

Religion & Catholic Studies Show Notes

A wide-ranging discussion of the present state and future prospects of Catholic studies, 60 years after the close of Vatican II. What do recent institutional crosscurrents (e.g., synodality and increasing lay participation versus an increasingly conservative American priesthood) mean for the field? What is the status of Catholic studies in the wider academy? What are the neglected areas in scholarship, whether historical, theological, or social scientific?

Peter defining Catholic Studies: Interdisciplinary field of inquiry that involved many different disciplines that work on catholic topics. It can also be a field of study or degree one pursues. Thus, we have brought in three different disciplines, sociology, history, and theology.

Question 1: As we approach the 60th anniversary of the close of Vatican II, are we at another inflection point in the church's history? What do recent developments, including the recent synod, mean for catholic studies

Susan: We are at a significant turning point culturally and ecclesially in the church. I would say culturally we have an unprecedented migration of peoples, we have seen crisis, warfare, the world around us is changing. Pope Francis is really advocating for a decentralized church.

Tricia: I do think we are at an incredibly special moment, the field of catholic studies has been shaped by Vatican II, the legacy holds. Then we are in this moment where the church has asked itself "who are we" and "where are we going." We are asking different kinds of questions, different concerns come to the table, things are evolving differently. The synod reflects a moment in the church where the table looks different, different people and thoughts are involved.

Susan: This is all going on during these culture wars as well.

Michael: Many historians of catholic studies are not focusing or centering this moment of the synod. I think that can show how are fields are different in how they are shaped, the questions they ask or what they address or do not address.

Question 2: Looking at the status of Catholic studies and Catholic universities. How does catholic studies fit into secular universities?

Michael: I begin by thinking about the academic and scholarly formation of historians of Catholicism in the US. There is a real balance and mix between secular schools and catholic universities. I think historically we had some tension between these two types of universities but that is long gone.

Susan: My concern is the loss of liberal arts in universities and what that is doing to impact catholic studies. In that respect, catholic studies plays a part as representing the liberal arts as they reach into harder, scientific areas. Catholic studies must be in discourse with the 21st century.

Trisha: One opportunity that I see for catholic studies is to act as a hub for conversations around difficult issues, topics like gender, inequality, race, etc. Because catholic studies are a laboratory of all these kinds of questions, it could create an opportunity to step into some of those spaces.

Question 3: What are all your thoughts on what the field of catholic studies can do and the contributions it can make?

- **Question from audience: [Mentioning the Catholic Studies Project study](#). There seems to be a distinction between catholic studies and Catholicism. Based on my experience, what is happening in the church is precisely the opposite of decentralization and diversity Trisha and Susan have mentioned but an internalization of the hierarchy, how can scholars navigate this distinction?**

Susan: I am familiar with the study... There is a church split, not a laity versus clergy split.

Trisha: I was on the qualitative research team, we did over 100 interviews. To observe the progressive versus conservative split that typically falls generational, is fascinating when you ask why and ask priests themselves why. It is not just a conversation within the laity but also between priests, how do they communicate with each other? I was also stuck by the way in which younger priests are explaining their rationale behind this more conservative trend.

Michael: As historians we are thinking about the priesthood differently. We do not have very many historian priests, who were really the founders of church history. The shape of the field has been much more lay driven since Vatican II. We are also thinking about the history in light of the clerical sex abuse cases. I think that allowed historians to finally realize that priests are ‘dudes,’ not that they had not been thinking of them as normal people, but it cracked open a lot of thought. It has allowed us to be more critical and ask harder questions.

Question 4: Does anything more need to be said about the sex abuse scandals?

Trisha: It is the ever-present backdrop of so many conversations around catholic studies. My dissertation book was on a lay catholic movement that mobilized a response to the crisis of abuse in the church, most of whom were baby boomers. It raises questions about accountability, transparency, etc.

Michael: I think that over the last two decades, with the research and revelations that have come out of questions or research specifically on clerical sex abuse. I am thinking of different programs like [BishopsAccountability.org](#) where we have lay people involved. This problem also makes us think about the priesthood and priests differently and that has allowed us to understand the networks of Catholicism differently.

Question 5: Are there other things that have not come up yet? Are there things you are hoping to see?

Trisha: I think there is some fear around these fields disappearing. We need to help and share our research, with colleagues but also the broader public. Supporting each other and our work is important. I am worried about the changes coming to universities.

Susan: One of the needs is to address the polarization within the church.

Questions from Audience:

1. What are you doing with spin-off groups like Roman Catholic Women Priest--their theology, their ethical stances, their liturgical practices?
2. About this lay movement Susan is talking about, as a PhD candidate on communications I would like to hear you about how social media and the more prominence of lay people and their thoughts influence these researchers (and how the Catholic church has been seen around)?
3. There used to be a lot of prominent Catholic fiction writers (Flannery O'Connor, Graham Greene, Shusaku Endo, etc.) whose work was also studied and championed by literature scholars. There are fewer now (Kirsten Valdez Quade is one notable contemporary writer.) Is this a cultural change that interests contemporary Catholic scholars, and is there something in contemporary Catholic culture that does as much to explain this change as what is easy to observe on the secular scholarly/publishing side of the equation?
4. What are some ways in which Catholic studies can survive the current and coming wave of institutional closures? "American Catholic higher education" is itself shrinking, so both the places where these studies occurred, and the subjects of some studies no longer exist. And the list of losses will increase.
5. Contemporary training in religious studies relies heavily on critical theory and guards against theology (I am generalizing here). This can tend to reduce Catholicism to "just another discourse." Is there a way in which the Catholic intellectual tradition can respond to this reduction?
6. Peter Thuesen's *Tornado God* explores how Americans reconcile violent weather with their faith in a loving God. As an emergency response and continuity planner, I often grapple with similar tensions: how do we balance faith in divine providence with the human responsibility to prepare for and mitigate disasters? In your view, how can Catholic teachings on stewardship, trust in God, and theodicy (the question of why a good God allows suffering) guide both religious and secular communities in disaster planning and response? Furthermore, how might this be a fruitful area for further study within Catholic academia?
7. Catholic studies has been described as a hub for addressing difficult conversations. How might the field engage with the theological and practical tensions surrounding disasters—events that are often seen as acts of God? Specifically, how can Catholic teachings on

stewardship, trust in divine providence, and moral responsibility guide both faith communities and professionals like emergency planners in responding to crises?