

## **“Where Truth is Told”: an Example of the University of Central America**

*by Mark Chater*

### **Context: The Jesuit Order and the Mission of a University**

The Jesuit order, properly known as the Society of Jesus, is a non-monastic order of priests of the Roman Catholic church. Its foundation by the Spanish priest Ignatius Loyola received full papal approval in 1540, in the heat of the Catholic counter-reformation movement. The Society was conceived as distinctive in its missionary and educational work beyond Europe, in its particular obedience to the Pope and – later – in its spirituality and intellectual impact. Jesuit priests underwent longer and intellectually broader training, usually of at least six years, than those of ordinary dioceses or other orders. Although Jesuits have been popularly lampooned as religious zealots, political schemers, or progenitors of the evasive answer (as in the word ‘jesuitical’), the complex reality of their history shows them to have shaped enlightenment Europe through several fields of academic discipline and public activity. While their methods have been varied, and conditioned by European assumptions, they have tended to achieve this by bringing Catholic truth and other branches of knowledge into relationships of integrity.

Matteo Ricci and others, as missionaries in China, developed models of missionary work that were prototypical of inter-religious dialogue. Distinguished work in science and the philosophy of science was achieved by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The *Spiritual Exercises*, based on the book of that name by Ignatius Loyola, are still in very popular use all over the world as a retreat. Ignatian spirituality “focuses on self-knowledge to discern the will of Christ” (Catholic Encyclopedia online, 2004). The beginnings of Christian and secular use of enneagram studies took place in Jesuit universities in South America and the USA. Activity and writing in defence of human rights was a part of Jesuit work, in self-conscious imitation of Christ, from at least the eighteenth century on. In theology, philosophy, science, psychology, human relations and other disciplines including, currently, sociology and law, Jesuits have achieved scholarship, added to knowledge and transformed the many

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secular professional and social environments in which they work. The scope of their intellectual activity is currently broad, the nature of their theological and educational impact on universities is complex.

The Jesuit order has deeply influenced both conservative and liberal models of Catholic university intellectual life (Langan, 1993). The current Jesuit leadership's focus is on education as a defence of human rights, and on the use of technical knowledge in partnership with spiritual perspectives as a way of challenging dominant cultural and moral myths (Kolvenbach, 1997). The Jesuit order's long-standing interest in an ethical and spiritual dimension to education has influenced wider Catholic educational work (Newman, 1852; Buckley, 1998) and has exercised a more general influence on the emergence of secular education at higher level, with its classical and enlightenment-based discourses on the moral purpose of the university (Nixon, 2005). There is certainly every distinction, in terms of theological positioning and method, to be made between Jesuit educationalists and their counterparts in fundamentalist churches or in reactionary right-wing elements of contemporary Catholicism, such as the Spanish-based *Opus Dei*. The influence of the latter two groups in Latin America and other third-world and first-world contexts is growing rapidly, and has become stronger than that of liberation theology.

### **The Event: an Attack at the University of Central America**

At 2am on 16 November 1989, in the University of Central America, San Salvador, six Jesuit scholars, a member of the university staff and her daughter were murdered by a death squad. The attack was part of a systematic campaign of murders and disappearances organised by the Salvadorean regime against the supposed leaders of a popular revolt. This particular attack attracted more publicity because it was directed mainly against Jesuit priests, and because it took place in the relatively placid and privileged context of a University campus. The priests were activists and, with reservations, theological apologists for the popular Marxist-led uprising against U.S.-sponsored tyranny. Another reason for the notoriety of the attack was that Jon Sobrino SJ, their priestly and academic colleague, would almost certainly have died with them had he been in residence at the time. He was more well-known as a liberation theologian and must have been the prime target. Surviving and grieving, Sobrino memorialised their work, analysed their death and exposed the system which killed them and many others (Sobrino, 1990).

Those killed on that day – priests Ignacio Ellacuria, Amando Lopez, Joaquin Lopez y Lopez, Ignacio Martin-Baro, Segundo Montes and Juan Ramon Moreno, staff member Julia Elba Ramos, who cooked for the priests, and her teenage daughter Celina Ramos

(both of whom had opted to live on the campus because they felt it was safer) – became collectively known as the Jesuit martyrs. They became celebrated in the Salvadorean revolutionary movement, which named a revolutionary refugee city, Ciudad Segundo Montes, after one of them. In the wider international human rights and solidarity movement, their names were recorded in stories, speeches and songs of lament or of revolutionary hope. In liberation theology their deaths produced a new level of consciousness of base communities and of the evangelising and humanizing mission of activist theologians in the continent and beyond it.

Certain features of the context of the attack, and of its actual events, carry political, theological and educational significance as a narrative of an attack on a university committed to social justice. Sobrino recalls fifteen bomb attacks on the university between 1976 and 1989 (Sobrino, 1990: 14). In the year of their death, the Jesuits of UCA had suffered a curfew and three attacks, together with several threats broadcast on television and radio. Many of the threats denounced the Jesuits as communists, particularly singling out the university Rector, Ellacuria, and the director of the UCA's Human Rights Institute, Montes. They and others were hated by the army and governing regime, and were seen as the intellectual leadership of the FMLN – the “brains” of the communist uprising – although there has never been documentary proof of such a link. It is for this reason that the story has grown that they were shot in the head, and that their brains were systematically spilled out on the university lawn, though this is not fully corroborated by the only non-military eye witness (Sobrino, 1990: xviii).

The eye witness, cleaning woman Lucia Barrera de Cerna, heard the attack and saw about thirty soldiers. They used grenades and power rifles, and made much noise, imitating more powerful weapons, as if to suggest a fire fight with rebel forces – thus preparing the ground for a propaganda defence of their actions. Two priests and the two women were shot in the dormitories (the women having decided to take refuge there because they felt their own home was under violent threat). The remaining four priests were taken out on to the lawn, made to lie face down and were shot in the head (Sobrino, 1990: xviii). The soldiers then torched the university archives and threw grenades into the building of the school of theology.

A congressional investigation in the U.S., published in April of the following year (Moakley, 1990) linked the killings very specifically and by a short chain of command to the highest level of the U.S.-backed Salvadorean government, and to U.S. training and funding. A military eye witness reported that the attack had been planned in advance and had been scheduled originally for a date approximately ten days before November 16, but that some military chiefs had expressed doubts about going ahead (Moakley 1990). This witness was a U.S. military adviser at the time, and his account, with its interpretation of the regime's

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doubts and final complicity, was accepted by the FBI as fully accurate, according to Human Rights Watch (1990).

The deaths were not isolated. Archbishop Romero's dramatic assassination in 1980 – his final sermon, (Romero, 1980: 304-306) a call to loving service for the kingdom, still in the ears of the congregation – was probably the most notorious internationally. Popular Salvadorean memory cherishes equally the death of the priest Rutilio Grande, murdered in 1977 by the military together with two Salvadorean peasants. Maureen Courtney, a sister of St Agnes, was similarly murdered in Nicaragua in 1990. Sobrino had earlier memorialised the four American missionaries, Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan, murdered in 1980 by the Salvadorean military (Sobrino, 1981). In his eulogy, the theologian gently points out that the most notorious deaths were simply part of an ongoing violent repression:

... there has been martyrdom upon martyrdom – an endless procession of priests, seminarians, students, campesinos, teachers, workers, professionals, and intellectuals  
... death has come to be the inseparable, dismal companion of our people.  
(Sobrino, 1981: 314).

Liberation theology has made much of those deaths, but has not always lived up to its popular and inclusive ideals in the way it narrates and interprets them. This has produced a compromised consciousness for those who study the martyrs of that context and who try to follow their example. However, Sobrino sees, in all human rights martyrdoms of that context, the face of the crucified Christ (*ibid.*, 315). Later he develops a servant theology in which the crucified Christ is present in a crucified people (Sobrino, 1991, pp254ff).

Yet it is troubling to see what has been made of the deaths in the wider theological world. Of all the "endless procession", those most noticed are either U.S. citizens or male clergy and academics. Theirs are the names that break into the public consciousness. Julia and Celina Ramos are added because they died with Jesuit priests; they have been posthumously incorporated into the Jesuit order. This status, from which in life they were excluded by obstacles of class, educational and gender – obstacles partly placed and maintained by the church and the Jesuit order - has been accorded to them in death; these female, working-class "Jesuit martyrs" were not wanted by the church until they were corpses. Then their witness could be added, and could indeed bring extra poignancy to an otherwise all-male narrative. Although the literature on this event recognises their martyrdom with due solemnity, it is silent on their lives. The meaning of the deaths is partially obscured if only the powerful are properly memorialised and celebrated.

If the popular narrative elevates US citizens, clergy, members of religious communities and academics - the powerful, or their associates – to martyrdom status, and remains relatively

silent on the campesinos and urban workers of Sobrino's endless procession, a further injustice has been committed. Although to some extent this selectivity is due to the *realpolitik* attitude of a global media, conscious of its need to sell a story amongst the literate and powerful, there are signs that church and education communicators have been complicit. The narrative in some theological and wider church discourses as well as in some religious education programmes is to some extent guilty of this sin of omission. Repeated many times over a period, this silence can aggregate into a corrupt theology of Gnostic Christ figures who descend from privilege into chaos to save the poor and who give their lives on behalf of the poor. The poor once again become objects in a narrative that is not about them. The drama of famous deaths robs the poor of the chance to have their stories heard.

### **Reflection: the Jesuits and Ethical University Education**

Part of the Jesuit martyrs' theological work was to interpret, in the context of oppression, the purpose of university education, of Catholic higher education and, by implication, of wider non-fundamentalist Christian or church-affiliated universities. Thus for them, a university ought to have an underlying commitment

... to a change of both structures and persons with a view towards a growing solidarity; a university which is willing to engage in dangerous struggle on behalf of justice. (Ellacuria, 1975: 207)

But they realised that this work is pursued in the context of a university structure that serves capitalism, and in immediate contexts of tragic conflict. The vision of a higher education for justice is therefore "contaminated", "tainted" and suffers from "cultural penetration" (Martin-Baro, 1974: 222). Education that starts in this compromised way will fail to take account of concrete reality. It will proceed from false premises and will, as Freire predicted, be pre-fabricated, bringing no relevant analysis to current issues (ibid.)

Cultural penetration, in itself a violent act, is achieved structurally by means of "technocratic mandarinism" (ibid., 223), in which everything is reduced to the technical, everything is subject to professional treatment, and distinct social or economic divisions are enshrined.

The opposite of cultural penetration is cultural creation. While this is a creative act, it must often begin critically and therefore negatively, with critical consciousness:

It is ... important that we analyse very carefully ... to what extent the structures of our University seek to accomplish or not accomplish the work of consciousness formation ... A thought that is not capable of effecting reality is an empty thought. (ibid., 242)

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An example of the negativity of the critique is seen in Ellacuria's description of some aspects of cultural and aesthetic studies, when seen from the viewpoint of the poor majority, as "narcissistic and tranquilizing" (Ellacuria, 1975: 183). More positively, Joaquin Lopez y Lopez, the only Salvadorean of the six, was a leader in the field of education, founding and running schools and clinics, and was distinguished by his practical response to the needs of the people (Sobrino, 1990: 138ff). Strategies to widen access and participation in higher education go some way to responding to this radical call, but their impact is blunted if the culture and values of universities remain unchanged. Ellacuria argued that universities, working with knowledge in the midst of social reality, must transform that reality, working with its intellectual tools of analysis, imagination, communication and development of the professions (Ellacuria, 1982: 149). There was also the necessity to "...communicate to our constituencies a consciousness that inspires the freedom of self-determination..." (ibid., 149).

This notion of an ethically-oriented university having "constituencies" – in the parishes, professions, schools, local community – is worth remembering, and it could translate, in the British and north American contexts, into professional partnerships in ways that are explored in the final section.

Ellacuria's thinking also touches on the interplay between inclusion and high standards. His belief that a university, especially a Catholic university, and by implication any Christian university, should be for and with the poor did not entail an abdication from the mission of academic excellence, since "... excellence (is) needed to solve complex social problems" (Ellacuria, 1982: 150).

An example of academic skill in the service of the community was Martin-Baro's study of psycho-social trauma among children and adults caught up in the Salvadorean war. The essay is both a vivid account of the effects of the "alienating havoc" of indefinite war (Martin-Baro, 1988: 95) and a call for new solutions:

... psychotherapy is insufficient ... so long as there is no significant change in social relations (structural, group, and interpersonal) as they exist today in El Salvador. (Martin-Baro, 1988: 95).

From this he went on to generalise that academic disciplines themselves, in their content and self-construction, should and could be transformed by coming into contact with the poor. Until a discipline subjects itself to this transformation, it cannot serve the poor. There could be no psychology of liberation without a prior liberation of psychology (Aron and Corne, 1996). This offers a powerful example of the excellence of the university brought to bear on social reality through activism. In this sense, Martin-Baro's work is both research and politics. He and others knew that this paradigm of knowledge would lead to opposition

and conflict: “Where the truth is told, analysed, and presented in a university and Christian way, this is a kind of university that the idols will not tolerate” (Sobrino, 1990: 29).

The use of the concept of idols here is very specific, borrowing from early Christian narratives of the persecution and martyrdom of those Christians who refused to bow to Roman idols. Idols, as manufactured objects designed to replace the true and living God, have become, in the Central American and broader liberation theology contexts, a recurrent name for objects such as capital, economic power, military power or church hierarchical power, all of which are set up in conflict with the being and will of God. Qualities such as death and falsehood are associated with idols, in contrast to a Christian approach to knowledge that pursues a life-giving, although costly truth. Here we can more subtly connect Martin-Baro’s call for the transformation of his academic discipline, and of all disciplines, with the recurrent theme of violence. That knowledge and teaching, when not socially transformed, are idolatrous, and therefore implicitly violent, is argued passionately in his analysis of his own context (Montgomery and Martin-Baro, 1994). That idols, when named and denounced, become explicitly violent, is stated in the theological reflections left by him and others (Romero, Sobrino and Martin-Baro, 1985), and is shown in the violence on the campus. Under the banner of this radical Christian epistemology, not only the purpose of university education, but also the nature of university knowledge are dramatically changed. The transformed content and the reconstruction of disciplines as if liberated from intellectual captivity, the nature of knowledge as service and the nature of excellence as that which clarifies the truth and brings about confrontation,— all bring high levels of challenge to academics and university administrators. But, although challenged, we miss any satisfactory clarity about the possible meanings of the phrase “university and Christian way”, which will now be explored.

### **Re-orienting Universities to Truth-telling**

The option for the poor, embraced by the Jesuits, transformed their intellectual work and made them, in that concrete situation, side with the popular movement of insurrection and armed struggle. For them as intellectuals the option for the poor meant “returning to the poor the truth that is theirs” (Sobrino, 1990: 28). This was to be achieved in academic fields such as economics, politics, technology, health, education, art and theology.

They did this in their teaching, research and activism so that “the reality of the lives of the vast majority of ordinary people . . . with its suffering and also with its hope and creativity has a voice” (Sobrino, 1990: 28).

Sobrino compares their idea of a Catholic university, in importance, to Newman’s a century

before. This claim deserves exploration and critical development. The UCA Jesuits' belief that "academic and Christian knowledge must be and can be at the service of the poor" (Sobrino, 1990: 38) could perhaps be seen as an extension of Newman's theory of the unity of all branches of knowledge, and an application of it in the concrete situation of oppression. Newman's ideal university had been firmly against division and (by implication) hierarchical distinctions between disciplines of knowledge, and had claimed that reason and revelation, properly understood, could not contradict each other (Newman, 1852: 235ff). The UCA united concepts of knowledge and truth in practice, transforming several branches of knowledge with a revolutionary social commitment. Whereas Newman had tempered reason with the dogmatic content of revelation, the UCA changed knowledge by making it answerable to a less clear, but more immediately resonant set of values summed up as the Kingdom of God or Reign of God. The concept of a divinely-given epistemological unity lies behind both Newman and the UCA Jesuits. The unity that Newman envisioned was between disciplines; for the UCA academics, that same unity lay between knowledge and action. *paraxis*. Although less theoretically developed, the UCA did in a way implement Newman's idea. The UCA replaced dogma with ethics as the partner and judge of a university's integrity.

From this Sobrino builds an implied epistemology in which the special form of knowledge of the world, and of Christ, enjoyed by the oppressed is referred to as "the light of the poor" (Sobrino, 1991: 33). The poor have a potential to humanize, evangelise and educate the whole of the surrounding society that causes their poverty. "A powerful light ... shines from the crucified people and it lights up the darkness of our world" (Sobrino, 1991: 263).

Nevertheless, a university can corrupt the knowledge of the poor. It can be and often is threatened by sinfulness, i.e. it can serve oppressive forces by reinforcing unjust structures "through the professionals it produces" (Sobrino, 1990: 39). The "anti-Kingdom" in academic life is always present, and it is in the form of lies (*ibid.*)

Older, privileged models of knowledge, education and university organisation are challenged by the poor and oppressed in their physical and social context. The nature of their knowledge, as suffering, changes the nature of all knowledge. And, in a powerful phrase derived both from Sobrino's personal knowledge of the terror of violent attack and from his Catholic theology of grace, he dares to claim that the crucified poor "most abundantly and cruelly fill up in their flesh what is lacking in Christ's passion" (*ibid.*, 271). His epilogue points to Galilee as the place where Jesus reveals his resurrected self; for Sobrino, the oppressed are the locus of revelation, the "Galilee of today" *ibid.*, 273).

This radicalised Christian epistemology is theologically predicated in, among others, the work of Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, in particular his development of a

socially radical Trinitarian structure. Boff calls on Christian theology to reject the image of the Trinity as aloof above a static universe. He argues that belief in the Trinity means that at the root of everything is dynamic movement, an eternal process of life. Theology must, he believes, move from a Trinity which is a hierarchy of power to one which is a dynamic community of diverse gifts and functions (Boff, 2000). This work draws on the earlier Asian theologies of Trinitarian and eucharistic communities as paradigms of equality (Mar Osthathios, 1979; Balasuriya, 1977). So Christian universities must also shift from privileged and static forms of knowledge, above an unchanging political universe, to dynamic, shifting sources and forms of truth, derived from, and existing for, community.

Sobrino does not say anything, in this context, on the ultimate truth of Christian theological claims about the trinity or Christ, nor does he address the historicity of New Testament narratives, nor does he develop argumentation on relations between Christian knowledge and truth-claims and academic objectivity. He prefers to make use of Christian narratives and doctrines in the service of political understanding. His position on biblical and doctrinal issues is, we might say, implicitly conservative, while his political read-out is explicitly radical and his epistemology very challenging for universities. He and the others are also silent on relations between church HEIs and secular universities. If church HEIs must run on a radical, unified, concretised epistemology, giving truth and knowledge back to the poor in order to defend their humanity, and if all humanity is embraced and called by the vision of the kingdom, are not secular universities equally obliged to organise themselves in this way? The UCA academics were vocationally inspired; some of them were professional theologians but all were steeped in the theology of their church in a Roman Catholic country. All worked in a situation of extreme oppression and physical danger. So it is easy to recognise why they expressed their vision in purely ecclesial terms and did not stop to ask how or whether it should apply elsewhere. Yet, under the logic of a liberation theology of knowledge, it must apply universally, giving all universities a similar mission, whose ethical basis can be traced (Nixon, 2005) in comparable terms to those of church HEIs. Therefore the problem becomes one of a disappearing distinctiveness for church educational visions for the leaders and academics of church HEIs (Buckley, 1998), and of church schools (Arthur, 1995).

### **Implications for a Truth-telling University**

Despite the contradictions and gaps identified in the narrative and significance of the UCA academics, there remain two areas in which their work offers moral perspectives for the consideration of Christian and secular university educators, even those working in contexts of stability, prosperity and democracy, who seek a university based firmly in ethical practices.

First, the UCA concept of the role of the “constituency” in a university is constructed to

ensure that the poor and oppressed have access to higher education, to expertise and to a voice, and that the university's moral climate is constantly renewed. To what extent can the present British government's inclusion policy, aiming to bring 50% of all school leavers into higher education, claim to be a contemporary model of the Jesuit ideal? There has been much sceptical comment on the project, some of it flatly stating the impossibility of sustaining tensions between excellence and inclusion (Woodhead, 2002). In the wide-scale implementation of key skills, placement options in the community, vocational degrees and recruitment-based partnerships between universities and poorer areas of their region, is there an effective strategy for listening to the experience of those who enter university? Is there any trace of the moral argument that definitions of excellence can and will change under the impact of inclusion? Studies of the impact of the knowledge economy and of transfers of focus and ownership of knowledge, together with changes in information technology and distance learning, have begun to address the nature of knowledge (Delanty, 2001). What is suggested in the use of the word "constituency" is something that a university will represent, not merely absorb.

Another consideration follows on. A church HEI eschews violence. The violence perpetrated against UCA staff consisted not only of murder and threats, but of the cultural penetration denounced by the academics. Campuses enjoying a surrounding political climate characterised by relative stability, orderliness and democracy may find it hard to see, in the UCA, any event or theme that is relevant. This will only change when academics make connections between violent cultural and physical penetration in a military dictatorship and the enforcement of cultural norms through compulsory universal education and centralised or business control of the curriculum. The critiques of Bellah (1996), Klein (2001) and Bottery (2000) have begun to raise these concerns in the western context. There is little ethical gain if universities absorb the socially excluded, only to commit cultural violence by imposing a curriculum and a set of covert values that have not been changed by their presence. Violence is also implied by the continuing fragmentation of knowledge into specialisms, the rising difficulties in establishing effective use of interdisciplinary approaches amongst university students and the limited success of theories of the secular re-integration of knowledge (Wilson, 1998). Universities themselves are caught in an increasingly urgent debate about their purpose as liberal and humanitarian or economically instrumental (Bouillon and Radnitsky, 1991), the former occupying prime place in university rhetoric while the latter is the dominant model in practice (Bottery, 2000). The UCA concept of "cultural creation" implies that not only theory, but also practice should change: transformation must affect not only the definitions of excellence, but also, and crucially, the curriculum itself and the moral culture of the university as it sees itself and is seen from outside.

### **Conclusion: Learning from University of Central America**

What self-understanding can church HEIs gain from a reflection on the work and death of the UCA academics? How much does the UCA's very specific and dramatic context diminish its relevance for wider church, secular, third-world or western universities? It is necessary to be careful in establishing how UCA Jesuits carry relevance beyond their own setting. Certainly they have become icons of steadfastness, of the relentless pursuit of truth in the face of mendacious and threatening authority structures. But as this was a much more dramatic confrontation than those which take place on most campuses, the very drama of the deaths, and the context of extreme poverty and oppression, may appear to weaken the narrative's relevance for higher education in more stable democratic societies; at the same time, the markedly Catholic terms of their mission differentiates it from any equivalent social aims in secular universities. Yet at the epistemological heart of their project there was a programme to change the nature of knowledge in ways that can have their counterparts in all church HEIs, and perhaps also in secular universities. But it is not clear that the Jesuits' epistemological revolution has taken root widely in other universities and church HEIs, which need a developed philosophy of the transformation of contextualised knowledge, and of the confrontations that accompany it.

Address for correspondence: Dr. Mark Chater, Bishop Grosseteste College, Lincoln, LN1 3DY, UK; email: markftchater@yahoo.co.uk

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