

Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal

Volume 11 | Number 2

Article 5

December 2022

Father John W. O'Malley, S.J., Ambassador to Secular Academia

Nelson H. Minnich

The Catholic University of America, minnich@cua.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe>



Part of the [History of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Minnich, Nelson H. (2022) "Father John W. O'Malley, S.J., Ambassador to Secular Academia," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 11: No. 2, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53309/2164-7666.1406>

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol11/iss2/5>

This Reflection is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed Journals at ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact epublications@regis.edu.

Father John W. O'Malley, S.J., Ambassador to Secular Academia

Nelson H. Minnich
Professor of History and Church History
The Catholic University of America
minnich@cua.edu

In the early 1970s, when I was a graduate student in the History Department at Harvard University, a senior faculty member confided to me that the only remaining prejudice in American academia was against Roman Catholics. They were considered intellectually inferior due to their supposed lacking a critical faculty because they were too deferential to authority. In the 1960s, as a graduate student in that same department, Father John O'Malley encountered that bias. By his stellar performances in course work and dissertation he proved beyond any doubt his intellectual independence and acumen, and went on to receive Harvard University's Graduate School of Arts and Science's highest honor, the Centennial Medal Award, for his outstanding achievements in historical scholarship.

John was not a prisoner of the "Catholic ghetto" mentality that afflicted many of his contemporaries. He grew up in a small town on the banks of the Ohio River, attended the local public schools, and was popular with his classmates. A vocational call to the Jesuit order resulted in his training in classical languages, philosophy, and theology, and a spirituality that did not fear the world but embraced the good in secular culture. When it came time to do doctoral studies, he carefully investigated the best programs at leading universities and chose Harvard.

His meticulous, original scholarship earned him a series of prestigious fellowships: Guggenheim, American Council of Learned Societies, National Endowment for the Humanities, and others. If there were any prejudices against him because he was a Jesuit priest, they soon vanished once people met the charming, witty, hard-working, and brilliant scholar who showed a sincere interest in their work and offered words of encouragement. He made numerous, lasting friendships with scholars in many fields. Research centers such as the American Academy in Rome and Villa I Tatti

in Florence extended his fellowships to keep such a valuable scholar present. His many books were published by leading academic presses: Brill, Duke, Toronto, and Harvard, and these books won numerous awards. John was invited to join the leading learned societies such as the Accademia di San Carlo of the Ambrosian Library in Milan, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the American Philosophical Society, where he became a valued member of its standing committees and its Vice-President. He was elected President of the Renaissance Society of America and of the American Catholic Historical Association; and he was honored for his life-time achievements by the Society of Italian Historical Studies, by the Renaissance Society of America, and by the American Catholic Historical Association. At the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, he received a standing ovation. He was the recipient of some twenty honorary degrees.

Any prejudices against Catholics for being supposedly intellectually inferior have been demolished by the career of Father John O'Malley, S.J. In his many studies, he has challenged lingering historiographical orthodoxies. Renaissance Rome did not embrace ancient paganism but a humanism that sought to harmonize classical culture with Christian truths in a new intellectual synthesis, and replaced didactic sermons with epideictic oratory. The Jesuits were not founded to combat Protestantism; their fourth vow is to go on any mission assigned to them by the pope and is not an oath of personal loyalty to the pope; their superior general is not similar to a military general, but is subject to the general congregation and rules collegially. The Jesuits' commitment to an apostolate of education evolved over time and altered their ethos, tying them to institutions, endowments, and secular culture. John has given in his studies due weight to the contributions of Protestant theologians while

remaining faithful to Catholicism. He has distinguished the doctrinal and disciplinary decrees of the Council of Trent that called for preserving tradition from the rhetorical exhortations of the Second Vatican Council that urged adjusting to a changing world. He called for renaming his field, replacing the terms Catholic or Counter-Reformations with their European bias for the more global Early Modern Catholicism. He has discerned in Western culture four intellectual strains: prophetic/reform, academic/professional, literary/political, and artistic/performative. True to his Jesuit vocation to go anywhere in the world to work for the greater glory of God, John has engaged the world of academia and shown that faith and rigorous scholarship are indeed compatible. He was a highly respected and much beloved scholar, who brought Jesuits outside the walls of Jesuit higher education and into the secular sphere, a welcomed ambassador of the Society of Jesus and of the Church to the secular world of higher learning. HJE