

# THE CRESSSET

*A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs*

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## Developing American Saints

### The Contribution of Catholic Higher Education to the American Experience

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I have in recent years been more than preoccupied—my friends would say obsessed—with the public responsibilities of my own Catholic community. In addition, I am proud to say that I am a Catholic Americanist, a title perhaps unfamiliar to many. Most simply, it means that I believe that our American experience tests our faith quite as properly as our faith tests our American culture. More broadly, my brand of Catholic Americanism arises from the judgment that the Catholic experience in the United States has been a story of success, not failure, a story of liberation from poverty and marginalization, not a story of passive surrender to an alien culture. Catholic aspirations gave and still give birth to rich, diverse subcultures. Those in turn are permeated by the surrounding culture, at least in part because of the very American aspirations of Catholics themselves. They “become American” by choice, and as a result, they share responsibility for this land, which is truly their own. I am one of them. So my subtitle should perhaps not be “The Contribution of Catholic Higher Education to the American Experience” but “Catholic Higher Education *as* American Experience and American Responsibility.”

Where to begin? On 22 September 2006, my wife and I were at the halfway point of an eight-day commitment to care for two of our remarkable grandchildren while their parents vacationed in Florida. I had fallen asleep on the family couch while thinking about preparing this presentation. I dreamed. In my dream, Alan Wolfe of Boston College’s Center for Religion and American Public Life invited me to visit a seminar discussing religion, politics, and Catholic higher education. After fretting about what to say, I decided I would simply enter the seminar, hold aloft a copy of Robert Ellsberg’s “reading a day” book *All Saints* and tell the Boston College scholars, “Here is all you have to know!” There my dream ended. I awoke convinced that this is what I should tell you here.

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Ellsberg's "cloud of witnesses" ranges from Hebrew prophets through traditional Christian saints, with exciting stories, to modern resisters, pacifists, and rebels, not all of them Christian, or canonized, but all united by their dedication to the beloved community we Christians call the reign of God. Christian higher education like all higher education is measured by the lives of its graduates, citizens, and, perhaps, disciples. In both cases, citizenship and discipleship, they, our graduates, and we, their friends and mentors, are called to be saints; I would add American saints.

Our question, then, is the role of Catholic and other church-related higher educational institutions in developing American saints. First, some history.

The story of American Catholic higher education has been well told by historians Philip Gleason and Alice Gallin, OSU. Gleason's definitive history covers the period before the Second Vatican Council, while Sr. Alice tells the story of the years since, years in which she herself has been a key history maker. Gleason's Catholic colleges and universities took shape within the American Catholic subculture where they assisted the movement of American Catholics into the centers of American society and culture, all the while finding their distinctive rationale by "contending with modernity" in its American forms. They were American, without question, but they were Catholic because they were, as they were told to be, "certain and set apart" from secular America. Of course, in American fashion, they never hesitated to make use of the best that secular America could supply. And, thank goodness, their contention with modern culture, Gleason's rationale for Catholic higher education, was always a bit of an American promotional pose. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the American bishops immediately placed at the disposal of President Roosevelt their institutions and their "consecrated personnel." Catholic campuses soon filled with officers in training. That near total self-sacrifice of Catholicism and Catholic higher education to American society carried over quite smoothly through the Cold War and beyond when, as we like to forget, we prepared as best we could to end human history, if we had to. Catholic intellectuals and institutions might "contend with modernity" and decry accommodation to secular culture, and a few prophets might mean it. But most of us, most of the time, had no trouble adjusting to American ways of war, race, and profit. Nor, to our credit, did we hesitate to make our own American dreams of "liberty and justice for all," including us.

Academically, Catholic higher education's anti-modernism also had its limits. University leaders eagerly joined accreditation networks and, only a bit behind schedule, embraced the standards of academic freedom and the professional practices of the American academy, including what David Reisman and Christopher Jenks called "the academic revolution." They did all they could to enable their students to enter American economic, social, and cultural centers, including secular graduate and professional schools. Gleason and other commentators worry that these adjustments put the Catholic

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integrity of these institutions at risk. And they did, of course. American hunger (was it for acceptance or a share of responsibility for our country's history?) could subvert distinctive Catholic identity, both personal and institutional. Still, Catholic higher education's Americanizing adjustments well served ambitious Catholic constituencies. For, contrary to common belief, immigrant Catholic subcultures were not old world enclaves engaged in a doomed rearguard action against modernity. Instead, they were communities of commitment shaped by "folk memories brought to bear on new aspirations," to use a phrase of the late Timothy L. Smith. Catholic colleges and universities, while proclaiming a trans-ethnic Catholic loyalty, embodied those aspirations, which exploded after the Second World War. As Catholics broke out of city parishes and neighborhoods to claim their places in boardrooms and suburbs, their colleges and universities were there to help, and to affirm this self-initiated Americanization as a very good thing. Some might call it liberation.

Americanism, the belief that active sharing of responsibility for America's common life was good, gave meaning to Americanization. The answer to the question of the Catholic contribution to the American experience was evident when I attended Notre Dame in the 1950s. By simply doing their job as American universities while trying to turn us into intelligent Catholics, Notre Dame and its counterparts were fulfilling their American responsibilities. At my graduation in 1960, President Dwight Eisenhower delivered the commencement address, Cardinal Montini of Milan, later Pope Paul VI, celebrated the baccalaureate Mass and actually handed me my diploma, and our loudest cheers went to honorary degree recipient Dr. Tom Dooley, the idealistic Catholic, anti-communist medical missionary in Indochina, then within a few months of death from cancer. Over the doors of the chapel at Notre Dame are the words "God. Country. Notre Dame." That day the answer to our question was altogether clear: Notre Dame's contribution to American society was—us.

In those days, American Catholic colleges and universities prospered wonderfully, but they remained under the control of church men, and I use the word men deliberately. Their ecclesiastical priorities together with the required pose of anti-modernism inhibited the development of Catholic colleges and universities as first-rate academic institutions. Emancipation, fueled by Americanist aspirations and affirmed by the spirit of solidarity of the Second Vatican Council, came in the late 1960s when an energetic set of college and university Presidents persuaded their religious communities to turn over charters, property, and heritage to independent boards of trustees. That altogether unprecedented move—almost all religious orders of men and women entrusted the schools they had built at great sacrifice to the Catholic community at large—should be a subject of reflection in every orientation program for new faculty and staff at Catholic colleges and universities.

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As academic leaders explained separate incorporation at the time, these were genuine universities and as such required “institutional autonomy and academic freedom.” They should be self-governing institutions, not branch plants of religious orders whose leaders had primarily apostolic responsibilities. Already most Catholic colleges and universities accepted prevailing standards of academic freedom; later they would not altogether happily accept professional standards of academic governance. The revolution of separate incorporation involved what Alice Gallin calls a “new partnership” between religious orders and the Catholic laymen and women who would now direct the affairs of colleges and universities. Without exception, the new Boards pledged to ensure that their colleges and universities would remain Catholic. Catholicism, they said, would be “perceptibly present and effectively operative,” a promise they thought could be best kept by bringing academic theology out of the seminary and into the college and university. Together with pastoral ministry, academic theology would help American Catholics become intelligent and responsible citizens and disciples. Historically, these moves, they were confident, would enable American Catholicism to give meaning to its liberating journey from margin to mainstream and enrich American life with Catholic wisdom and resources.

The Vatican, always suspicious of Americanism, never accepted this new arrangement and, from time to time, intervened to insist on accountability to the Catholic hierarchy and the Vatican. Academic leaders resisted external control, but they manifested their continuing Catholic commitment through formal statements, development of academic programs in theology, heavy investment in pastoral ministry, and dialogue with the bishops. The American bishops, until recently, were completely sympathetic and mediated disputes between Catholic universities and the Vatican. It was, it remains, a uniquely American arrangement, blurring boundaries between church and academy for the sake of the church’s life and mission, just as we so often blur the boundaries between church and state for the sake of public purpose.

What are we to think of this history? My colleague and friend Professor Gleason and I have disagreed about this question for thirty years. Recently, Catholic cultural politics have gone his way, and he has, for now, the best of the argument. Gleason thinks that separate incorporation and the multiple adjustments that accompanied it cost the Catholic colleges and universities their integrity as Catholic institutions. He believes that the Presidents and professors who shaped Catholic higher education for the last thirty years were hell-bent on “assimilation” and “Americanization” and unwittingly gave away the Catholic game. Intent on imitating secular academia, they hired anybody who showed up with a good degree, ignored the Pope, and turned their backs on neo-scholastic philosophy. Fortunately, according to Gleason, in recent years “*Ecclesiastical authority*” (italics in a recent Gleason text) has helped “stem what might have become an unintended slide into the kind of secularization experienced by Protestants a century

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ago.” Protestants and their colleges then (you will recognize references to the work of George Marsden), Catholics and their universities now, Americanization as loss and defeat. But Catholic higher education might yet be saved from secularization and salvage its integrity by the intervention of the Pope and his many supporters at home and abroad.

As you may have noticed, Gleason’s anti-Americanist position now dominates Catholic discourse. This explains the shocking defensiveness of Catholic college and university leaders during the last few years, steering clear of the sex abuse crisis, avoiding controversial questions such as abortion, homosexuality, and the role of women in the church, and nearly breaking down over the Vagina Monologues. Many reputable commentators now blame the Vatican Council (or supposed misinterpretations and misapplications of the Council) for the supposed loss of Catholic identity among American Catholics. Others, a growing number, combine that revisionism with Gleason’s explanation of Americanization, as if the Council was interpreted in ways that simply lent legitimacy to the desire of Catholics for acceptance and belonging among their non-Catholic neighbors. The near consensus now is that the church of the past should have been, and the church of the future must be, countercultural, that is to say non-American if not at least selectively anti-American. The reasons for that consensus, I would argue, have less to do with theological judgments than with the decline of the Americanist impulse, Smith’s “aspirations,” that long shaped so much of American Catholic self-consciousness.

The retreat from Americanism has been a long process. It is perhaps best illustrated by a text that for some of us marked a high point of responsible civic discipleship, the 1983 pastoral letter of the American bishops on nuclear weapons. In that text, the bishops spoke of two styles of teaching: one evident in their theological section where they spoke of the nonviolent Jesus, the other in the long body of the text where they engaged in a process of moral dialogue with the Pentagon, concluding with a “strictly conditioned moral acceptance” of nuclear deterrence. This bilingualism, struggling with conflicting demands of Christian discipleship and common citizenship, seemed to correspond to the moral struggles of many thoughtful Americans, not just Catholics. But then, in a move few noticed, the bishops launched into a moral jeremiad against their country not heard from American bishops since the formalistic denunciations of secularism in the 1920s and 1950s. They described the United States as a country dangerously “estranged from Christian values”; in early drafts they called it “neo-pagan.” Faithful Christians might well expect persecution and martyrdom comparable to the early church. This was anti-Americanist “knocking” (the term is Charles Taylor’s) of modernity with a vengeance. The passages were drawn almost word for word from an essay by theologian, later Cardinal, Avery Dulles, then moving from the reformist to the neo-conservative camp. It signaled an important shift in American Catholic thought.

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Over two decades, the decline of Catholic Americanism and the rise to dominance of countercultural language and subcultural strategies have drained the foundations of conciliar reform, destroyed the American church's center, long represented by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin (see Peter Steinfels's *A People Adrift*), and shattered the intellectual foundations of the Catholic academic revolution. Leaders like Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC and Paul Reinert, SJ, were disciples of John Courtney Murray, who formulated the bilingual approach that allowed for, indeed insisted upon, both faithful Christian discipleship and responsible American citizenship. Such bilingualism is nothing more than our daily Christian practice of using one language among our Christian friends, where we ask what God, revealed to us in Jesus and present to us in God's spirit, would have us do, and another, common language used in marketplace and city square, in classroom and laboratory, in all areas of shared responsibility. Hesburgh and Reinert and people we meet every day bear witness to the fact that ambiguity need not be heresy, that the tension between discipleship and citizenship can shape a fruitful public church and can inform lives of integrity, even produce American saints.

Still, it is a position made vulnerable by the disciplines of democratic pluralism, as debates like that over nuclear weapons, and over abortion, make clear. It is also challenged by the felt need of the church, of every church, to establish its difference and distance from others. To do that it is important to insist upon not just the distinctiveness but the superiority of its own claims. So it is that advocates of the model of responsible public Catholicism embodied in American Catholic higher education have found themselves on the defensive as important church leaders have identified particular moral issues as definitive of faithful Catholic discipleship. Their defensiveness reveals that modern Catholic higher education's contribution to American life, its Catholic as well as academic contribution, depends upon the presence in some form of Americanism. Our capacity in Catholic colleges and universities to empower one another and our students to live a Christian vocation, as disciples and citizens, turns on our answer to the American question: What do we make of the American experience, and of our own inescapable American-ness?

The "Catholic Answers" to that question we now hear are far from Americanist. They profess to be integrally Catholic and therefore countercultural. So far, on campus and off, American optimism has softened the hard edge of such counter-cultural distancing from America. Until now, Catholic critiques of American life have had a peculiarly American style: denounce the culture but don't miss lunch! But we can expect renewed "Catholic Answers" to take on a more serious tone, for its themes correspond to those set forth by the new Pope. As theologian Joseph Komonchak puts it, Benedict XVI believes that the faith must be presented as counter-cultural. It should appeal to the widespread sense of disillusionment with what modernity has promised but failed to deliver. It will appeal by "presenting the Christian vision in its totality as a compre-

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hensive structure of meaning that at nearly every point breaks with the taken for granted attitudes, strategies, and habits of contemporary culture.” We hear echoes of the Holy Father’s ideas in influential places. Cardinal Francis George is among the leaders of those bishops who are realigning the American church in a stance of opposition to modernity in general and to much of American society in particular. He told Pope John Paul II that “the Church in the United States is in grave danger,” threatened “externally” by anti-Catholicism and efforts to limit its freedom and internally by “Catholics shaped by their culture more than by faith” (Zenit News Agency, 6/1/04). Listen to such authoritative voices and you will understand why we Americanists are few in number and more than a little gray.

Over the years, I have tried to offer an alternative story and an alternative answer to the American question. The architects of modern Catholic higher education believed that assimilation and Americanization were good because they would enable the church and its universities to participate in new ways in the transformation of our United States and someday our world. Pastoral networks, Pope John XXIII, and the morning newspapers told them that the country and the world were in a lot of trouble. Not yet informed by “ecclesiastical authority” that those troubles were the fault of secularists, they believed that Catholics actually shared with everyone else responsibility for the American future. They (and I) thought we heard that message clearly from the Second Vatican Council, especially from “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World.” Renewal and reform were not about assimilation and Americanization for their own sake. Our family stories of economic, social, and educational improvement, even liberation, had a purpose beyond getting one of our own to the White House and all of us to the mall. We were to face the fact that we as American Catholics had new, historically changing responsibilities for our country and our world, and we were supposed to get smart enough to make a difference. If there was not another new world to be made, as our forebears had made their new world for us, then we really were back in Egypt, having pursued false gods, and we had best get back to church. Americanization without Americanism, a sense that our shared story has meaning, always will look, and be, wishy-washy.

What a generation of church leaders from Father Hesburgh through Cardinal Bernardin instinctively recognized was a point made years ago by Jesuit sociologist John Coleman: for a pluralist democracy to work it needs more than a language that respects diversity and seeks a public moral consensus. Its people must love it. The common good, our common good, must be a genuine good. The public square is not naked but a common achievement allowing all to flourish. In the absence of such Americanism, the bilingualism required of Christians in pluralist democracy becomes not simply wishy-washy but impotent and indecisive, caught in the whiplash between civil religion at one end and pseudo-prophetic sectarianism at the other.

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Let us take the question back to the Catholic college and university. Like all church-related institutions, these institutions affirm three distinct but intersecting lines of responsibility: professional, civic, and ecclesiastical. For those of us who pursue our vocations here, these are also our own commitments and responsibilities.

First, these institutions—like their faculty—have professional academic responsibilities. “This is a college, not a church,” our former President used to say. Yes, these are authentic American colleges and universities, and we are authentic American scholars and teachers. Consequences follow, among them institutional autonomy, academic freedom, academic self-government, and a variety of very real professional responsibilities. Our colleges and universities have chosen, deliberately, to move out of the subcultural margins they once occupied and to participate in and share responsibility for the cultural and educational life of American society. And so have we. This is a college, not a church. Do I also say that here, on campus, I am an historian, and a professor, not a Roman Catholic? Not quite, but like the institutions, most of us acknowledge complicated but altogether serious professional and disciplinary commitments and responsibilities which mediate our understanding and practice of faith. And that has consequences, not least that dualism that leads us to our own dialogue between faith and culture, but also risks the segmentation, sometimes mistaken for secularization, that disturbs many of our friends.

Second, we all have civic as well as academic responsibilities. Our colleges and universities are public bodies, chartered by the people of the several states, supported by public appropriations as well as semi-public and private benefactions. Our institutions are expected in return to serve the public interest, the common good, and so are we. Civic, or could we say political, responsibility is a fact and not an option, though we all worry when talk turns to the politics of knowledge. Once again, do I leave civic and political responsibilities behind when I put on my professional robes? Not quite, but on my office bulletin board I post a bumper sticker that reads “TRUST ME—I’m not into Politics or Religion.”

Finally our particular colleges and universities have a third set of responsibilities because they profess to be Catholic, and some make that commitment concrete through vital connections with religious communities of women or men, in Holy Cross’s case with the Jesuits. Our institutions almost all fiercely defend their institutional autonomy against any effort to exert control from the outside, political or ecclesiastical, but, with the church as with the public, they freely acknowledge genuine responsibilities and attempt to act on them. In our Catholic case, our connection to the church can at times seem burdensome, challenging, and at times disrespecting our professional and civic obligations. So, in our human way, we sometimes minimize its importance in order to avoid conflict. But on our better days, we try to turn the Catholic and Jesuit heritage, and our living connections with the church and the Society of Jesus, into assets that



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enrich our vocations. But, with the church as with the government, collaboration is a two-way street, and external authorities do not always make it easy for us, and we at times may not make it easy for them.

There is a specific form of solidarity required by each line of responsibility. Public and social solidarity means that we take with full seriousness our historic location in this place, among these people, at this moment in history. Our academic work is located within a horizon that embraces what the Vatican Council called “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted.”

Similarly, our Catholic responsibilities point to an ecclesial solidarity as our academic work participates in the whole church’s service to the human family, touching not just Catholics but everything and everybody. Thus while we resist external control, our colleges and universities and those of us who practice our vocations within them affirm our share of responsibility for the life and work of the church.

And far less securely established is an academic and intellectual solidarity that regards the “us against them” of countercultural religion with the same suspicion it directs at tribes and nations. Intellectual solidarity requires that we regard the problems facing all serious scholars and teachers as our problems as well. Intellectual solidarity informs the academic work of committed Catholics. It is the essential ingredient, I think, of responsible resistance to countercultural Catholic claims.

This institutional balancing of academic, political, and religious responsibilities has pedagogical and pastoral counterparts. Our students, in their future, similarly will have to balance professional, civic, moral, and religious responsibilities, and we hope to help them do that with intelligence and integrity. We hope they will be competent professionals, conscientious citizens, intelligent disciples. And our hope for them expresses our aspirations for ourselves. All of us are at once scholars and teachers, citizens of complicated civic communities, and, in some cases, active participants in communities of faith, in all cases people of conscience and commitment. What the Second Vatican Council said of ordinary Catholics could be said with only slight modifications of all of us: “the laity, by their very vocation, seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family, and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven” (*Lumen Gentium*, paragraph 29).

I end with our students, then, and ideas about their future we often talk about but perhaps think about less critically than we should. First, vocation. When students leave your school or mine, fired by a deeper faith and awakened social conscience, where are they to go to find a community of shared faith, mutual support, and common commit-

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ment, the kind of community they might have enjoyed at school or on a summer or overseas service project? Will they find a community of conscience and commitment in the workplace? Will they find it in your religious congregation or in mine? Where will they turn when they are asked for the first time to share in work of limited or negative social benefit? Will they find communities of shared faith and friendship appropriate not just to acts of mercy and justice but to a lifetime oriented toward service to the human family? To whom will they turn when they realize in their hearts the enormity of inequality and injustice, the mass of systemic irresponsibility of our emerging global marketplace? For the Christians among us, after a century of multiple social gospels, can we say that the piety and culture of our local congregations and religious movements nourishes courageous conscience and an informed ability to read experience in light of faith? And of course, we pose these questions in the perspective of our students, but they are really our questions. Have we found such communities and congregations of conscience and commitment? And, if we answer “yes,” need we not ask “why” most of the time most of us, and certainly me, are so comfortable?

Second is an element of vocation, citizenship. We read Martin Luther King Jr.’s first book and his last. The young minister schooled in the social gospel of love, disciplined by a clear analysis of power, confronted the reality of racism in Montgomery. Sadly, he had only thirteen years before he wrote his last book. The commitment to loving service burns brighter than ever, but the problems seen now in what he calls the “world house” are more complicated and intractable than he had imagined in the days of the bus boycott. Power is not power with a small “p” but with a capital “P” as in Powers and Principalities. And he is gravely worried, in part because the political options available in 1967 are so inadequate to the problems people confront across the globe. His call to action is clear, but sober and modest. So, you and I issue our invitation to civic responsibility. Where do we go to carry out those responsibilities? Yes, there is the Catholic Worker and Bread for the World and Habitat for Humanity and Greenpeace and thousands of national and international NGOs. They help us do our duty, but do they really give direction and hope to our lives? Are they adequate to the level of our responsibility? You and I are here following two, three, and four generations of poor immigrant, marginalized outsiders who chose the burdens of self-government and personal responsibility. And, they gave us these gifts: material security, education, respect, and access to power. And they gave us these schools we serve. And, what is the quality of the political culture we are making by our choices each day? What is the feeling in our hearts and the look on our face when talk turns to the United Nations, to the Congress, to the elections? And how do we feel, how do we really feel about our fellow citizens in the United States? Can they be trusted with self-government? Can we? In the end, who really is responsible for the public life and global action of this last superpower?

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So there you have it. Does responsible Americanism preclude serious religious commitment? Does the quest for common ground, and a common good for all of us preclude serious religious commitment? And how do we feel, really feel, about this people among whom we live? The future of Catholic higher education will be determined by Catholic responses to such questions. The arguments are important, not just for American academic life but for American public life, as Catholics constitute a very important component of American society and culture. A lot is at stake. The mission and identity questions really do matter.

I have tried to argue an Americanist case. Michael Harrington's characterization of the impact of his Jesuit education was that "ideas have consequences." Harrington was not referring to a pragmatic epistemology or Ignatian discernment but to something altogether different; he was referring to Jesuit priests who lived strange lives of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and devoted themselves to their students day and night because they actually believed the ideas they taught in class. If something is true, you are supposed to live that truth. So for we American Catholics. This is our land, indeed, and these are our people and, as the result of our remarkable history, we as a people and as a community can choose whether to embrace our American responsibilities or reconstruct a subculture defined by distance and difference. The future is, as it has always been, in our hands. ✚

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