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LIVED EXPERIENCE IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Research and Reflections from Sub-Saharan Africa and North America
MATHEW N. SCHMALZ

Interviews in Catholic Global Studies:
William T. Cavanaugh

William T. Cavanaugh is Professor of Catholic Studies and Director of the Center for World Catholicism & Intercultural Theology, a research center housed in the Department of Catholic Studies at DePaul University and focusing on the Catholic Church in the global South—Africa, Asia, and Latin America. He is the author of six books, including Field Hospital: The Church’s Engagement with a Wounded World (Eerdmans, 2016) and The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict (Oxford University Press, 2010), and the editor of three others. His books and articles have been published in 10 languages.

Watch this interview on YouTube: https://youtu.be/1FGoDVtw6pY.

MS: Welcome everyone. My name’s Mathew Schmalz, and I’m Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Global Catholicism*. And this is part of our continuing series of interviews with scholars in the field of Catholic Studies. And so it’s my great pleasure to introduce William Cavanaugh of the Center for World Catholicism & Intercultural Theology and also Professor of Catholic Studies at DePaul University. So many thanks for being here.

WC: Oh, my pleasure, Mat.

MS: First, tell us something about your intellectual journey, how you got to DePaul.

WC: Oh, gosh. So I went to Notre Dame as an undergrad intending on majoring in chemical engineering, and I got hooked on theology. So one of my professors—I was going to go to law school after getting a theology degree after I had changed—and one of my professors said, “Lawyers are a dime a dozen. Go get a degree in theology.” So I did. Between my master’s and PhD, I spent a couple years in Chile on a volunteer program with the Order of Holy Cross working on a cooperative building project in a poor area of Santiago, Chile under the military regime. So that’s kind of my experience with global
Catholicism, was the couple years I spent in Chile. And then I got a PhD at Duke and began teaching.

**MS:** Okay, and also hasn’t your work in Chile produced a publication?

**WC:** Yeah, that’s right. It was my dissertation, which was my first book. It’s called *Torture and Eucharist.* And it’s about the Church’s response to human rights abuses under the military regime. And I actually, when I came back from Chile, I worked at the law school at Notre Dame for about six months with the archives of the Vicariate of Solidarity, which had cataloged all the human rights abuses under the military regime. So that experience kind of gave me my materials for the dissertation, which became the first book.

**MS:** And for those of you listening, it’s a book that comes highly recommended, certainly by me. So you ended up at DePaul, and so tell us just a little bit about DePaul.

**WC:** So DePaul calls itself a Catholic Vincentian Urban University. It was founded in 1898 by the Vincentian orders of the followers of St. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. And from the beginning, it’s been kind of the poor kids’ school as opposed to the Jesuit school.

**MS:** Got it.

**WC:** But DePaul from the beginning has been kind of a working class school. We still, nearly 40% of our students, our undergraduates, are first-generation college goers. And DePaul’s always been very inviting. They were very welcoming to Jewish students when the University of Chicago and Northwestern had quotas for Jews and so on. So the kind of social justice aspect has been there from the beginning. There aren’t very many Vincentians left, and so the Vincentian character is now carried on mostly by lay people. And people around Notre Dame tend to talk about Vincentian much more than they do about Catholic. The Catholic identity of the university has been, I think, diminished. And so that’s one of the reasons why the Catholic Studies
Department was created in 2010 and why the Center was created just a little bit before that.

**MS:** Can you share a little more about that, particularly about the Center, but also Catholic Studies and, you know, how it was started and also conceptualized?

**WC:** Sure, so the Catholic Studies program came about sometime in the 2000s. I’m not sure when. I got there in 2010. And it was an attempt by Catholic faculty in various departments to kind of do something Catholic at DePaul. There wasn’t much Catholic. You can still today get through DePaul without much exposure to Catholicism at all. There’s a religion requirement, but you can satisfy it by taking one course in Buddhism and another course in business ethics. So they started a Catholic Studies program, and then it became a department in 2011 or 2010. And that’s when I came from the University of St. Thomas. The Center was started, I think, a couple years earlier than that in 2008 maybe. And the idea was to capitalize on the broad kind of international outreach that DePaul was trying to emphasize, and that fit with the character of DePaul as a Catholic University.

**MS:** So let’s talk a little more about the Center. How is it structured? What kind of work does it do, and so forth?

**WC:** We have three faculty and two staff. One of the staff is half-time. We host visiting scholars each year from the Global South. We publish a book series, *Studies in World Catholicism*, which is largely volumes that come out of conferences that we do. We have a podcast series called “Near and Far.” We have an annual international conference, “World Catholicism Week,” which starts this evening actually.

**MS:** Oh, wow.

**WC:** Youth and young people is the subject for today. But each World Catholicism Week gathers people from around the world from every continent to talk about one particular subject. We have other events, lectures and round tables and so on throughout the academic year. We have a free video library
of recordings of our past lectures and conferences. And we have the African Catholicism Project, which is an attempt to create a network of scholars in Africa working on African Catholicism. And we've actually got a conference in Nairobi in July where we're going to launch our *Handbook of African Catholicism*, this massive 800-page reference book, which is being published by Orbis Press. So we do all of that with the cooperation of a lot of people and a lot of good will.

**MS:** So given all of that, I mean, what would you say are the particular strengths of the Center as it’s developed over the last couple years?

**WC:** One of the things that we do well I think is we’re a resource for scholars and pastoral agents around the world. So some of the things that I mentioned there. The providing opportunities for networking, for example. So we’re going to gather scholars from around Africa in Nairobi in July, and a lot of African scholars just don’t have the kind of opportunities. They don't have travel budgets. They don’t have an annual AAR, American Academy of Religion, like we do in the US. So this is an opportunity to network. We've set up mentoring relationships. So for the chapters of the handbook, a senior scholar worked with a junior scholar. We have fellowships. We've sponsored PhD students at DePaul in addition to the more senior scholars. We have books and a podcast series and so on. So we think of ourselves as kind of a research center that is a resource center for people in the Global South. I think that’s one of the things that we do well.

**MS:** And given those resources, what particular intellectual or theological issues do you think your Center is best equipped to address or most interested in addressing?

**WC:** That’s hard to say. We don’t have a particular agenda. I think some centers say, okay, we’re going to spend the next five years working on this set of questions. We want to serve both the academy and the Church, and we try to let our partners in the Global South set the agenda. So for example, we have a partnership with the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and they
suggested that Hélder Câmara is not very well known in the US, and Dorothy Day is not very well known in Brazil. And so we had a conference on Dorothy Day in Rio de Janeiro and we had a conference on Hélder Câmara in Chicago, and I thought that was a good way to cooperate. But we try as much as we can to be aware of our position as, you know, having resources and we try to let the people in the Global South set the agenda. And so we take different suggestions for different topics of interest, but our recent World Catholicism Weeks have been on youth and young people—again, starting today; health; care; nonviolence; women’s leadership; humanism; Pentecostalism; ecology. Those are some of the things that we’ve worked on. And each one of them has a corresponding volume in our book series.

**MS:** So one of the things that anyone involved in working in the Catholic academy has to face is the politicization of Catholicism, particularly, you know, in this country, I would think most specifically. How do you navigate that in your own work?

**WC:** That’s one of the great things about working with the Church globally is that you step out of the dynamics of American politics and the culture wars, you know, striving to gain influence over policy makers to get the Bishop’s agenda into law. That really doesn't mean much in places where there isn’t much of a functional government, you know, a lot of places in Africa and so on where the Church in some ways substitutes for the government. It is the main provider of healthcare and education and so on. Occasionally we get a speaker that says something which is disagreeable to an audience member, but I think in some ways we have the advantage of just stepping out of the usual space of controversy. And we think part of our job anyway is to help the US Church have a broader view so our concerns here are not those of the Church as a whole.

**MS:** From your experience in Chile onward, what has your involvement in issues surrounding global Catholicism taught you?
It’s wonderful to see the students rediscover Catholicism through the lens of elsewhere. It helps us break out of our small dynamics that we usually think of Catholicism.

—William Cavanaugh

WC: I think one of the things that I’ve learned is how quickly the stereotypes dissipate, you know? I mean, the more that I get to know people from around the world, the more I tend to think of the global self less as just kind of one big whole. We kind of had this moment about 25 years ago where the Church in the north discovered the Church in the south, you know? Philip Jenkins’ book on *The Next Christendom*, and suddenly everybody was talking about how the center of gravity of the Church worldwide had shifted from the Global North to the Global South. And with that sudden realization, there were certain stereotypes that the Church in the south is conservative on sexual matters, but progressive on political matters. And in general, there’s a kind of vibrant Church in the south and a moribund Church in the north. But the more I study it and the more I meet people and travel, the stereotypes, if they don’t break down entirely, they’re complexified. There’s a greater diversity today, I think, in attitudes towards sexual ethics in the south than there were in recent decades. The Church in Europe is not dead. I think that was premature. The Church in Africa is not without serious problems, even though it’s held up as this great representation of growth and vitality. Which it certainly is, but it also has serious problems one of which I think is a coming sexual abuse crisis, which is going to match that of the Church in the north. And so, I teach a course on Intro to World Catholicism to my undergraduates. And it’s wonderful to see the students rediscover Catholicism through the lens of elsewhere. It helps us break out of our small dynamics that we usually think of Catholicism. But one of the things that I have been impressed by, just to make a very broad generalization, is the dynamism and the diversity of Catholicism around the world. And one of the things I do
in that class actually is—thanks to you and your work there, your and Tom Landy’s work at Holy Cross—the Catholics & Cultures website. Every class period in that class begins with a student or two making a presentation of just a minute or two from the Catholics & Cultures website. Something they thought was fun and interesting. Pick a country, pick a thing and just talk about it for two minutes. And that, I think, just gives the students and me a sense of the kind of breadth and vitality of the Church around the world.

MS: Are there any particular theological issues for you as a theologian that this encounter with global Catholicism has raised for you or that you find particularly interesting?

WC: Theological issues? I guess for me, the issue that I keep coming back to more and more in the class that I teach on this is the centrality of Christ and the question of suffering. That one of the things that makes Christ concrete and not abstract to the students is this kind of connection with the sufferings of Christ and this very strange idea of a God who identifies with those who suffer. And that, I think, in a lot of what we read, that kind of comes across as being central to the experience of a lot of people, a lot of Catholics in the Global South. And so that, I think, has been, for me, one of the central theological issues that I face in teaching that course and in encountering people from around the world.

MS: One of the issues that I’ve faced is how you define what “Catholic” is. You know, what goes into the basket? And is Catholic a normative term when you use it academically? Or is it simply a descriptive term? So how do you sort of wrestle with that or engage that in terms of what you include and what you don’t include, whether it be in a course or in the work of the Center as a whole?

WC: Yeah, that’s a really interesting question. I mean, I guess it’s both descriptive and normative, right? I mean, the Catholic Church is—I often tell my students—the first truly global organization, and continues to be today probably the only truly global grassroots organization. And so that, to me, is a
descriptive reality. But with that, of course, then comes certain questions of normativity and what gets included as Catholic and what doesn't. And of course, we have a magisterium to help us sort through all of those questions. There are, of course, some limits to diversity, but the idea that... We read Shusaku Endo's novel, *Silence*. And in the preface, he talks about Catholicism as a symphony where it's important to get notes being sounded by everyone throughout the world, right? That there's no culture that's excluded from it. Everybody has something to add to the symphony that is Catholicism. And I like that as an image. But one of the exercises that we do in the class is taking up certain questions of enculturation and trying to determine what's a good enculturation and what's a bad enculturation. Can you use rice cakes and sake to perform the Eucharist in Japan? The ordination of women, is that a proper enculturation? All of these kinds of questions. And I try to make them very aware that enculturation is not just a problem for other places. You know, we tend to think that we don't have culture, we’re just neutral and that other people have culture, but I give them examples of enculturation, of, you know, Jesus in American culture, including a great picture of Jesus teaching a little kid how to shoot a gun.

**MS:** Oh my God. Okay, well, some proprieties here.

**WC:** Right, yeah. So I don't know if that answers your question, but those are some of the things that I wrestle with.

**MS:** Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for being with us this afternoon. And you know, the work you do at the Center is just really wonderful, and so thank you for sharing it with us.

**WC:** Oh, my pleasure, Mat, and if I could return the compliment, what you do there at Holy Cross is invaluable.

**MS:** Thank you.