Finding God in All Things: Reflections on the Possibility of Mission Implementation at a Jesuit University in the Area of Faculty Research

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Abstract

In recent years, much progress has been made in explicating how the educational mission of a Jesuit university can be informed and guided by the specific Catholic and Jesuit identity of the university. In contrast, almost no progress has been made in academic mission implementation in the area of faculty research. This failure is due in part to the widespread conviction that such an implementation is incompatible with academic freedom and will harm the research enterprise. This article argues that exactly the opposite is true. Such implementation could liberate the research enterprise of the methodological and substantive restrictions imposed on it by the dominant secular research paradigm. It would free scientists to diversify their research methods, gain a much richer understanding of reality, and even find God.

The Restoration of the Society and the Modern Jesuit University

Last year, the Jesuits commemorated the 200th anniversary of the rebirth of their religious order, or as the event is more commonly known, the restoration of the Society of Jesus in 1814. Half a century earlier, compelled by a variety of pressures (most of which were rooted in European politics), Pope Clement XIV had abolished the Society. Not only had the Jesuits been forced to join other religious orders or become diocesan priests (or leave religious life altogether), all of their institutions worldwide were either turned over to the local bishop, became public institutions, or were simply closed. With one signature, scribbled down on August 16, 1778, the papal brief Dominus ac Redemptor took effect and more than 800 Jesuit educational institutions all around the world, including many colleges and universities, were no more.

Following the 1814 Restoration of the Society, the United States saw the establishment of one Jesuit school after another. Initially, most of them were what we would nowadays call high schools with maybe two years of higher education added. But by the end of the nineteenth century, medical schools, laws schools, graduate schools, and other advanced degree programs had been established in many of the new Jesuit colleges, turning them into proper universities.

In the subsequent one hundred years, American Jesuit universities struggled to be recognized as respectable institutions of higher learning. By the mid-20th century, the Society itself established commissions to examine whether there was any point in holding on to professional and graduate schools. But the universities did. And by the end of the twentieth century, many of the 28 American Jesuit universities had matured into regionally outstanding universities and even internationally recognized research universities.

Now relieved from the incessant pressure to prove their quality as a university, these institutions could begin to ask what exactly made them Jesuit universities. This question quickly became urgent as the number of Jesuits began to decline rapidly, and with it the number of Jesuits available to work at Jesuit universities. If a university with 3,000 employees had only 15 Jesuits actively engaged in some aspect of academic life, was that really enough to still call it a Jesuit university? The answer to this rhetorical question was obvious. And in rapid succession, one project after another was launched to secure the participation of lay employees in mission implementation. Existing curricula were revisited to incorporate a variety of Ignatian-inspired pedagogical innovations such as
service-learning courses, reflection assignments, and student-run clinics for marginalized populations. Regional and even national conferences were organized and journal articles written to report on developments as diverse as hiring for mission, living wages for all employees, sustainability, and formation as an educational paradigm.

But there was one area that proved quite immune to these Ignatian injections: the area of faculty research. As soon as scientists at Jesuit universities leave their classrooms and clinics and head over to their libraries and laboratories, it seems they also leave behind the Jesuit heritage. Among the many reports and books written of late about Catholic and Jesuit higher education, one searches in vain for one devoted specifically to the topic of research at Jesuit universities. Conversations, the main journal devoted to Jesuit higher education in North America since 1992, did not devote any of its forty-five issues to the topic of research. Though the recently initiated online journal Jesuit Higher Education, now four years old, has published articles describing individual research projects at Jesuit universities, it has not yet published an article specifically devoted to the philosophical question of how research should be conducted at a Jesuit university.

This dearth is not completely surprising. Paulsen has surmised that only in 1711, in a speech at the University of Halle, Germany, was the idea advanced for the very first time that research is an integral part of a university’s educational mission. For centuries, universities had been seen as institutions where existing knowledge was being transmitted, but not necessarily discovered. To the extent that research was organized institutionally, this was done primarily in separate associations of scholars that came to be known as academies. These gradually diversified and specialized in different fields of study and research. When Ignatius began opening new schools in the mid-sixteenth century, this phenomenon was only in its infancy. For example, the first academy for natural sciences, the Academia dei Lincei, would only be founded in 1603; Galileo would be inducted into it eight years later in 1611, half a century after Ignatius’s death.

Now Ganss has suggested that the common, education-focused structure of contemporary universities notwithstanding, Ignatius actually conceived of his new brand of universities to include research. Ganss does not explain what led him to this conclusion. But even if his assessment is correct, this research mission remained a distant second at best. We already saw that as late as the mid-twentieth century, the Society of Jesus established an internal commission to examine the status and future of graduate education at Jesuit universities, which seriously considered the option of abandoning graduate, research-oriented education.

Ex Corde Ecclesiae

If one were to ask faculty members at Jesuit universities how today their research is, or can be, informed by the Catholic intellectual tradition and the Ignatian heritage in particular, most of them would probably respond with blank stares or surprised frowns. To some, the idea of scholarship being informed by a faith tradition sounds like an oxymoron. To others, the mere idea is threatening: they fear that their academic freedom will be restrained and before long, the Galileo affair is brought up.

But that story is actually much more complex than most casual commentators know. It did not so much involve a church-science conflict as it did a conflict between different paradigms of understanding the world. Throughout the western Middle Ages, virtually all universities, the sciences, the arts, just about everything of social and cultural import, had been run by the Catholic Church. Hence, all scientific battles took place on a church stage. For a twenty-first century reader, it is almost impossible to conceive the impact of organized religion in the Middle Ages. The closest modern equivalent would be the biomedical enterprise. Whatever the problem may be, today we tend to look at medicine for an answer. We look at medicine not only for relief of diseases, but also for an answer to criminal behavior, to gain eternal youth, to increase grades in elementary school, to obtain a beautiful appearance, assist in suicide, regulate sexual practices, and to execute prisoners. We always seem to expect an answer from physicians and biomedical scientists; and as soon as they get
involved we tend to trust that all is well or soon will be. The church no longer has that status and aura, but it most certainly did into the dawn of modernity.

The church’s loss of unquestioned authority and aura has evoked two types of responses. One has been fear. A personal anecdote can aptly illustrate. Some thirty years ago, when I had just begun my medical studies at the University of Maastricht in the south of the Netherlands, I got involved in the establishment of a new, Catholic student association. As the main inaugural activity, I planned a series of lectures on the topic of evolution. I figured that students in many different disciplines could get excited about this theme and might be interested in attending. The eight speakers lined up represented a broad variety of academic perspectives, ranging from an evolutionary biologist to a scholar of ancient philosophy, and from a social scientist to a Catholic moral theologian at the nearby seminary. But only weeks before the launch of the series, the Catholic student chaplain, an Opus Dei priest, called me into his office. He had discussed this lecture series with the diocesan bishop. Together they had concluded the series had to be cancelled. It was just too risky, so he explained; the Church simply could not afford that even a single attending student might begin to waver in his or her faith after attending one of these lectures.

This was thirty years ago. But even today, Church authorities occasionally suspect that academics’ primary purpose is to undermine Church teachings, particularly at Catholic universities. They would rather the university in their diocese not be Catholic, for at least that would relieve them of the near impossible task of enforcing the Catholic character of the university in their diocese. Even the Jesuits themselves, known for their counter-cultural boldness, have at times fallen prey to this type of fear. Not only was the main prosecutor of Galileo (i.e., Cardinal Bellarmine) a Jesuit; more recently, the Jesuit leadership essentially banished one of its own members, and one of the best-known anthropologists of his days, to the ends of the earth (more specifically China and later the US). I am speaking here of the twentieth-century French Jesuit anthropologist and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

But this type of fear is actually not consistent with the official church position that universities were and still are “ex corde ecclesiae,” at the heart of the church, as the first three words of the papal encyclical on universities says. Being at the heart of the church does not mean being “best buddies.” Of course, there will be skirmishes at times between church and university leaders. The local bishop may be upset about a book published by a member of the theology department; in turn the university’s ethics center angrily complains that the bishop is unwilling to announce to the priests in his diocese a major public lecture hosted by the university. Some students complain to the bishop that the medical ethics course does not contain enough specifically Catholic content; in turn, faculty members in the civil engineering department complain that students in their particular discipline should not be required to take an ethics course at all, let alone one informed by Jesuit spirituality. But this is the price both the church and the universities have to pay if we want universities that are “ex corde ecclesiae.”

**Academic Freedom**

As mentioned, in addition to fear, there is a second way in which both the local bishop and the Catholic university can respond to the aforementioned loss of aura. Rather than responding with fear – fear on the part of faculty members that they will become the next Galileo – fear by the local bishop that “his” university is bent on undermining the Magisterium – is for both to embrace the change in aura as a gain in freedom for all involved. I once asked our former university president, Father John Schlegel, S.J., after having attended a mass where he had presided, what he preferred to do: preach during mass or address a university audience. When he answered he had to do both, I inquired again what he would rather do. He finally admitted he preferred preaching. I told him I could tell because his sermon seemed to have been more enthusiastic, frank, open, and appeared to be coming from his heart. He in turn explained that when he addressed university audiences, he had to be very mindful of his status as president; everything he said would be weighted, interpreted, even turned and twisted, pleasing some, angering others. But in his pastoral role as a Jesuit priest with no such authority and matching
responsibilities, he was free to speak his mind and heart. The same is true for a modern Catholic university. It may be “ex corde ecclesiae,” at the heart of the Church, but it is not at the top of the church hierarchy, imbued with authority and hence responsibility for the well-being of the whole Catholic community. And this creates freedom.

Is the freedom of scientists restricted within a Catholic university? For sure it is. And it should be. If an institution commits to a particular set of values and guiding principles, those should apply to the whole academic community. The fact that most faculty members are also scientists and researchers, is not an excuse to do whatever it is they want to do, not even if they do it in the name of science. Scientists are not angels; they are human and indeed all too human. There is no shortage of historical examples to show that individual scientists, but also scientific teams and whole scientific associations, have engaged in and endorsed practices that were deeply immoral. Even more importantly, most of the scientists involved were not third rate, demoralized, or marginalized members of the academy. Many were the leading scientists of their days, working for the government or in prominent universities. And they were absolutely convinced that their research protocols actually were for the common good. So it would behoove any university, Catholic or otherwise, to set limits on what scientists can do. And any scientist who believes she or he ought to have total freedom to perform her or his research, should probably be fired sooner rather than later.

The aforementioned considerations apply to any university. There are and should be additional limits on the freedom of scientists who decide to join a university that has explicitly and publicly committed itself to a particular set of values. Consider a university that by its mission is devoted specifically to African-American issues and causes. Such a university should not tolerate a biomedical research protocol that capitalizes on the ready availability of poor black research subjects. Even if the university’s Institutional Review Board were to approve the research protocol, even if all participants granted informed consent, such a university should apply a higher moral standard and actively try to reverse the centuries-old trend of performing biomedical research over the backs of vulnerable minorities. Conversely, it would behoove this university to not simply reward faculty members with tenure and promotion based on the amount of research dollars secured or the number of publications in journals with high citation indexes. That would be caving in to the dominant academic culture, the very culture that has led to and is still perpetuating structural violence, racial discrimination, and marginalization of vulnerable populations. Instead, such a university should reward and promote scholars who engage in orphan science, who take on the topics that are not on the agenda of mainstream science, in an attempt to break through these structural barriers and achieve equality and justice.

The same, then, is true of a university that claims to be Catholic, precisely as a university. Having a Catholic church on campus and Catholic priests among its chaplains and faculty contributes to its Catholic character, but it does not yet make it a Catholic university. For that to happen, its mission must also shape its educational and research endeavors. This, then, explains why a Catholic university cannot, for example, allow its researchers to develop means of facilitating assistance in suicide. For such research is quite clearly at odds with a major tenet in Catholic moral doctrine that a human being, regardless of old age, disabilities, or physical demise, remains of immeasurable value until the moment of natural death. Conversely, it would be fitting for a Catholic school of pharmacy to promote faculty members who undertake research on more effective means of palliative symptom control at the end of life. Likewise, the university’s leaders should reward researchers who study policies to improve access to end-of-life care for poor citizens, even if such research is not nearly as fiscally attractive as research on the latest anti-cancer drug.

So if we grant that scientists at a Catholic university are not and should not be free to perform whatever kind of research they individually chose to perform, in what sense can we nevertheless conclude that their freedom is actually greater than that of most of their peers in secular universities? Rather than being restrained and narrowed, how can their being faculty members of a Catholic and Jesuit university
actually expanded and enrich their research? As mentioned, this question still appears to be mind-boggling for most faculty members in these universities, even for the most passionate and expert advocates of the Catholic and Jesuit mission. This article does not pretend to provide a comprehensive, let alone definitive answer to this question. Instead, two partial answers to this question will be proposed.

Methodological Freedom

The first answer involves the relationship between knowledge and faith. Within the Catholic intellectual tradition, and even more powerfully so within the Society of Jesus with its long history of producing many eminent scientists, faith is not in opposition to knowledge; faith is one way of knowing. This is not at all a new idea; one can already find St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century hammering on this point. But he was primarily talking about the complementary nature of philosophy and theology. Nowadays when we talk about science, most people do not think philosophy; some would even argue that philosophy itself does not qualify as science, as a way to gain knowledge – never mind theology.

This bias is quite common in secular universities, where scholars are not free to embrace a multitude of forms of knowing. The idea that faith, science, and still other forms of knowing are complementary, is a very counter-cultural idea. Or at least, it has become so. We already saw that throughout the Middle Ages, universities were considered part and parcel of the fabric of the church. As late as the nineteenth century, virtually all of the great American universities, such as Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and the University of Chicago were still faith-based universities. But secularization of universities had already taken a firm hold in Europe, and under the influence of the leading German research universities, the American universities began to adopt the view that science and faith do not make good bed fellows. And so they dropped their religious affiliations.

It is important to emphasize that the issue at stake here is not the separation of church and state. The impetus for the secularization of the great American universities was not that public power and funds shall not be used to proselytize. Rather, the conviction had taken hold that on methodological grounds, whatever insights could be derived from faith, they could not possibly qualify as knowledge proper, and hence had to be dismissed. Faith had no place in the academic enterprise of knowledge generation, or so many American academics had come to believe.

Remarkably, the American Catholic universities, notwithstanding their ardent and at times almost desperate fight to be recognized as genuine, high-quality academic institutions, by and large held on to their religious affiliation. If anything, their self-confidence grew as the twentieth century progressed, and they began to present themselves ever more explicitly as Catholic institutions (unlike many of their counter-parts in Europe, which have continued to de-emphasize their Catholic identity as much as possible).

This self-confidence was well founded. For their refusal to accept only a very limited number of methods of gaining new knowledge has created all kinds of opportunities for scientists to employ a breadth of research methods. Some of these methods admittedly have not yet been teased out and refined to the degree that quantitative methods have. We lack an analogue to contemporary statistical know-how to support, for example, imagination or discernment as modes of gaining new knowledge. But at least within a Catholic university, there is a place for such complementary ways of knowing. Rather than simply dismissing certain disciplines as non-scientific—scholarly maybe, but non-scientific nevertheless—the Catholic university can embrace this diversity as a methodological challenge, an opportunity to develop genuinely complementary, interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge generation.

The Freedom to Find God

We have seen that the first way in which a Catholic university offers more freedom to academics pertains to the mode of doing research; the second concerns the content of their research. If a Catholic university is not going to let itself be compelled by the prevailing secular paradigm to artificially narrow the methods of doing research, neither is it going to accept an artificial narrowing.
of the areas of research. Thus, researchers at a Catholic university, regardless their discipline, are free to examine reality in all of its richness. In fact, they can even seek to find God – and not just theologians, but all faculty members. They are free, and indeed encouraged, to find God in all things.

Granted, this phrase, though often listed as one of the hallmarks of Jesuit higher education (together with such phrases as “Men and women for and with others,” “cura personalis,” and “for the greater glory of God”), is not commonly associated with research. One can readily find publications by Jesuit authors on prayer and spirituality more in general that carry the title “Finding God in All Things.” Occasionally, one finds an author linking this adage to the field of theological research. But scholars in other areas of academic research, whether in political science or epidemiology, medical anthropology or astrophysics, seldom invoke it. A rare exception is the short 2010 reflection on encountering God in the laboratory by the Jesuit geneticist Robert Allore.

Being at a Jesuit university frees the researcher to find God in all things. But what could that possibly mean? This, again, is the kind of phrase that is bound to evoke a sense of antipathy among many scientists, particularly if they have been trained in secular institutions. But on closer inspection, this guiding principle, rather than restricting and derailing the scholarly enterprise, does indeed generate freedom and scientific opportunity.

Some seventy years ago, Pope Pius XII addressed the Italian Medical-Biological Union of St. Luke, and captured this insight quite pointedly:

“One of the characters of Rembrandt’s famous ‘Lesson in Anatomy’, in striking contrast to his colleagues in their handsome waistcoats, whose main concern seems to be the handing of their portraits down to posterity, attracts the attention of the viewer by the vitality and depth of his expression. With rapt features, held breath, his eyes probe the open wound, anxious to read the secrets of those organs, avid to wrest from death the mystery of life. Anatomy, a wonderful science even only in its own field for all that it reveals, has the virtue of introducing the mind to even vaster and nobler spheres. How well the great Morgagni knew and felt this, when he could, during a dissection, drop his scalpel to exclaim: ‘Ah! If I could only love God as well as I know him!’”

Morgagni realized that his anatomical investigations gave him knowledge about the Divine, and actually did so more powerfully than his own faith could achieve. We may be able to tease out this seemingly paradoxical conclusion if we examine more carefully each of the individual words contained in the phrase “Finding God in all things.”

Finding. This choice of words tells us research is a process of discovery proper, of rendering visible what was there all along but somehow covered and hence not seen. Three related cautionary notes follow from this observation. Firstly, as scientists we have to be careful not to insert our own God into the things, let alone recreate reality as we think it should be. Instead, we are engaged in the more modest task of finding and uncovering. Secondly, even though research generally involves an active process of searching for what as of yet has escaped our insight, finding God also involves a passive receptiveness, an openness to encounter God. When a friend tells us he finally found love, that usually means love came to him. And so it is when we seek to find God. How, thirdly, is it that our dear friend finally came to find love, or rather love overcame him? It may well have involved a turn-around of sorts, not just of his world but also and foremost of our friend himself. And so it is, again, when we seek to find God. It may well require a turn-around, a conversion, on our part as researchers to be able to recognize what is staring us in the face.

God. This term is surely the most perturbing of all of the five terms for most scientists. It tells us that the ultimate object of our research is not an understanding of the things themselves; rather, we are to find God. Our examination of the world is but a means to a higher end: to come to know God. Secondly, we do not merely seek some transcendent aspect(s) of the world along pantheistic lines. The God we are seeking is the God that we have come to know and believe in through the Christian tradition; it is a creative,
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loving, and personal God, who became human, and who desires our salvation. Thus, when engaging in research, the scientist is not only generating general knowledge, but also entering into a personal relationship with God. Science, when performed along these lines, actually becomes a form of prayer.

In. We can find God in the very things themselves. God is not, in a deistic sense, the initial creator who has since removed himself from the world. God is to be found in the world, still concerned with the world, and most dramatically with us human beings. Indeed, each human being is created in God’s image and God in turn became man, fully human, and continues to live among and in us.

All. The world in its totality is a gift of God. Notwithstanding the seeming godlessness of the immense universe, of quantum physics, of bits and bytes, the whole world is in fact God’s garden. Every mode of scientific inquiry, though inevitably limited and methodologically biased, reveals some aspect of the Divine. Conversely, no scientist can assume his/her research to be exempted from the challenge of finding God.

Things. We can find God not only in holy texts, mystical experiences, liturgical beauty, or sacred art. We can find God in everyday stuff, including in things that appear merely material, seemingly devoid of divine presence, such as molecules and mountains, bacteria and buildings. This, again, underscores the inclusive challenge to all scientists, including those working in the so-called “hard” sciences, in engineering and e-commerce, in statistics and linguistics, to contribute to an ever greater understanding of God and God’s plan of salvation for us.

Conclusion

Virtually all of the almost 200 Jesuit institutions of higher education around the world that exist today were founded after the restoration of the Society of Jesus in 1814. As such, the same forces that have shaped the secular academic institutions of our age have had a much greater impact on them than the views of Ignatius and his early companions. Nowhere is this disparity more evident than in the area of scientific research. Moreover, the mere suggestion that academic scholarship by faculty members in Jesuit universities should be guided by this particular faith tradition to many academics invokes anxiety rather than enthusiasm.

In fairness to these scientists, we have to readily acknowledge that little has been done in the past two centuries to explain exactly what renders a Jesuit university “Jesuit” precisely as “university.” The dramatic decrease in the number of Jesuits working at these universities in the past quarter of a century and, hence, the new reliance on and responsibilities of lay faculty and staff members for academic mission implementation, has underscored the urgency of such an explanation. And much explanatory material has indeed been generated in recent years to cover themes as diverse as the core, cura personalis, and recycling. But when it comes to faculty research, the silence is almost deafening.

An argument can be made that a Jesuit university serves first and foremost to educate and form students. This was the primary mission 450 years ago and it remained so for roughly 400 years. Because secular universities in the course of the last century began to view research as an ever more important mission, to the point where it has become the most important criterion to rank universities today, Jesuit universities had to follow suit and adopt research as a prominent “mission.” But research, in this view, remains to a Jesuit university what semi-professional sports teams are to an American university: they have little impact on the academic enterprise of the institution, but are absolutely necessary for name recognition and income generation. But this analogy cuts two ways. In the same way that a university’s focus on semi-professional sports can come to detract from and even corrupt the academic identity of an institution, so a university’s integrity can be undermined if it devotes ever more attention to research while at the same time insisting that the research enterprise has no bearing on its identity as a Jesuit university.

In this article, I have tried to argue that our failure to undertake academic mission implementation in the area of research is actually a missed opportunity. In the same way that the educational mission of Jesuit universities is diversified and
enriched as a result of academic mission implementation, so our research could be liberated from the methodological and substantive restrictions imposed on the academic enterprise by the dominant secular research paradigm. It would free us to diversify our research methods, gain a much richer understanding of reality, and even find God. What more could a scientist want?
Notes


2 In this article, the term “research” is broadly understood as any attempt to generate new knowledge in a methodologically reliable manner. No distinction is made between quantitative research (as is typically performed by epidemiologists), qualitative research (as is typically done by ethnographers), archival research (as us typically done by historians), hermeneutical, analytical, literary or any other kind of research. Similarly, the word “science” and “scientist” are used covers all these academic disciplines, consistent with the Latin root of that term and foreign language synonyms such as the German term “Wissenschaft,” literally, “the enterprise of knowing.”

3 http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/.

4 http://jesuithighereducation.org.


14 Coghlan, “Enacting a Jesuit Hermeneutic.”