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The Idea of a Catholic University by George Dennis O'Brien. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002. 239 pp. Cloth $28.00.

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In *The Idea of a Catholic University* George Dennis O'Brien ambitiously endeavors to show that Catholic universities are not only different from secular universities but in principle capable of providing a richer and deeper education. While most academics tend to think of the Catholic university as dogmatic and the secular as free, O'Brien, a Catholic who has served as president of Bucknell University and the University of Rochester, seeks to uncover the implicit dogmas of the contemporary secular university, above all its tendency to bracket ultimate and existential questions.

The initial chapter outlines the Christian foundations of the modern university: the exploration of the natural world gains meaning through a recognition of its having been created by God, and the study of texts has its origins in engagement with the Bible and its interpretations. Chapters two through five elaborate a distinction between three kinds of truth: scientific, artistic, and religious. Science explores disinterested, universal, and verifiable truth; art is "signatured truth" (33) or particular to the unique work of art; religious truth, also a form of signatured truth, engages ultimate questions and offers, unlike art, definitive answers, which in the case of Christianity are "bound up in a specific historical person" (33). For O'Brien religion is close to modern anti-art: both seek to address "the real" or the ultimate mystery of life and existence (58), but whereas anti-art gives disturbing accounts of "the meaningless contingency of our existence" (71), religion is salvational, offering a "sacramental life of presence" (86). O'Brien argues that secular universities are oriented primarily toward scientific truth, tolerate artistic truth, and bracket religious truth.

Chapters six and seven seek to uncover some of the implicit dogmas of secular universities, including the restriction of academic freedom to scientific inquiry and artistic creativity, skepticism toward faith as a path to truth, and the denial of "the import of existential reality" (99) and of the value of questions concerning life and salvation (103). The idea of a "life commitment" is foreign to university culture (12 1).

Chapter eight is an engaging thought experiment: O'Brien discusses the idea of a Holocaust university, a university in which remembering the Holocaust and recognizing its centrality in history is central to its mission; by comparison and contrast, O'Brien helps to clarify why Catholic universities pursue certain curricular and policy goals. He asks, for example: "Just how would a *Holocaust* university deal with deniers, dissenters, and diversity advocates?" (133).

The ninth and tenth chapters tackle *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in a creative way: O'Brien rejects the institutional/juridical model of the church associated with the *mandatum*: it is inimical to the autonomy of the university and an inappropriate paradigm for the church. In its stead, O'Brien advocates a sacramental model, which recognizes not only God's transcendence but also his presence in nature and history. Religious truth, which is accessed through prayer, does not undermine academic truth but reinforces the value of understanding ordinary

reality and ordinary truth. Academic abstraction, while not equivalent to existential reality, is nonetheless not unconnected to existential reality; the two are ideally intertwined, and religion aids in this linkage.

The penultimate chapter, chapter eleven, seeks to summarize by introducing two ideal types: the secular university and the contrarian Catholic university. The final chapter, the only one devoted to practical considerations, argues for a course in fundamental theology entitled "Love, Commitment, and Decision" that would engage students in the existential meaning of religion. The chapter also includes some brief reflections on policy issues, such as inviting controversial speakers, culminating in the Christian imperative to discover the moral interest or passion in positions with which one disagrees (211).

O'Brien's questions have never been more central to American higher education. In *Contending with Modernity*, Philip Gleason shows that the ideas originally animating the modern Catholic university—from the *ratio studiorum* to transcendental Thomism—no longer cohere or persuade; we are in need of new models. George Marsden in *The Soul of the American University* and James Burtcheal, C.S.C., in *The Dying of the Light* have delineated the secularization of religious universities in this century. And several works, most recently Dovre's anthology of essays, *The Future of Religious Colleges,* have sought to address this challenge with creative ideas. Also, the leading Catholic universities have now reached a level of maturity, such that they are competing for faculty and students with the nation's premier secular universities.

Beyond the identification of a fascinating topic, the book has above all the following virtues: a genuine search for the *differentia specifica* of religion in relation to art and science; a recognition that the Catholicism of a Catholic university cannot be reduced to campus ministry or community service; an elevation of the sacramental as justifying intellectual engagement with the real; recognition of some of the limits of secular universities and the opportunities of religious universities; a useful thought experiment on the idea of a Holocaust university; a creative response to the *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* debate that returns us, on the one hand, to a notion of faith seeking understanding and, on the other hand, to a sacramental respect for the ordinary; and, most importantly, a recognition of the value of ultimate questions and participatory truth within a university setting.

In my view at least three challenges face today's Catholic university: first, developing a coherent identity that is true to the Catholic tradition and faith; second, addressing a variety of practical issues—from hiring strategies to curricular concerns; and third, articulating the idea of a Catholic university in such a way as to appeal also to persons skeptical of any but the dominant secular model of the university.

O'Brien focuses most of his attention on the first of these challenges. In doing so, he develops in some detail theological points that may make the book less than attractive to a non-Christian audience. In addition, O'Brien states that he originally conceived of his book as being more practical than it is (8). To have so little reflection on practical matters in a book-length study of the idea of a Catholic university is unfortunate. For practical reflections one would do better to turn to Robert Benne's *Quality with Soul.*

The third challenge facing Catholic universities is also hardly addressed. In a sense O'Brien downplays the challenge by making his main thesis the claim of

"a fundamental clash between Catholic faith and the modern university" (3). While I see good reason to recognize and even stress differences, I wonder if a more constructive dialogue might be possible. First, O'Brien's account of the secular university has at times a bit too much of the straw man. "The real," even if it is sometimes excluded at non-religious liberal arts colleges and research universities, may not be quite as absent as O'Brien suggests.

Second, O'Brien has consciously bracketed two ideas that have been central to the idea of a Catholic university: the unity of truth (5, 23, 24) and the search for social justice (9, 13). O'Brien views the former as overused and in fact incorrect (there are different models of truth) and the latter as not distinctly Catholic. On the unity of faith and reason and on the integration of knowledge across disciplines, I would side with the weight of the Catholic tradition against O'Brien, and I would argue that the social justice ideal has a distinctive motivation and horizon of reflection within a Catholic university. Both can be linked to the universalism of the Church, and both could in various ways appeal to a more secular audience.

Third, O'Brien's book has a strong christological focus, with little reflection on one of the distinguishing characteristics of Christianity, the Trinity. I should think that a discussion of Catholicism within a *university* setting would place more emphasis on pneumatics, elevating the Holy Spirit and with it tradition and reason, which provide rich counter-cultural moments to the elevation of technical reason, the overvaluation of the present, and the postmodern abandonment of reason.

Fourth, there is no systematic reflection on the ways in which one might address the complexity of today's world and the problems confronting it with the richness of categories available in the Catholic tradition. The ultimate and the ordinary are not systematically related in O'Brien, only evocatively related.

Finally, the emphasis on art is welcome, but O'Brien could go further. Just as theology, understood in the Catholic tradition as faith seeking understanding, means that students learn not only *about* the Christian tradition but also *from* the Christian tradition, seeking to know and love God more deeply (in contrast to a religious studies framework that consists only of the disinterested study of religious phenomena), so can the study of art at Catholic universities involve not only all of the historical and aesthetic elements we find at secular schools but also a profound existential dimension. Catholicism is a mediating religion that recognizes the human capacity to give shape to divine presence; the arts are a privileged forum for this mediating vision.

Catholicism may have more to offer the secular university, and the secular university may have more to offer Catholicism than O'Brien suggests, though his study does have many insights, not least the proposed integration of ultimate questions with academic pursuits.

References

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Recent popular and professional literature is replete with news about explosive present and future growth of distance education, and faculty on campuses across the country are debating the advisability of this new trend. As Mehrotra, Hollister, and McGahey point out, however, the question is no longer whether or not to implement distance education, but how best to do so. Therefore, the book is timely and needed.

The text is intended for instructors and administrators planning their initial foray into distance education. The authors have wisely chosen to focus on principles that will lead to quality distance education rather than on rapidly changing details of hardware and software. They maintain that when educators are aware of the principles that lead to excellent programs, and when the content, the student population to be served, and the desired student outcomes are identified and analyzed, good technical decisions can, with some minimal advice from technology experts, easily be made. Thus, rather than a book about technology, the authors aspire to producing a practical guide for those launching new distance education courses or programs.

The authors begin by stating their belief that most of the principles of good distance education can also be applied to traditional, on-campus courses. This, they believe, is particularly true given the recent interest in student-centered learning; countering the isolation felt by many students enrolled in very large, on-campus courses; and the considerable potential of technology to make active learning a reality.

The authors then present a brief history of distance education, an informative timeline of events, and an excellent discussion of the reasons for the implementation of distance education courses and programs by American institutions of higher learning. The next five chapters (dedicated to what should occur *before* students enroll) address the planning and preparation that should take place prior to implementation of distance learning courses and programs. Highlights include several pages of very detailed, practical ideas for promoting and marketing; a list of seven "good practices;" a lengthy chapter on course syllabi and how they should differ from traditional course syllabi; and a very usable decision tree for help in selecting course delivery methods.

The next three chapters (devoted to what should occur *while* students are en-