

INTERVIEW WITH JAY MARTIN, PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Perhaps a majority of researchers in mine and related fields tend not to share my particular values and commitments, especially with respect to Catholicism, but I have generally enjoyed the opportunities to engage with and learn from them.”
- “My advice to Catholic students who are considering pursuing advanced degrees in Theology is simply to allow themselves the chance for genuine discernment. Everyone knows that the job market is tough, graduate school is arduous, and that the academy can be an unwelcoming place, but I would encourage them to refuse the pull of cost-benefit analysis.”

Would you describe where you work, and some of the particularities of your university?

I am a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame. As a leading research university that is also Catholic, Notre Dame brings together academic excellence, innovative research, and the rich resources of the Catholic faith with an incredible student culture that promotes the education and formation of the whole person in order to prepare them for serving Christ, the church, and the world. Working at an institution and in a department that by its charter is committed to those same ideals is nothing short of a grace.

What is your main field of research, and why did you choose that field?

I am a systematic theologian whose research centers on the intersection of Catholic theology and various forms of theory, particularly psychoanalysis, German and French philosophical thought, radical emancipatory political theory, and critical race and postcolonial theory. In addition, I also write and research in the areas of science and religion and comparative theology. I pursued these particular fields of study first out of personal interest and perhaps a natural inclination toward them.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Jay Martin, Assistant Teaching Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, shares insights about the work that he received an Expanded Reason Award for and about life in academia including the work he did for the Science & Religion Initiative at the McGrath Institute for Church Life.

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As my research has developed, I have become increasingly convinced of both their importance and ability to provide conceptual resources to Catholic thinking, but also of their need to be studied in light of and with a commitment to Catholic teaching and tradition. Much of what I study is self-consciously inimical to religious belief in general and the Catholic faith in particular, but I can't help but see my academic work as my own modest way of the call to evangelize through the careful assessment of these various forms of thought to identify what is true in them and to help shore up resistance to what is not.

You are a recipient of the Expanded Reason Awards. What was your contribution for receiving the Award?

Before joining the Theology faculty at Notre Dame, I served as the Academic Director of the Science & Religion Initiative (SRI) at the McGrath Institute for Church Life. Over the course of six years, Patricia Bellm, the Programming Director of the Initiative, and I built and developed the SRI. We designed and executed its annual science and religion conferences and Institute Days for Catholic secondary educators, and established critical partnerships with other leaders in science and religion, including the Society of Catholic Scientists and the Lumen Christi Institute at the University of Chicago, among others.

As the Academic Director of the SRI, I was responsible for themes and speakers for our conferences, the selection of reading materials for our participants, and planning and coordinating future projects and collaborations. In the fall of 2018, Chris Baglow joined the SRI as its Executive Director, at which point I continued that kind of work in an advisory capacity to him.



Photo: Cavadini, Baglow, Bellm, and Martin at the Vatican to receive the 2018 Expanded Reason Award in Teaching from the Ratzinger Foundation.

How easy or difficult is it for you to share your values with students when teaching?

I am very lucky. At Notre Dame, it has been incredibly easy to share my values with students through my teaching. I have the freedom, even encouragement, to begin my classes with prayer and the luxury of approaching biblical and theological material with my students from the perspective of an affirming faith. Notre Dame students on the whole expect this approach, at least in their theology courses, though I am sure they find it across the university curriculum.

How do your values affect your research? And what are some challenges you face?

Perhaps a majority of researchers in mine and related fields tend not to share my particular values and commitments, especially with respect to Catholicism, but I have generally enjoyed the opportunities to engage with and learn from them. I do, on the sly, maintain some small hope that my presence in the field might amount to something like a faithful witness and an encouragement to students and fellow scholars who have similar intellectual interests and a desire to be faithful Catholics.

What is your advice for students who may be Catholic who are contemplating doing graduate work or a PhD?

My advice to Catholic students who are considering pursuing advanced degrees in Theology is simply to allow themselves the chance for genuine discernment. Everyone knows that the job market is tough, graduate school is arduous, and that the academy can be an unwelcoming place, but I would encourage them to refuse the pull of cost-benefit analysis. To study and teach theology can and should be a service to the Church, an opportunity to form students in the faith, and to seek on behalf a faith that seeks understanding. Those things are ends in themselves, whether done in a formal or informal way.

Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

My academic journey was relatively straightforward. In college, I became immediately interested in philosophy and theology, and as my interests developed I came to understand that the most important questions for me were theological, though my methodology was largely philosophical; this has served me well as my research profile came into focus during graduate school.

Between college and graduate school, I spent 4 years teaching theology at a Catholic school in South Bend, while my wife Jenny, now an associate professor at Notre Dame jointly in the Department of Theology and the Program of Liberal Studies, began graduate school. That experience, more than any other, helped me discern an academic future in theology.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

Despite being an ontologically understated person, I am probably passionate about too many things to be very good at any of them. I am passionate about being a husband and father. I am passionate about the craft of teaching and the task of theology. I am passionate about learning Copperplate and blackletter calligraphy. I am passionate about cooking, heavily peated single malt Scotch whiskies, collecting vinyl records, travel, and lording over the 20,000-book library my wife and I have built over our nearly two decades of marriage.



Photo: An example of Copperplate calligraphy from 1740 (from Wikipedia).



Photo: Jay's upstairs library right after the shelving and ladder were built. (Most books are in the basement, but that view is reserved to hoarders).