The Faiths of a Catholic University: Personal or Impersonal?

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Let me just say at the beginning: this was an effort on my part to get clear for myself about where we are as a university. It isn't necessarily connected to the seminar, although I learned a great deal from the Catholic Intellectual Traditions seminar discussions that we have.

What I was looking for was a framework in terms of which to conceptualize Boston College's current situation as a university that has a religious heritage, and has a religious aspiration. The title basically states my thesis: “The Faiths of Boston College as a Catholic University: Personal or Impersonal?”

Here is my basic structure. Firstly, there is a plurality of religious faiths represented at BC, as well as humanistic faiths, and that condition will increase most likely in the years ahead. It's also a series of levels of faith within any particular person who is here. Secondly, one way of conceiving its Catholic identity is the aspiration to inclusiveness, and to a harmony of faith and knowledge, that Catholicism does represent an aspiration to universality. Certainly, the tradition is that faith and knowledge are not enemies of one another. Thirdly, the key dividing line in terms of developments for us, where we're operating today, is not between the secular and the religious, between faith and knowledge, authority and academic freedom, but rather that between the personal and the impersonal. Now, that's a strong claim on my part. Finally, John Macmurray's philosophy of religions offers one helpful template for understanding religion as the realm of the personal, not that all religions necessarily embrace this realm of the personal as their own identity, but that understand religion is the realm of the personal, and as the integration of the two great forms of intellectual pursuit. On one hand, the arts, concerned with the ends of life, and the scientific, concerned with the world's needs. That's a sort of basic structure.

Now, John Macmurray was born in Scotland, and his books are still in print, or several of them are still in print. But I believe he's a neglected philosopher and I think he offers a great deal. He came along at a time when English philosophy became terribly concerned – obsessed, almost – with methodology and language. John Macmurray's vision is much broader. He came back to some prominence recently because Tony Blair attributed his perception of government to John Macmurray. Actually, there's a new collection of essays of Macmurray's work that has an introduction by Tony Blair. One of the lines I love, of John Macmurray, and it's sort of a slogan of his philosophy, is that “all meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action is for the sake of friendship.” He has a very communal sense of the human project.

Now, in terms of my own personal coming to this formulation, this framework, I just thought I'd give you some of the areas that have influenced the way I approach him. First is the Catholic Intellectual Traditions seminar. One of the things that's not surprising for me, is this terrific

satisfaction that people have in being at Boston College. That doesn't depend upon its own religious identity. People with different religious convictions feel very comfortable at Boston College. It surprised me to some extent to discover that people felt this way a long time ago. I would have thought that when Boston College was more Jesuit in the numbers of faculty, obviously much more Catholic in traditional atmosphere, it would have been more difficult for non-Catholics to feel welcome here. But that doesn't seem to have been the case. The strong point that has been made by some non-Catholics is that **they felt personally welcome**. There was a personal sensibility at Boston College. There's some feeling today, perhaps, that we have to safeguard that sensibility in Boston College's future, however we describe it.

In thinking about this topic, I was reminded of an incident, a lecture that a trustee gave a number of years ago to a group of Jesuits. He mentioned that when he was in his first year, his mother died. And he was at the funeral, and he saw all these BC people at the funeral mass. He said, "I realized I was in something more than a school." It's that more that I'm trying to do justice to. At that time, of course, it was appearing within a liturgical event, but that was symbolic of a deeper relationship that individuals in the school had with students, and somehow our lives were connected on a more profound level than what takes place just in the classroom.

Another source for my approach to the question of the Catholic character of Boston College comes out of my work in Holocaust studies, which I have been concentrating on in recent years. If you do Holocaust studies, or study fascism, it's quite clear that reality doesn't recognize this border between the religious and the secular. Fascism is one of the prime examples of how interpenetration of the secular and the religious is what motivates people, leads people on. I refer to a book by Saul Friedländer (*Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939-1945: The Years of Extermination*). Many scholars and general readers were waiting for this book to appear. He is the most distinguished historian on the Holocaust. This second volume of his magisterial work came out in 2007. He makes a strong and stark statement at the very end of his book, namely, that there's only one plausible interpretation of what happened in the Holocaust. He claims that there's this need for some sort of presence of religious or pseudo-religious incentives within a system otherwise dominated by thoroughly different dynamics. He was always fascinated by how you have this sort of cultic, liturgical politics in fascism, and yet it is wedded to a bureaucratic mentality within the same people.

The other dimension of the Holocaust, the Righteous among the Nations Project, is probably something you know of. In 1953 Israel established the Yad Vashem institution to try to recognize those people who risked their lives or lost their lives trying to save Jewish life. And such risks could not have been taken for financial gain. There are some problems with methodological issues, but it's a very ambitious project, and it constitutes a sort of archive of moral life at that time. I won't go into the details about how they tried to establish who these people were, but the reason I bring it up is I have been teaching a course on the Holocaust for quite a few years. And about three or four years ago, I found myself near the end of the course – I think it was an inspired moment. I asked the class, how many Righteous among the Nations do the students think there were at the time? I had them jot down their estimates. I was startled to discover that people were guessing five people or 100. I don't think anyone guessed more than 500. Yad Vashem actually has recognized 22,000 people at this point. Yad Vashem estimates that's probably one-tenth of the number of people who deserve recognition. That's certainly changed

the way I teach the Holocaust. What is so clear to me, and I've had other indications of that, is the students did not appreciate the capacity of people to stand up to systems, to be personally responsible, to be heroic.

Even though the vast majority of people who are recognized by Yad Vashem are Christians, the studies that have been done of their explanations for why they rescued Jews, why they risked their lives, religion played a very small part in explaining why they did what they did. Which for me was surprising. I know some of those who have been recognized by the State of Israel, and twelve of them were Jesuits, so they had obvious religious motivation. But they seem to be very exceptional. It makes me wonder: at a time when religious Christian formation was widespread, and there was a firm Christian identity, what really was that about, if those who come out of that background and were heroic don't think that religion played much of a role in justifying what they did and encouraged them to do?

A third source for this approach I take is a Jesuit post-modern project . Here I'm not going to go into this unless you ask me to. *Jesuit Postmodern* is a book that came out in 2006. It was an edited collection by Frank Clooney, who's now over at Harvard, and it brought together conversations among a group of Jesuits who met regularly over the years, talking about how the current perception of intellectual life among Jesuits differs from that of the generation before, and generations earlier – "classic Jesuit." We had the "modern Jesuit", and the modern Jesuit is basically those who have empowered this sort of institution in terms of the way it thought about itself. You know, a clear appreciation the autonomy of knowledge, of the disciplines and so on. Then there are the post-modern Jesuits, who are not the counter-modern Jesuits. The counter-modern anxiously ask whether the Catholic university, as it has developed, has become too secular. But the post-modern Jesuits were pointing out that maybe the stress of modern Jesuits on the autonomy of knowledge, and the autonomy of disciplines, perhaps that was a bit naïve too. That disciplines are part of a wider culture, and they have interests themselves. There was also recognition that modern Jesuits, and the universities that came out of their cooperation, respected knowledge very seriously. That search for knowledge wasn't subordinated to other projects, moral or religious.

I'm a New York Province Jesuit, which you can probably recognize by my accent. There are a lot of us around here. But one thing I recall from the seminary days is, New York Province used to throw a dinner. I don't know how many years they did this. But they used to throw a dinner in recognition of those Jesuits who wrote articles or books in the course of a year. They put out a very nice program, with identification of what had been written. It left a strong impression on me, as a young seminarian, that this is a religious ministry – writing and researching. I was very impressed, and that has stayed with me.

A fourth source of my approach is a remark that Hannah Arendt made that I've been puzzling with over the years, from her essay, "What is Authority?" "But who can deny that faith, too, for so many centuries, securely protected by religion, its beliefs and its dogmas, has been gravely endangered through what is actually only a crisis of institutional religion?" I found that helpful for thinking out a difference between the crises that are afflicting institutional religion, some of which or maybe most of which are their own making. This other dimension of faith life that, in her perception, was sheltered by many of the dogmas of religion, but maybe perhaps now is

endangered by those same orientations within religion. The crises of institutional religions now are often reduced to authority issues, identity – for example, sexual identity issues, recruitment of clergy and such, all right? They're not the central issues that worried Hannah Arendt in terms of human dignity, the community, how we foster that confidence in the worth of human lives, as opposed to the utilitarianism of our culture that instrumentalizes those lives.

Finally we come to John Macmurray whom I have found extremely helpful in thinking about these issues. His *Persons in Relation* book is particularly good, a volume of the Gifford lectures that he gave. The book is very complex, but there's an elegance in his framework, namely, that we are in community, we are born into community. We can take a positive relationship to that community of love and respect, or we can take a negative relationship to that community, and that attitude comes out of fear. He identifies these two fundamental attitudes in the negative relationship. One is a contemplative attitude, where I don't want to be in real community with the others, so I'm submissive. My project in life is getting along with the others, not risking any sort of rupture with them. Then you have the pragmatic attitude, which is the realization that I can get these people to go along with what I want, so power becomes the issue, not the submission. In his philosophy, what's he's trying to think out is how we can think of a positive relationship to one another, one that escapes the fear motivated modes of relating in submission or seeking power. He looks at various phenomena from this point of view, morality being one of them.

I xeroxed a few pages from his book *Persons in Relation*, which are part of this handout I gave you. If you look on 124, that second paragraph, about seven lines down, here he's talking about morality, and the different types, personal and impersonal morality. This is helpful for thinking of religion, personal and impersonal modes of being religious. “The form will be of an organic type, a system of social habit” – he's speaking of the submissive mode here – “in which the activity of each member is functionally related to the activity of others. So the practical life of society is a balanced and harmonious unity, a system of social habit. To maintain this, each member must have his function in the common life; he must be trained from childhood to recognize the social pattern and his own function in it, and to develop a system of habits which makes conformity to it a second nature.

“The contemplative mode of morality is then a morality of good form. Wrong actions, bad form; doing something that's not ‘seemly,’ not ‘fitting.’ Its standard is, in the broad sense, an aesthetic standard. It is not the sort of standard that can easily be formulated in general precepts. It has to be felt. It is a kind of beauty or grace in social relations.” But it's an inferior form of morality, and Macmurray would call it contemplative.

On the next page, at the beginning of the next full paragraph: “The other negative mode,” negative because it's motivated by fear, “which we have called ‘pragmatic,’ is the antithesis and the complement of this. If the material life – the life of action – is taken as real, then the life of the spirit is subordinate, and becomes a means to practice. In that case, the conflict of wills is met by aggression, by the effort to overpower the resistance of other agents and compel them to submit.”

The second paragraph shows how “The pragmatic mode of morality will then be conceived as obedience to law – to a moral law which the individual imposes upon himself, and through

which he secures the universal intention to maintain the community of action. It will be morality of self-control, a power unto itself, limiting its own freedom…" I point that out, because those are also modes in which we might think of religion, in terms of the contemplative and the pragmatic.

Now, on page 164, he raises the question: "How can a universal mutuality of intentional and active relationship be represented symbolically? Only through the idea of a personal Other who stands in the same mutual relationship to every member of the community. Without the idea of such a universal and personal Other it is impossible to represent the unity of a community of persons each in personal fellowship with all the others."

He says later, "In its full development, the ideal of a universal personal Other is the idea of God." What is interesting is, we have the capacity to feel deeply about strangers, for example, who are suffering in the Congo right now. What is that relationship? Is it fantasy on our part that we construct, that we're connected to them somehow, that we have a relationship? Or is there an ontological condition, a reality, of a universal personal other, with whom we are all in relationship? Moral action manifests the reality of that ontological bond, which we don't have to recognize in being able to perform the actions. But unbelief doesn't reach the level, the depth level, of recognizing that these actions are not just arbitrary whims. They really do confirm what reality is. On the next page, he talks about "The fear of the Other… as a fear of life." The very last sentence, the last two sentences on 165: "Religion would then be simply the celebration of communion – of the fellowship of all things in God. Meanwhile, it sustains the intention to achieve this fellowship." Again, that's his notion of religion.

But the relevance of that notion of religion at a university, he makes quite explicit in those final pages here, 176, and 177. This has come up regularly in our seminar, the Catholic Intellectual Traditions, science on one hand, as opposed to the aesthetic or philosophical. All right, how do we relate them? Can we relate them? Is this what the real story at the university is? Why we have a sense of fragmentation? Well, this is the way Macmurray ties them together, which he has built up to in the course of his book.

"Art and science are derived from religion by a limitation of attention. They are activities of reflection carried on for their own sake, and not for the sake of the personal Other. The one is an activity of emotional reflection, the other of intellectual reflection. As aspects of religion, they refer to action which integrates them, and they have therefore a reference to one another and qualify one another. This is possible only so far as action is positively motivated and heterocentric. If they are carried on for their own sakes, the reference to personal Other is excluded from this intention of the activity; though it necessarily remains as matter of fact." That is, whatever we're doing at the university does take place within a personal context of some sort. "As a result, they lose their intentional reference to one another, and become antithetical. Religion, we might say, intends the synthesis of art and science; art and science each intend themselves and exclude one another. Art intends the determination of the possible, not of the actual. Its problematic is in terms of satisfactory or unsatisfactory, and it is therefore an activity of valuation."

I'll skip the following section, and go to the next paragraph. “We must not forget, however, that both art and science are, as a matter of fact, personal activities. They are the activities of persons, and only of persons. It is the relation to the Other that is impersonal. Artists and scientists alike are doing something, and the unity of the personal informs the doing.” Again, we don't have disciplines, we have people practicing the arts and seeking knowledge. There is in all art an intellectual element and in all science an emotional element.

Finally, the last page I have here, 222, just that one paragraph, the full paragraph at the end. “There is, then, only one way in which we can think our relation to the world, and that is to think it as a personal relation to the form of the personal. We must think that the world is one action, and that its impersonal aspect is the negative aspect of this unity of action, contained in it, subordinate within it, and necessary to its constitution. To conceive the world thus is to conceive it as the act of God, the creator of the world, and ourselves as created agents, with a limited and dependent freedom to determine the future, which can be realized only on the condition that our intentions are in harmony with His intention, and which must frustrate itself if they are not.”

So that's his way of putting together the two major areas of the disciplines, in terms of living out of a personal faith, even if one does not articulate that in religious terms. One is living out a personal commitment in what he calls a personal community that does have an ontological foundation. Which is nothing new, but I find that his way of formulating it very helpful. Meditating on Macmurray’s architecture of the personal will disclose the university as a personal community, as a religious action in which we feel a grateful participation.