

BOOK REVIEWS

The Future of Christian Learning: An Evangelical and Catholic Dialogue

Mark Noll & James Turner, Thomas Howard (Ed.)
Brazos Press, 2008
\$16.99, 144 pages

Reviewed by Brother Jeffrey Gros, FSC

The 45 years of reception of the ecumenical movement in Catholic education has been a marvelous source of renewal, both in the content of religious instruction, as all of the education documents of the Holy See note, and also in new contacts, relationships, and institutional renewal. Nowhere has this encounter been richer than in Catholic higher education, both in the ecumenical developments in theology and Catholic Studies programs, and in new students, faculty, and administrators open to dialogue and to the common witness to which the Catholic Church is committed in carrying out its task of evangelization, witness to the unity of human knowledge, and harmony of faith and reason.

One of the most remarkable developments in the last 30 years of the conciliar renewal has been the Evangelical and Pentecostal encounter with the Catholic tradition. While the formal dialogues sponsored by the Holy See and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops have been surprisingly productive, the texts have hardly penetrated the life of Catholic higher education with the fruitfulness of their potential. In fact, because of the theological character of the divisions among Christians, and thus the program of the official dialogues, issues like education, and especially university education, have seldom been the subject of formal dialogues with Orthodox, classical Protestant churches, or the Evangelical and Pentecostal communities. For this reason, this dialogue between leading Evangelical and Catholic scholars, in an Evangelical college context, is a welcome contribution to the literature both on higher education and on the ecumenical reconciliation among Christians.

Evangelical historian, Mark Noll of Wheaton College, now teaching at the University of Notre Dame, gives a masterful overview of the Western religious development, focusing on the splintering of Christendom in the Reformation and its impact on how education has come to be organized and conceptualized in modern, voluntaristic society. He notes the common complexity faced by

both Evangelical and Catholic learning in the postmodern, post-Christendom world, proposing three theses: (a) Such learning must entail both real learning and real, orthodox Christianity; (b) it has revived in a revived Christendom; and (c) in the present U.S. intellectual context, Catholics and Evangelicals share a common agenda in promoting Christian learning.

This author's penetrating critical analysis of religious culture, including a well-informed overview of the role of authority in pre-Vatican II Catholic culture and theological tendencies in Evangelical culture, which have fostered an anti-intellectual ethos, sets the stage for seeing both positive and negative contributions to Christian learning in both traditions. The author indicates the importance of hegemonic Christianity for Christian learning, and notes how within U.S. Catholicism this hegemony, within its immigrant ethnic enclaves and universal neo-scholastic philosophical system of knowledge, has slipped away in the post-Vatican II years. Both Evangelicals and Catholics now face pluralistic approaches to Christian learning, pressures of university specialization and the fragmented views on human knowledge, and reductive sectarian or self-secularizing accommodation to the dominate academic culture.

Noll situates his analysis in the context of a thick description of American Catholic and Evangelical developments in Christian learning from the struggles of late nineteenth-century Catholicism with both anti-Catholic U.S. forces and Vatican pressures, and the struggles of early twentieth-century fundamentalism to throw off its world-denying anti-intellectualism, to the present situation of common struggle with internal fragmentation and external secular pressures on institutions of Christian higher learning. It is in this context where the two streams of Christianity have most to benefit by cross-fertilization, in Noll's view. For him, what was a polarizing moment, in the sixteenth-century Reformation, now needs to become an opportunity for mutual enrichment so that the values of both can serve a common Gospel imperative and become a corrective to each other in the service of Christian learning in American society.

In the second contribution to the dialogue, Notre Dame's James Turner traces how Catholics and Evangelicals can learn from each other in improving their own practices, how they might cooperate in furthering Christian learning, and how they can cooperate together in work with others to enrich the learning enterprise. Turner outlines first of all why historically it has been difficult for Catholics and Evangelicals to learn from each other because of their very different approaches to truth, reason, and the institutional expressions of higher learning. In a disclosative example, he notes that the Franciscan University at St. Joseph is the only Catholic school to associate with the Evangelical Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. However, from

this difficult history, he moves on to demonstrate the potential for cross-fertilization in teaching, student formation—both faith and moral—and curriculum. The obvious complementarity of personal faith sharing in Evangelical formation and liturgical, sacramental focus for Catholics is analyzed for the strengths and weaknesses of each in contributing to the Christian learning in institutions of higher education. Particularly telling is the demise of the Catholic vision of the unity of human knowledge as the horizon of the university, a vision envied by many Evangelical academics.

As any academic in either tradition recognizes, there is more in common with the Christian scholar committed to this vision of Christian scholarship, Evangelical or Catholic, than with their coreligionist committed to the specialized fragmentation of knowledge characteristic of the modern research university. He outlines where some of the dialogue is going on, and the fascinating convergence of Christian philosophers and historians, for example, out of the Catholic and Dutch-background neo-Calvinists traditions.

In both essays, and the responses to each other, the authors provide some provocative ironies that can stimulate the discussion in either community, or among those bold enough to cross the boundaries, following the example of these venturesome interlocutors. Indeed, for some secularists and sectarian Christians, Christian scholarship is an oxymoron, to which this dialogue gives eloquent counter witness.

This volume is a programmatic piece, in many ways, calling for interdisciplinary dialogues among Christian scholars, administrators of Christian institutions of higher education, and across lines of Evangelical, Catholic, classical Protestant and Orthodox Christian scholars in search of a common language, mutual learnings, and a common vision for Christian learning. We can be grateful for these two scholars, and Thomas Howard their host at Gordon College, for initiating such an important process in service to Christian learning in America.

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