



**Catholic Universities of Central,
Eastern and Western Europe
in a Secularizing World.
Experiences and Challenges**

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*CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES
OF CENTRAL, EASTERN AND WESTERN
EUROPE IN A SECULARIZING WORLD:
EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES*

Vidurio, Rytų ir Vakarų Europos
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pasulyje: patirtis ir iššūkiai

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Book Review

SUMMARY

The paper reviews a book about Catholic universities across Europe in today's secularized world. The volume presents cases from the Netherlands, Sweden, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Ukraine. It focuses on their unique experiences, analysing the challenges they face, their distinctive roles, and the importance of their search for identity within diverse societal contexts. Additionally, the review proposes new avenues for possible continuation of the research on Catholic universities in Europe, that could be organized around common themes and explore new contemporary challenges like the post-pandemic reality, artificial intelligence, climate crisis, and war against Ukraine.

SANTRAUKA

Recenzijoje apžvelgiama knyga apie katalikiškus universitetus šiandienos sekuliarizuotoje Europoje. Rinktinėje nagrinėjami Nyderlandų, Švedijos, Slovakijos, Lenkijos, Slovakijos, Vengrijos ir Ukrainos šalių atve-

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: katalikiškas universitetas, Vidurio ir Rytų Europa, sekuliarizacija.

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jai. Analizuojama unikali šių universitetų patirtis, iššūkiai, gilinamasi į išskirtinį jų vaidmenį ir tapatybės paieškas įvairiuose socialiniuose kontekstuose. Recenzijoje taip pat aptariama, kaip būtų galima tėti katalikiškų universitetų Europoje tyrimus. Pavyzdžiui, organizuoti juos, atsižvelgiant į knygoje išryškėjusias pasikartojančias temas, taip pat įvertinti naujus šiuolaikinius iššūkius, tokius kaip realybė po pandemijos, dirbtinis intelektas, klimato krizė ir karas prieš Ukrainą.

This collection explores Catholic universities across Europe in today's secularized world. It focuses on their unique but relatable experiences, shedding light on the challenges they face, the distinctive roles they play, and their search for identity within diverse cultural, historical, and societal contexts. As Helen Alford, O.P. notes in the Preface, the publication revives, revises, and concludes the project "The Catholic University between Secularisation and Identity" (CUSI), launched in 2013. As a result, the initial articles by scholars from two Catholic universities in Western Europe and four from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) were updated and complemented by three new contributions to offer context. The diverse experiences of Catholic universities discussed in the book showcase their, in a sense, paradoxical and hopeful nature. Despite facing circumstances that in most cases hinted at their redundancy or impossibility, these Catholic universities were established, persisted, and continue demonstrating their unique and irreplaceable role in secularized European societies.

The Preface is followed by the first contribution about the context, titled "The Birth of the Catholic University in a Secularised World: From Newman's The Idea of a University to *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and Beyond" written by Angelo Bottone. The author highlights three pillars of Newman's educational vision:

liberal knowledge pursued for its intrinsic value, the collegiate system contributing to the formation of the whole person in students, and the challenge of defining a distinctive Catholic culture as addressed also by Saint Pope John Paul II in *Ex corde ecclesiae*. The chapter ends with a discussion of two concurrent crises that the idea of a Catholic university has to cope with today: the crisis of the Catholic faith and the crisis of the university. The crisis of a university is related to the difficulties in synthesizing diverse disciplines and defending university autonomy from external influences. In addition, Catholic universities face challenges in maintaining their identity and commitment to truth-seeking in a secularised society. Bottone concludes that this twofold crisis can be faced by Catholic universities only "if their peculiar character is highlighted and testified rather than attenuated" (p. 49).

John L. Davies, a specialist in higher education policy and management, authors the second article titled "The Catholic University in the Context of a Changing World of Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities," which addresses the sustainability of RCHEI¹ in a challenging environment. Davies writes about the current situation and possible directions for RCHEI development in the context of global higher education (HE) trends. His perspectives are drawn from diverse sources like

various chapters in this volume, consultancy projects in Catholic and similar universities in over 50 countries, extensive quality reviews, foundation of quality assurance agencies, and leadership roles in universities internationally. Davies provides a detailed description of how globalization influences a global student market, staff dynamics, funding, programme, and student mobility, as well as how supra-national initiatives shape quality standards, partnerships, and global university rankings. He overviews the significant contemporary socio-economic phenomena from which no university is immune, such as societal divisions, wars, secularisation, intercultural agenda, problems related to corporate capitalism, threats to academic freedom, the importance of life-long-learning and broadening of access to HE, “poverty and social deprivation on a massive scale” (p. 57). Davies is convinced that to survive, Catholic universities need to be more business-minded while keeping what makes them unique: integrating faith and reason, affirming their holistic education purpose, promoting interdisciplinary studies, being thought leaders within their communities, and upholding academic freedom in relation to accreditation requirements and the Magisterium. The author concludes that Catholic universities can remain relevant in society if they engage in strategic thinking and are proactive.

The article “Mission of the Catholic Intelligentsia in Central Europe Today” by András Máté-Tóth concludes the first part of the book. Having defined the main features of the CEE region as “be-

ing in transition”, Máté-Tóth shifts to an extensive analysis of the religious context and the processes of secularisation in five CEE countries: Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine. The author observes that during the period from 1990 to 2017, religion has become less important in these societies, but now more people believe personally, which is not the case in Western societies. The existing differences in contemporary socio-political, religious, and church situation in the CEE region are explained by looking at the combination of 3 factors: the size of the country, “their traditional forms of state sovereignty and their denominational variation” (p. 110). Máté-Tóth also presents the dominant preconceptions regarding religion in the region. For example, people here often see religion as something private or identify it with the biggest Christian institution. It is noteworthy how the author finds not only limitations but also hopeful positive sides in each preconception. For example, he appreciates the fact that the shift to the private dimension of religion has also allowed us to discover the inner dimension of the human person. Then, in CEE, where the focus on the Christian institutions often replaces the discussion of Christian ideas, Christian intelligentsia has “one of the most important tasks [...] to bring the ideas and perspectives of the wider Christian tradition into public discourse, and to maintain a critical public stance regarding any current issue that touches humanity, solidarity or other value questions” (pp. 119-120). In performing this task, Christian intelligentsia in CEE

needs to resist the temptations of uncritical loyalty, becoming an apologetical “janissary”, and holding on to old concessions from the state. Finally, the author believes that in post-totalitarian societies Christian intelligentsia should transform their experiences from the totalitarian period into new missions in contemporary CEE societies. They should create autonomous Christian intelligentsia which continues to demonstrate Christian courage as it did during the time of totalitarian oppression.

The second part of the book contains case studies from 6 countries: the Netherlands, Sweden, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Ukraine. It starts with the chapter by Peter Jonkers, titled “Catholic Identity in a Pluralist Society. The Case of Tilburg University”. According to the author, despite the Netherlands being known as one of Europe’s most secular countries, some recent sociological surveys allow us to question the applicability of the term “secularisation” to it. The surveys find that in the Netherlands many people are searching for meaning but who may not identify with any particular religious institution. Jonkers suggests calling the phenomenon “longing without belonging.” These findings demonstrate that while religious values haven’t disappeared, they were transformed and continue to implicitly influence socio-cultural identities. These societal changes are reflected in Tilburg University (TiU) as its educational mission in the reality of today’s socio-cultural pluralism is implicitly rooted in the Catholic tradition. TiU values connectedness, curiosity, care, and courage and aims to

train students so that they can contribute to society as “professional thinkers of character” (p. 152). Like other Catholic universities, TiU integrates faith and reason in addressing contemporary issues.

Philip Geister’s article, “Secularization and Evangelization: The Newman Institute in Uppsala, Sweden,” explores another example from Western Europe. Geister wants to show that the creation of the Newman Institute, Sweden’s first Catholic higher education institution, in a country where only 1% of people are Catholic and where the Catholic church was suppressed for a long time, shouldn’t be surprising. Instead, he believes that it is “more adequate to state that any secularized society needs the intellectual challenge that a Catholic university offers” (p. 165). Thus, the new Institute is seen as a tool of evangelisation in post-secular Swedish society. Interestingly, when the original chapter was written (2014), the Newman Institute had become the way how Swedes experienced the Catholic Church – through its study programmes, public events, as well as its presence in the public arena and media. At that time the Catholic church seemed very attractive intellectually and spiritually to many people seeking truth and meaning in life. Additionally, the Catholic church was seen as holding the potential for the common good, especially through new ideas on how to solve age-old social problems. However, the article’s 2021 revision presents a quite different situation of the country which is summarized with one word – “disappointment”. In the last decade, Sweden and the Catholic church in Sweden have faced societal shifts and

crises. Yet, Geister states that the evangelizing role of the Newman Institute should remain the same as long as there are people who search for serious reflection and are dissatisfied with secular alternatives in society.

Starting with the third case study in the book, the attention turns towards the CEE region. It focuses specifically on Marian Kuna's research titled "Catholic Identity in a Post-Communist Society: Exploring the Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovakia." The Catholic University in Ružomberok (CUR) emerged in Slovakia due to the country's predominantly Roman Catholic nature, which faced systematic persecution of Christians, particularly Catholics, under Communist rule. The CUR initially began as St. Andrew's Pedagogical Institute in 1995, training Catholic teachers. In 2000, it evolved into its own public university, which is now the only university in Slovakia with a confessional character. The CUR defines its Catholic identity committing to the principles of seeking truth laid out in *Ex corde ecclesiae*. One of the challenges that the CUR faces in promoting Catholic values concerns the lack of a professional Catholic academic elite. Another challenge is the ideology of the "effectiveness-cum-centralization" (p. 213), which risks violating the principle of subsidiarity in university organization. According to Kuna, these challenges should motivate the CUR to get even more rooted in Catholic social teaching (CST) to safeguard Catholic intellectual culture and tradition not only in the university but in the whole society.

The next case study in the collection is written by Fr. Paweł Tarasiewicz and

is focused on Poland. It is called "Between Secularization and Evangelization. A Case Study of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland". As reflected in the title, Polish society is described as experiencing at the same time the processes of secularisation and well-organized evangelization by the Catholic church. An important contextual factor for the mission of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (KUL²) is the stratification of the Polish Catholic society into several specific groups. The non-homogeneity of the Polish Catholic community is presented as a serious challenge to the KUL since it has to allow criticisms from all sides. In such a situation the main KUL's mission consists in "the development of Christian culture based on the symbiosis of faith and reason" (p. 225). This combination happens at three levels of KUL's activities: through research, teaching, and academic ministry which "are joined together by one common goal: providing students not only with an opportunity to acquire sound knowledge and professional skills, but also to find suitable conditions for developing their personalities" (p. 231).

The following case in the volume differs from all the other contributions as it addresses the relationship between Catholic values, natural science, and technology. It also has a narrower institutional focus on just one faculty – the Faculty of Information Technology and Bionics of the Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Hungary. The faculty's founder's Tamás Roska's manuscript "Am I my brother's keeper? Moral and intellectual challenges in Bionics", though unfinished to his untimely passing reflects a pro-

found commitment of a Catholic faculty to the dual mission of scientific excellence and moral guidance. In the Foreword to the manuscript, Kristóf Karacs outlines Roska's vision as "based on four pillars: authenticity, community, service of the society and modern technology" (p. 244). The main concern that Roska had about the new scientific developments in bionics was related to the fact that "for the first time in history" people are not "able to assess all the major consequences" (p. 247) of bioengineering. According to Roska, today the "main open questions are related to the new discoveries and inventions in bionics" (p. 250), and therefore Catholic scientists should always justify them on a "knowledge-ethical basis" (p. 249).

The final chapter, "Rethinking a University in the 21st Century: a Case about the Ukrainian Catholic University³⁷" by Taras Dobko and Volodymyr Turchynovskyy, presents an account of the UCU's foundation and its response to challenges in a post-communist and post-colonial society. The UCU was founded "in exile" by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) in Rome in 1963 and in 2002 was established in Ukraine. Since the start, it posed itself an audacious goal to reimagine the very idea of the university. The UGCC, functioning clandestinely from 1946 to 1989, after the gain of the country's independence emerged strong and able to shape social norms in Ukraine. Dobko and Turchynovskyy emphasize that in such a challenging context of a country in transformation, "everything matters" (p. 272) for advancing the mission of a Catholic university: building on

a heritage of new martyrs, studying the newly available sources of Christian tradition, serving the contemporary society, especially the most vulnerable people, cultivating hospitality, healing the social divisions and wounds, rebuilding trust and openness between people, promoting university autonomy, ensuring holistic development of students and service-learning. Now, when Ukraine is fighting for its freedom, this mission of the UCU "in standing for what is true, good and holy" becomes even more significant and, according to Turchynovskyy, serves as the source of "resilience and our hope for the future" (p. 25).

In conclusion, the book stands out for its original focus on Catholic universities in Europe, especially in the CEE countries. There are many lessons to be learned from the comparison of different experiences of Catholic universities. Most importantly, as it is stated in the Preface, after almost a decade since the launch of the CUSI project, some lessons from the Central and Eastern European region for those in the West could be recognized. The first theme that runs through all the cases in the book, but is particularly evident in the experience of the CEE Catholic universities, is the importance of holding on to the Catholic identity, seeking truth, and witnessing the fundamental dimensions and values of humanity even in the most difficult times of history. Coming out of a totalitarian oppression the churches and Catholic universities in CEE seem in a sense to be more aware of the threats of centralization, Christian deculturization, and attempt to delegitimize their search for

truth. On the other hand, the case studies presented in the book speak to the truth that secularised societies will only gain if Catholic universities are able to engage in their unique mission, foster dialogue, and thus contribute to the promotion of human dignity and the common good.

The text of the book carries an academic tone and seems to be addressed to an audience of scholars, university leaders, and education experts. However, even experienced readers may find certain passages or abbreviations that could benefit from further elaboration or clarification as the ideas of the science of bionics, Máté-Tóth's idea of "media as religion" (p. 109), or some abbreviations from Davies' paper. Furthermore, as should have been expected, there are quite a few themes that are repeated throughout the majority of contributions, especially when it comes to discussing the elements of Catholic university identity, drawn from *Ex corde ecclesiae*. Besides that, many chapters also draw on each other. Therefore, a study about Catholic universities in Europe could alternatively be organized around the key common themes that emerged in the

case studies of this book, such as integrating faith and reason, cooperation between disciplines, character building, and the importance of credibility of people, Christian courage, university autonomy, etc. Finally, as many articles in this collection were written several years ago, a possible continuation of this project could more extensively address the challenges posed by such new social developments as post-pandemic reality, the appearance of the generative artificial intelligence, climate crisis issues, and war against Ukraine.

Overall, the book *Catholic Universities of Central, Eastern and Western Europe in a Secularizing World: Experiences and Challenges* is a very important contribution to a yet not much-researched field of the role of Catholic higher education institutions in contemporary European societies. It can certainly serve as an inspiration and guidance to any Christian university facing the challenges of an increasingly secularized and uncertain world. In an even broader sense, the book will appeal to all people who truly care about the common good of the society in which they live.

Endnotes

¹ Roman Catholic Higher Education Institutions

² The Polish acronym for Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski

³ The Ukrainian Catholic University