Catholic Studies and Religious Studies: 
Reflections on the Concept of Tradition

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ABSTRACT: Positioning Catholic Studies within religious studies highlights the question of "what is a tradition?" and simultaneously allows us to do three things: elaborate a non-essentialist second order understanding of the concept of tradition appropriate to Religious Studies, study Catholicism as a tradition that has been created and maintained through first order reflection on the meaning of tradition, and position the move toward “Catholic Studies” reflexively with respect to Catholic efforts at self-definition.

I. Introduction

Although most of the chairs and programs established in Catholic Studies in recent years have been established in Catholic colleges and universities, an increasing number are appearing in non-Catholic institutions both private and public. Some of the latter have been established as interdisciplinary chairs or programs without any special relationship to Religious Studies; others, such as the new chairs at Hofstra and UC Santa Barbara, are located in Departments of Religious Studies alongside endowed chairs in other religious traditions, such as Tibetan Buddhist Studies, Sikh Studies, and Jewish Studies. At UCSB, where the Department of Religious Studies has been organized on an area studies model (e.g. Religions of South Asia, Religions of North America, Religions of the Mediterranean World), the endowment of a series of chairs in particular traditions sparked a year long faculty discussion of how the study of traditions might relate to the study of religions in areas or regions.

In reflecting on those conversations, I was struck by the need for more sustained reflection on the concept of “tradition” within the context of Religious Studies. In those conversations, I used “traditions” – perhaps naively -- as a loose synonym for “religions” as in “religious traditions” or as a way to refer to variants within a religion, as in, for example, Christian or Buddhist or Islamic traditions. Although I wasn’t assuming that the boundaries of “a tradition” were clear cut or undisputed, colleagues and doctoral students raised questions that seemed to equate studying traditions with advocating for a tradition or promoting traditionalism. In contrast to other concepts routinely used by scholars of religion, such as sacred, myth, ritual, and religion, I realized that we apparently had less scholarly distance on the concept of “tradition.”

A search of the literature revealed that this is indeed the case. The concept of tradition hasn’t been the focus intense discussion among scholars of religion in the same way that say myth or ritual or experience has been. Recently, however, there has been renewed interest in the term.¹ This new work evinced a fairly high level of frustration

with defining the term beyond the bare etymological meaning of “things handed down.” The best of the new work on the subject suggests these difficulties arise because the term is “an object of intense partisan struggles and ideological distortion,” a conclusion that will surprise few Catholics. Claims regarding tradition, these scholars suggest, mark a site of struggle. If this is the case, and I think it is, then we can anticipate that there will be no easy way to separate the normative and descriptive aspects of tradition and that any attempt to do so will presuppose a point of view (Engler 2005a, 360-61).

Although “tradition” is a site of struggle, we can gain greater clarity if we distinguish between several different ways we use the term and, thus, several different kinds of sites where struggle can take place. The sociologist Edward Shils (1981, 12-13) makes the helpful distinction between a tradition as a thing that is handed down from the past to the present and a tradition as a “chain of transmitted variants, as in the ‘Platonic tradition’ or the ‘Kantian tradition.’” We can distinguish, in other words, between references to particular traditions, such as apostolic succession, and the Catholic tradition as distinct from (say) the Protestant tradition. Tradition in either sense can be a site of struggle, as various parties argue over what counts as apostolic succession or over what counts as Catholic tradition. We can also distinguish between tradition in either of these senses and explicit appeals to tradition as a means of legitimation, alongside or in opposition to appeals to scripture, reason, science, etc. Here the struggle is more likely to be over what counts as a means of legitimation. We can distinguish these three senses of tradition as tradition\(_T\) (\(T=\)things handed down), tradition\(_L\) (\(L=\)lineage or chain of variants), and tradition\(_A\) (\(A=\)source of authority or legitimation).

These distinctions can help us to clarify similarities and differences between Catholic Studies in the context of religious studies departments in secular universities and Catholic Studies in the context of Catholic universities. First, Catholic universities are related in some way to the Catholic Church and, thus, positioned within the Catholic tradition\(_L\). Although what it means to be positioned in this way is debated, Catholic scholars teaching in Catholic universities typically presuppose that Catholic Studies can or should play a role in defining how the Catholic tradition\(_L\) is or ought to be understood. Doing so may involve making appeals to tradition\(_A\). In secular universities, Catholic scholars teaching in the area of Catholic Studies may want to define the Catholic tradition\(_L\) and may make appeals to tradition\(_A\) when doing so. This I assume is what some of my colleagues feared would be entailed in studying the Catholic or any other tradition\(_L\) within the context of religious studies. This, however, is not how I understand what it means to do religious studies.

Second, academic disciplines can be thought of as similar in some ways to traditions\(_L\). Academic disciplines, like traditions\(_L\), are sites of struggle. Scholars argue over what it means to do religious studies or history or sociology and they may appeal to disciplinary traditions\(_A\) when doing so. In this essay, I will argue that we can and should distinguish between doing religious studies and doing theology and that this distinction gives rise to two distinct ways of doing Catholic Studies. Whether or not we can legitimately distinguish between religious studies and theology is an issue over which much ink has been spilled in religious studies, with some arguing that the two can and should be rigidly separated and others that this is not only impossible but also undesirable (cf., e.g., Cabezón 2006). I am of the school, or tradition if you will, in religious studies that thinks that the two can and should be distinguished. In contrast to some who argue
for this distinction, however, I understand doing theology and doing religious studies to involve specific roles or stances that scholars can take in relation to their subject matter regardless of their religious beliefs. Scholars can shift roles or positions as desired, but should signal their intent to their audience or readers when they change roles.²

We can use the act of defining the key terms that constitute a discipline or tradition to locate the boundary between the inside and the outside of the discipline or tradition. By key terms, I mean what others have referred to as “constitutive terms,” that is, the terms without which the discipline or traditions in question would not exist (Tweed 2006, 30-33). The constitutive term for the study of religion is “religion” or “religious studies.” The constitutive term for the study of spirituality is “spirituality.” For the study of history, it’s “history.” And so on. I think that with respect to traditions the situation is quite parallel. The constitutive term for Christianity is “Christian.” In other words, for Christianity to exist as a living tradition, we have to ask “what does it mean to be a Christian?” Likewise for (say) Catholicism to exist as a living tradition, we have to ask what does it mean to be Catholic or for Judaism, Jewish; or Islam, Muslim, and so on. The idea of a living tradition, in other words, presupposes something that is being kept alive through a transmission process. Though we don’t normally refer to “living disciplines,” we can extend the concept to disciplines as well. The key distinction then is between those who treat the tradition or discipline as set of human beliefs and practices that can be understood historically and those who actively seek to keep a tradition or discipline alive in the present by defining what it means to for it to live in the present (see Taves 2003, 2005).

In this essay, my aim is to advance religious studies as a “living discipline” that studies (among other things) living (and dead) traditions historically. As historians, we neither seek to keep traditions alive nor to “kill” them, but rather to observe and analyze the processes that those who identify with them employ to maintain and transform them. I am hoping, in other words, to advance religious studies as a discipline by defining it as a discipline that, among other things, studies traditions without attempting to define what is authentically traditional (what counts as a tradition). I will elaborate on this in relation to the Catholic tradition and debates over the meaning of tradition within Catholicism.

Positioning oneself either inside or outside a particular discipline or tradition results in both gains and losses. If we refrain from defining “Catholic” and, thus, from defining the Catholic tradition, we can position ourselves so as to analyze and observe struggles over the meaning of tradition over time with an eye to comparing the way that traditions are made and unmade in various contexts. Refraining from defining what counts as the tradition in a particular context frees us to compare underlying processes of interest to scholars in religious studies and the wider university. If we enter into the definitional process, we add our voice to the mix of voices struggling to define what it means to be Catholic. In doing so, we contribute to processes of reflection that are of deep concern to those who identify with the tradition. From a religious studies perspective, particularly religious studies in the context of a public university, I do not think it is our task to enter into Catholic struggles to define the Catholic tradition, but

² The analogy here is to the movement between player in a game and referee or between committee member and chair. Obviously some individuals are less skilled at switching roles than others and some games or institutions may discourage or preclude switching roles (see Donovan 1999; Hufford 1999; Taves 2003, 2005).
instead to study the definitions of those who are actively engaged in those struggles in order to advance our understanding of how religious communities constitute and maintain themselves over time. A religious studies approach to tradition$_L$ allows us to do three things: elaborate a non-essentialist understanding of tradition$_L$ and tradition$_T$ appropriate to the study of religions, study Catholicism as a tradition$_L$ that has been created and maintained through intensive reflection on the meaning of tradition, and position the current move toward “Catholic Studies” reflexively with respect to Catholic efforts at self-definition. Doing these things will help us to integrate of Catholic Studies into the study of religion, as defined here; they may or may not further the interests of Catholics as Catholics.

II. A Non-Essentialist Understanding of Tradition

Taking a non-essentialist stance relative to tradition$_L$ and tradition$_T$ means understanding tradition$_L$ and tradition$_T$ as historically constructed products of contestation rather than as guarantors of truths revealed at the beginning and handed down over time. Viewing tradition$_L$ and tradition$_T$ in this way undercuts tradition$_A$ as a source of authority relative to other sources of authority. It is precisely this undercutting of claims based on tradition$_A$ that has allowed historians to investigate how traditions$_L$ and traditions$_T$ have emerged, developed, and been maintained (or not) over time (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Brown 2006). Scholars standing both inside and outside of traditions$_L$ have used historical methods to undercut the legitimacy of claims based on tradition$_A$. When insiders to a tradition$_L$ use history to undercut claims based on tradition$_A$, they typically go on to argue for what they consider to be a more legitimate understanding of the tradition$_L$ based on either a different understanding of tradition$_A$ or on other sources of authority recognized by the tradition$_L$ (see, for example, Thiel 2000; Tilley 2000; Espin & Macy 2006). In so far as scholars of religion position themselves outside of traditions$_L$, they can compare the way in which traditions$_L$ and tradition$_T$ have been historically constructed. Many within religious studies would argue that such comparative work is a distinctive task of religious studies.

We can illustrate the distinction between these approaches by considering the concept of apostolic succession. The idea of apostolic succession is a tradition$_T$ within the Catholic and Anglican traditions$_L$, which claims that there is a line of succession that can be traced through successive bishops back to the apostles. Historians would argue that lines of succession that run from historical bishops back to the apostles were retrospectively constructed, given the historical evidence that the role of the monarchial bishop emerged gradually over the course of the first two centuries of the common era (see, for example, Duffy 2001, 1-19; Lampe 2003, 397-408). Recognizing this, however, allows us to examine the way in which the idea of apostolic succession was derived from the idea of apostolic authority and utilized in the construction and defense of what came to be called “orthodoxy.” While apostolic succession per se is a Christian concept, scholars of religion can and have compared it with notions of authentic transmission in other traditions as part of an attempt to understand how orthodoxies are created (Henderson 1998, 89-95).

Benedict XVI, drawing on Dei Verbum, the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, draws a similar distinction between historical and theological method in his recent Jesus of Nazareth (2007). Historical methods, he argues,
must leave the past, including the past attested to by the Bible, in the past. Historical methods cannot make “the biblical word … into something present today.” Historical methods treat “biblical words … as human words” and the biblical texts as composites made up of texts written, rewritten, and combined over time to create “scriptures.” With respect to “all efforts to know the past,” he concludes, we must bear in mind that “we can never go beyond the domain of hypothesis, because we cannot bring the past into the present” (Ratzinger 2007, xvi-xvii). To bring the past into the present, we must make theological claims that position us within a tradition. Thus, as Ratzinger points out, the idea of “the unity of Scripture,” i.e., the unity of the “Old and New Testaments,” is a specifically Christian theological claim, based on a Christological hermeneutic. “This Christological hermeneutic, which sees Jesus Christ as the key to the whole [of scripture] and learns from him [that is, Jesus, in post resurrection appearances recounted in the gospel of Luke] how to understand the Bible as a unity, presupposes a prior act of faith” (Ratzinger 2007, xix). Only some first century Jews believed that Jesus was the Messiah and the rabbinic tradition, which emerged alongside Christianity during the first centuries of the Common Era, argued for a very different scriptural hermeneutic based on Mishnah and Talmud. While historians do not dispute that some first century Jews believed Jesus was the Messiah, they cannot as historians interpret the history of this period in light of that claim. For historians, the early Jewish Christians’ claim that Jesus was the Messiah is simply one claim among many.

Catholic theologians also distinguish between general definitions of tradition that can be applied to any religion and definitions that presuppose specifically Christian claims. So, for example, Yves Congar, O.P., distinguishes between tradition in its total meaning as the “transmission of an object to another person” and tradition as understood in the context of “revealed religion and Christianity itself.” In the latter context, he distinguishes between apostolic tradition and ecclesiastical tradition with a range of subspecifications under each (Congar 1966, 307). Gerald O’Collins, S.J., provides a general definition of tradition as “as a human reality [that functions] to secure a society’s continuity, identity and unity. Traditions fashion the bond between successive generations in a society” (O’Collins 1981, 193). A specifically Christian understanding of tradition, he indicates, presupposes “the saving [or foundational] revelation of God … in the history of Israel and then definitively in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ” (O’Collins 1981, 195).

Those who position themselves within a tradition take up a different set of questions than those who position themselves within religious studies. Within a tradition the basic question has to do with keeping a living tradition alive. From within the Christian tradition in particular the question is:

How can we be sure and ensure that the original, foundational revelation remains living and effective in the present Church? To put matters more precisely: In the life of Christianity how does one generation know that, as it expresses and transmits to another what it has experience of the divine self-communication, there will be real continuity between the foundational revelation which occurred then and the dependent revelation which takes place now? How does it know that there will be no loss of essential identity in re-enacting the basic experience of God’s self-communication in Christ? (O’Collins 1981, 195)
From within a tradition, the central questions have to do with the authenticity and legitimacy of what is transmitted from the past to the present. The key question is what counts as tradition and on what grounds.

To sum up: Traditions generally posit some originary event (e.g. Jesus crucifixion and resurrection or the Buddha’s enlightenment) as revelatory of Truth or Reality and seek to bring this past event into the present. Bringing the past event into the present often involves tradition, that is, the handing down of something from the past to the present. Claims that a specific formulation of tradition authentically transmits the past to the present are sometimes backed by references to tradition. Those outside the tradition -- and this includes historians in their role as historians -- are not in a position to decide if any particular formulation of tradition authentically transmits the past to the present. Nor are they in a position to decide what counts as an authentic representation of a tradition, since doing so relies perforce on claims regarding tradition.

Scholars who routinely define a tradition for the purposes of teaching and research may view this last claim as overly strong. Definitions that seem neutral enough on the surface, however, break down under scrutiny. If, for example, we define Christianity as chain of transmitted variants that descend from the figure of Jesus, how do we as scholars decide which variants (actually) descend from Jesus? Do we count as variants Glenda Green’s *Love Without End* (1998), which she claims is based on her visitations with Jesus; *A Course in Miracles*, teaching recounted to Helen Schucman by an inner voice that she identified as the voice of Jesus (Miller 1997); or *The Book of Mormon*, another testament of Jesus Christ translated, according to Mormon teaching, by Joseph Smith? While these claims are contested, each would count as a variant in so far as someone claims to have handed down something from the past to the present. In the case of Glenda Green and Helen Schucman, each claimed that the still-living Jesus directly handed down his words to her (i.e., via oral transmission). In the case of Joseph Smith and *The Book of Mormon*, we have “another testament” having to do with Jesus Christ that Joseph Smith and the communities descended from him claim was written by ancient prophets, edited by the historian-prophet Mormon, and translated by Joseph Smith. Deciding which variants actually descend from Jesus requires scholars to tacitly accept or reject claims regarding tradition, e.g. that the apostle Paul really heard the voice of Jesus, but Glenda Green and Helen Schucman did not. Making such claims tacitly aligns us with definitions of Christianity advanced by particular groups or individuals and not others.

Scholars use various techniques to signal their intent to distance themselves from contested claims such as these. Sometimes they use the idea of “orders of discourse” to distinguish between their use of a term and the way others use it (Gunnell 1998). Scholars of religion often distinguish between the first and second order use of terms. In so doing, they intend to distinguish between terms that are used within a community, in accordance with the underlying presuppositions of the group, and terms that have been, in many cases, abstracted from particular contexts, more or less “scrubbed” of particularistic presuppositions, and put to use as generic concepts that can be utilized across a range of traditions (Smith 1998, 269). Any number of basic terms in the study of religion have undergone such a process, including “religion,” “religious experience,” “ritual,” “myth,” “spirituality,” and “mysticism,” though scholars continue to debate to what extent the terms still reflect the presuppositions of the contexts that generated them.
In a recent essay, Gavin Flood argued for a distinction between first, second, and third order discourses, in order to distinguish between discourse at the level of practice (first order), theological reflection on practice from within the tradition (second order), and reflection on first and second order discourses from a comparative perspective from a position outside any particular tradition (third order) (Flood 2006, 55-56). Whether we distinguish between one or two (or more) levels of discourse within a tradition is not as crucial to my argument as noting the difference between the use of a concept that is bounded by the presuppositions of a religious group and a concept that scholars seek, however successfully, to purge of group-specific presuppositions in order to use it to examine similar phenomena across groups. Adopting a distinction commonly employed by anthropologists, we can refer to the former as *emic* and the latter as *etic* use of the term. Though there has been some scholarly reflection on the concept of tradition in this more generic (etic) sense, an etic approach has not been as thoroughly assimilated into religious studies as it might be.

Much of the scholarly frustration with the concept of tradition has arisen from two sources: the inability to differentiate between different ways of using the term, i.e., between tradition$^T$, tradition$^L$, and tradition$^A$, and the inability to reliably signal the shift from an emic to an etic perspective. If, as I have suggested, historical methods tend to undercut tradition$^A$ and historians and religious studies scholars as such have no basis for determining what “counts” as a link or chain or variant and, thus, what counts as either tradition$^T$ or tradition$^L$, then one way to mark the shift from an emic to an etic use of the term lies in incorporating the contested character of what counts as tradition into the etic definition itself. Put simply, if we define tradition$^T$ etically as anything that someone claims is handed down from the past to the present, we have a basis for proceeding that positions us within the discipline of history but does not require us to align ourselves with any particular group or individual.

The insertion of “someone claims,” thus, historicizes the claims and makes it clear that traditions$^{T,L}$ are not given but actively constructed and as highly contested as the traditions$^A$ that presuppose them. The simple assertion of agency (someone claims) into the definition shifts our attention away from figuring out if something is (authentically) traditional or not and focuses it instead on the struggle over what counts as tradition$^{T,L}$ within various communities or groups and on what grounds (including tradition$^A$). Building on Shils (1981, 12), this definition, thus, makes no statement about:

- What is handed down
- How long it has been handed down
- How it has been handed down – whether orally or in written form or through imitation
- Who makes the claim
- What justification they advance for their claim
- Whether it was actually or authentically handed down
- Whether it was good or bad that it was handed down

The insertion of “someone claims” also provides a way to signal that we are positioning ourselves etically – that is outside the traditions$^L$ in question and, thus, a means of clarifying some of the confusions that have surrounded the use of the term.
III. The Study of Catholicism as a Tradition

An upper division undergraduate course I teach titled “Church, State, and the Construction of Orthodoxy” illustrates the historical, religious studies approach I am advocating as appropriate in the context of a religious studies department in a secular, public university. The course surveys the emergence and development of the Catholic Church as a transnational institution with a particular focus on how its centralized authority structure emerged in conjunction with the definition, maintenance, and transmission of “orthodoxy” and through interaction with the political order. Histories of Christianity or Catholicism that seek to keep the tradition alive typically assume that Jesus was the Messiah and presuppose Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection as originary events, as revelation or manifestations, that is, of the living Word. Histories that begin in this way presuppose that true teachings were revealed at the outset and then defended against heretics (false teachings) that emerged in response. In this view, it is assumed that orthodoxy existed from the beginning independent of heresy, and that, if orthodoxy could be protected from heresy, it could be passed on more or less unchanged.

From a strictly historical vantage point, of course, this cannot be presupposed. Then and now people disagree over whether Jesus was the true Messiah, a true Messiah, a false messiah, a failed messiah, or whether there were, are, or will be any messiahs at all apart from human longing and imagination. Historians as such cannot judge the question but instead explore these various beliefs about messiahs and their consequences. So the course I teach does not start from the premise of truth revealed in the originary events of Jesus life, death, and resurrection, but rather with what the surviving texts reveal about the range of reactions to Jesus that emerged among those who followed him and those who did not. From this starting point, we don’t see revealed truth battling heresies cropping up on every side, but rather a diversity of contending views of truth each claiming that it is orthodox and that others are not. Out of this diversity of contending views, we can than ask how followers of Jesus created distinctions between orthodoxy and heterodoxy (inside/outside) and in some cases the institutional structures necessary to maintain and transmit that distinction from one generation to the next.

Teaching this way requires that we include non-traditional texts that reflect the views of critics of a tradition and that we teach students to read texts beloved by traditions critically. So, for example, I pair Irenaeus (“Against the Heresies”) on apostolic succession with the “Coptic Apocalypse of Peter,” a third century text that describes bishops and deacons as “dry canals” incapable of understanding the deeper meaning of scripture (Ehrman 1999, 196-211, 227-230). This year, with the help of Elaine Pagels (2002), we dug into Irenaeus’s text more deeply than I had in the past, analyzing the views of his immediate opponents (the followers of Ptolemaeus, including the enigmatic Marcus), who apparently advocated a second initiation (or second baptism) into higher, more perfect knowledge. Reading between the lines, we were able to compare the competing interpretations of the prologue of the Gospel of John offered by Irenaeus and the Ptolemaeans and the implications of their views for their understandings of the crucifixion, the relation between the divine and human Christ, and Christian initiation.

Knowledge of the claims and practices of his immediate opponents brought the text to life as a historical document. Reading it this way not only allowed us to consider what they believed to be true (what counted for them as the living tradition) but how they
defended their beliefs. Scripture was the first line of defense, but as the text makes clear this was not enough. While Irenaeus and the Ptolemaeans agreed that scripture had to be read correctly, they didn’t agree on what that entailed. It is in this context that Irenaeus turned to the “Rule of Truth” (a proto-creedal statement [Young 1991, 10-11]) to establish the authority of his reading of scripture. As there were multiple variant proto-creeds, the Rule of Truth was in turn linked to the idea of apostolic succession and the assertion of the preeminent authority of apostolic tradition as preserved by the church at Rome. It is in this context, then, that Irenaeus could argue that the bishops, whom he claimed constituted a line of authority from the apostles down to his own time, “neither taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about.” Because he was convinced that the apostles committed the churches to bishops and especially to Peter, he could then add the finishing touch to his argument, saying that “if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to ‘the perfect’ apart and secretly from the rest [as his opponents were claiming], they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the churches themselves” (III.3.1, in Ehrman 1999, 209, emphasis added). If the apostles had had hidden mysteries to impart, in other words, they would have imparted them to us and not to them!

This kind of analysis allows us to analyze the way in which the definitions of orthodoxy (i.e., definitions of the “living tradition”) that survived went hand in hand with the emergence of the structures needed to defend and maintain them. Though Jesus’ immediate followers claimed that he appeared in person to help them interpret the [Hebrew] scriptures in the wake of his crucifixion (e.g. Luke 24:13-35), claims of this sort expanded rather than narrowed the interpretive options. A stable understanding of truth required a stable interpretation of scripture, which in turn required more developed claims regarding how those in the present knew that their understanding of the truth was authentic. It is in this context that we can understand the historical development of lines of succession and the need to extend the idea of bishops all the way back to the apostles. We can see, too, how lines of descent from apostles, like genealogical lines of descent, fan out from the original ancestors to create multiple heirs. So even lines of descent from bishops were not enough. There had to be a way to either prioritize their views (e.g., by giving some preeminence over others) or by forcing them to come to agreement (e.g. in councils).

The understanding of apostolic succession, of course, is not static within the tradition. It has been interpreted and reinterpreted in order to keep the tradition alive. At the end of the course, I have them analyze a recent reinterpretation of apostolic succession – one offered in an essay by (then) Cardinal Ratzinger (1998) on the place of new ecclesial movements -- in more depth. To understand the place of these movements in the church, Ratzinger argues, “the concept of apostolic succession must be given greater breadth and depth” (495), especially in light of the thirteenth century controversies over the new movements of that era led by (unauthorized) mendicant preachers. I have students compare Ratzinger’s reading of Irenaeus and the thirteenth century controversies with the relevant primary texts we’ve already discussed in order to see how Ratzinger builds his theological argument on a thirteenth century theological discussion that was parallel in many ways to the situation he was facing.
IV. Positioning Catholic Studies in Religious Studies

This way of positioning Catholic Studies in relation to Religious Studies allows us to consider how this way of positioning it differs from others. Most chairs and programs in Catholic Studies are driven by a concern with Catholic identity. In Catholic colleges and universities and in some non-Catholic institutions as well, Catholic Studies is seen as a means of fostering Catholic identity, as a means of forming Catholics, and a context in which the tradition can be passed on to a new generation (Fisher 2006, 56-57). As such, of course, it is a site of intense conflict over what actually counts as authentic Catholic identity, with some viewing it as a potentially more liberal site of formation and others hoping for just the reverse. However faculty position themselves in relation to these debates, they are arguing for what counts as Catholic identity and for a vision of what it means for the tradition to be passed on, that is to live. They are engaged, in other words, in a process of forming a new generation of Catholics. This suggests that we can view the difference between teaching Catholic Studies as Religious Studies in a secular, public university and teaching Catholic Studies in a Catholic college or university in light of the question of who we are forming for what end or, to put it another way, what we are trying to make. When I am teaching Catholic Studies in a Religion Department, I am not only participating in the making of religious studies, I am also participating in the formation of students in the liberal arts, in the humanities, and in the discipline of religious studies. My aim in that context is not to form Catholics.

To put this more generally, students may pursue the study of religion within programs in secular universities that have no connection to processes of religious or spiritual formation. In doing so, they enter into a process of academic formation under the direction of academic insiders whose insider status is established by academic traditions (i.e., degrees, promotions, tenure) rather than through participation in specific religious or spiritual traditions. Conversely, the task of forming persons religiously or spiritually may be taken up by the traditions and reflected on by persons formed within those traditions independent of processes of academic formation. Religiously affiliated colleges and universities, like theological seminaries that aim to combine processes of academic and religious or spiritual formation, occupy a complicated institutional middle ground. Although Catholics tend to agree that Catholic institutions should combine both types of formation, what it means to do so in practice is hotly debated.

V. Conclusion

In contrast to some who argue for a distinction between doing religious studies and doing theology, I understand doing one or the other as a matter of adopting a role or stance. This means that we are not confined to one role or the other, but can decide which role is most appropriate depending on the context or situation. If we understand these roles in relation to defining or not defining the constitutive terms of a discipline or tradition, we can assume either posture relative to disciplines or traditions depending on our aims and circumstances. We can decide situationally whether to define key concepts such as Religious Studies or Catholic Studies or Catholicism or sit back and track how others are defining them. Either stance has its strengths and liabilities. Each allows us to see some things while obscuring others. They key is to figure out what we want to see under any given circumstances.
I would argue that we can model both roles to some degree in both public and Catholic colleges and universities. Indeed making a distinction between the two roles makes it possible to model the distinction by signaling when we are switching from one to the other. Modeling the distinction can allow faculty in departments of religion to incorporate methods and viewpoints, which, if pursued exclusively, might threaten to undercut the overarching ideal of refraining from advocating particular religious viewpoints. Conversely, a distinction between the two roles can allow faculty in departments of theology in Catholic institutions to incorporate methods and viewpoints, which, if pursued exclusively, might threaten the school’s overall commitment to fostering Catholic identity.

In a public university issues of religious or spiritual formation do come up. Although the undergraduates I teach come from a variety of religious and secular backgrounds and take Catholic Studies courses for many reasons, some of them are deeply invested, devout, and vocal Catholics. In a class on “Catholicism and Modernity” that attracted a number of such students, we worked at distinguishing between speaking from a position inside the tradition, with presuppositions held only by those within the tradition, and speaking about the different presuppositions held by those who identified with the tradition. They understood the distinction, but sometimes failed to make it, then caught one another and worked together to clarify what they wanted to say. Making the distinction allowed fairly conservative Catholics, Catholics by upbringing, and non-Catholics to engage in a common conversation. Some of the more conservative students wound up in my office, asking the same sort of questions that first year seminarians ask when grappling for the first time with historical critical methods. I offered what reflections I could, assuring them that others before them had struggled with these issues, but I was also aware that the most religiously invested students were actively involved in the local campus parish. It turned out that our discussions in class spilled over into the parish, where some in the class met to continue to wrestle with texts we were discussing in class in a context specifically devoted to issues of Catholic formation.
VI. Bibliography


