping the discussion of Catholic education, it is a disappointing truth. Catholic education is not only majorly populated with women educators, it also owes a great debt to the women, and in particular, the holy women and sisters, who forged the way for the robust network of Catholic schools that currently exist. Catholic education today is the legacy of Catholic women. The Church and Catholic scholars should strive to include women's voices, experience, and perspectives in the discussion of

the future of Catholic education—or we risk losing an important part of their legacy.

Lastly, while McKinney and Sullivan's text is illuminating in many ways, and refreshingly honest, it is a work primarily for Catholic scholars, theorists, and theologians. The attempts to evolve theory into practice, while yielding important insights, are best used as ideologies, and can inform ways of thinking and ways of being a Catholic educator, but do not translate easily into practice oriented usage in Catholic schools.

McKinney and Sullivan's *Education in a Catholic Perspective* is an important read for those interested in Catholic education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and provides avenues of thought to encourage conversation about issues that matter to both the Catholic theologian and the Catholic educator.

*Jill Bickett, Ed.D. is Clinical Associate Professor and Associate Director of the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership for Social Justice at Loyola Marymount University. Correspondence regarding this review can be addressed to Dr. Bickett at [jbickett@lmu.edu](mailto:jbickett@lmu.edu).*