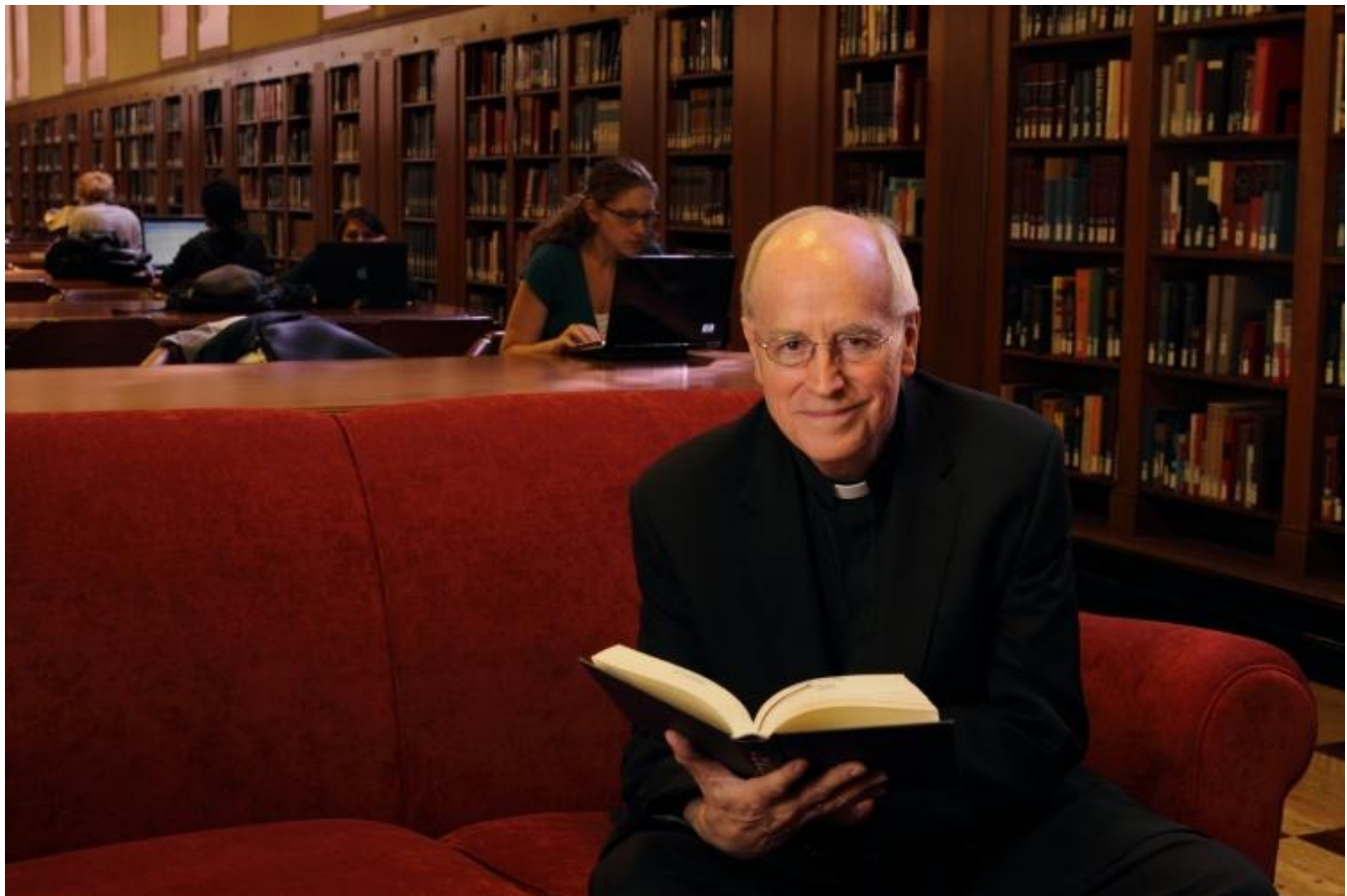


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James L. Heft, SM (Courtesy of Oxford University Press)

While completing his doctorate in medieval history, James L. Heft, SM, taught for three years at a Marianist high school in Cincinnati. He joined the religious studies department at his alma mater, the University of Dayton, in 1977. He served as faculty member, departmental chair, and provost at Dayton for almost thirty years. In 2006 he founded the Institute of Advanced Catholic Studies (IACS) at the University of Southern California. Having retired from IACS in 2018, he now holds the title of president emeritus. Heft's unique experience in Catholic education from high-school catechesis to advanced Catholic Studies grants special authenticity to *The Future of Catholic Higher Education* [1]. It is a *summa academica Catholica*.

The allusion to Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* is deliberate. These two *summas* are similar in at least two ways. First, Aquinas's work was written as a guidebook for future Dominican preachers. Heft's book offers a guide for future faculty, administrators, and—at a tangent—bishops to help them form and foster Catholic higher education. Second, and more important, is a comparison of method. As Alisdair MacIntyre has pointed out, Aquinas is not a philosopher in the mode of the great systematizers like Spinoza or Kant. Aquinas's task was sorting and synthesizing an accretion of traditions from the Bible, the patristics, ancient philosophy (especially Aristotle), Church councils, and great predecessors like Augustine. This is Heft's method too: the future he projects for Catholic higher education emerges from a sifting of the historical realities. Most Catholic colleges are small, residential, and founded by a religious order. Historically, they have had a commitment to theology as a complement to the liberal arts in their curriculum, which raises suspicion within the dominant secular model of American higher education. Given Heft's attention to this tradition, it is no surprise that John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University* is one of his three "north stars." The other two: Jesus and Mary.

Heft's basic metaphor for future Catholic universities is "the open circle" of his subtitle. He contrasts this model with the closed circle of earlier Catholic colleges and the "free market of ideas" vision embedded in statements

from the Association of American University Professors (AAUP).

Heft characterizes a closed-circle institution as one that “will allow on campus only speakers who represent their version of Catholic teaching...and fidelity to the *magisterium* represents the only reliable indicator of orthodoxy.” The presumed failure to close the circle by many contemporary Catholic colleges has led to the foundation of several new “real Catholic” colleges. Heft clearly believes that a closed-circle campus constitutes a failure for higher education and a true Catholic vision thereof.

As for the AAUP’s model, Heft accepts the demand for academic freedom but is wary of translating that freedom into the university as a “free market of ideas.” The problem arises when the only coin of the realm in this market becomes fact. A world of “just the facts” is “scientism,” a view that reduces ethics and religion to irrationality. Scientism is not even genuine science; it slights the role of theory, and obscures any transcendent ground of truth.

Catholic higher education is not a timeless and isolated study of a theological idea. It is intimately linked to an extant worshipping community.

Heft welcomes into the open circle university scholars and theologians of other religious traditions as well as the natural sciences and professional studies. Aquinas provides historical warrant to Heft’s “open circle” by having included the Muslim Avicenna and the Jewish Maimonides in the circle of his own theoretical discussions—all of them indebted to the natural philosophy of Aristotle.

Heft devotes four very important chapters to “the University and the Church.” They again express his basic picture of the future of Catholic higher education from realities on the ground. Catholic higher education is not, he insists, a timeless and isolated study of a theological idea. It is intimately linked to an extant worshipping community that stretches from Pauline home churches to Vatican baroque. Too many discussions of Catholic academia brush by hierarchical pronouncements like *Ex corde ecclesiae* and the vexing issue of a *mandatum* for Catholic scholarship. Not this one: Heft addresses these ecclesiastical dicta head-on, with appreciation but also a certain degree of apprehension. Issuing a *mandatum* is the prerogative of a bishop. So Heft offers a careful discussion of the relationship between bishops and scholars. He notes valuable possibilities arising from closer contact between these two groups as well as notable failures, such as the ill-advised and irregular censure of the theologian Elizabeth Johnson by the USCCB’s doctrinal office.

The most intriguing chapter by far is a discussion of the role of Mary in the life of Catholic higher education. The historical Mary was the first teacher of Jesus. She is not associated with prophetic denunciation, but with Biblical Wisdom literature. Heft cites Walter Ong, SJ, on how the entrance of women to colleges and universities could blunt the “agonistic” spirit of male argument. (To this day PhD candidates must *defend* their theses.) A bit of wise “motherly” concern to resolve academic and theological issues without *disputatio* would be welcome.

Heft’s first and last “north star” is Jesus. He argues that Jesus and the Catholic tradition bring to higher education a “community ethic, sacramentality, and the dignity of the human person.” Anyone familiar with the rancor of academic arguments will appreciate a dose of community and respect for persons. As for “sacramentality,” here it relates to the daily life on campus, from dining hall to soccer field to lab. In all these places Catholicism finds “images and reflections of the divine.”

Will faculty really come to see Jesus in their work? In chapter one Heft poses that challenge. “Christian philosophers would be puzzled, I think, if they were asked how the person of Jesus should influence their work.” (This sentence is followed by a footnote: “George Dennis O’Brien is an exception.” Many years ago Heft reviewed my book, *The Idea of a Catholic University, for Commonweal*. He suggested that my treatment of Jesus was on a “somewhat abstract level.” The time has come to repay the compliment.)

A chapter titled “Humility and Courage” is devoted to a lecture given by the philosopher Charles Taylor at the University of Dayton and later published—along with essays by four commentators—as *A Catholic Modernity*. The final commentary is offered by Rosemary Haughton, who suggests that Taylor’s use of the word “transcendence” should be avoided because “it allows spirituality to escape the messiness of individual existence.” Agreeing with Haughton, Taylor admits that such grand words are bound to seem “abstract and evasive.” There is much “transcendence-talk” in Heft’s book, along with a host of other Catholic tropes like “faith and reason” and “sacramentality.” Anyone who writes a book on Catholic higher education like mine or Heft’s falls under Haughton’s critique. We both know the fault line. Taylor’s “excuse” will have to do. “You end up using [transcendence]...with a sense of defeat on the grounds that it is not as catastrophically misleading as its

rivals.” Perhaps it is appropriate that the most telling critique of Taylor’s work—a critique one might extend to Heft’s work (or mine)—was made by a woman. Speaking in the spirit of Mary, Haughton reminds us that the Word is made flesh before and beyond commentary or philosophy.

The Future of Catholic Higher Education

The Open Circle

James L. Heft, SM

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