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"Kierkegaardian Incommensurability and Spiritual Dysphoria:
Analysis of a Confliction on the Campuses of Catholic Colleges and Universities"

Abstract:
Drawing on Kierkegaard's proposal that religious faith is incommensurable with a
rational understanding of actuality, I contribute to the contemporary debate between two
sides that articulate what it means for a university to be both truly modern and Catholic.
Observing that today's Catholic universities are no longer typically comprised of mostly
Catholic faculty or even mostly Catholic students, I articulate a new phenomenon on
Catholic campuses: spiritual dysphoria. I argue that this arises from the actual
conditions that are paradoxical in the way that Kierkegaard conceives of it.

I

A novel confliction[1] is emerging on the campuses of some religiously affiliated
colleges and universities: I call it "spiritual dysphoria," and argue that it is like gender
dysphoria. Spiritual dysphoria, as I conceive of it, is the distress experienced when there
is a conflict between the spirituality that an individual identifies with and wishes to
express, on the one hand, and the spirituality that the college or university identities with
and expects a particular expression of it, on the other. This confliction seems to arise
under certain conditions: for example, when a university identifies as Catholic and
Jesuit, and attempts to cultivate and express that identity on its campus while at the same
time embracing a commitment to diversity and inclusion which extends to those who do
not identify as either Catholic or Jesuit. I argue that the confliction or tension arising
under these conditions should be of no surprise. I also argue that it is extremely difficult
to find coherent solutions to this confliction that are amenable to the frameworks
underlying the leading models of diversity and inclusion. Drawing on two decades of
experience at a Catholic, Jesuit university, as both professor and administrator, I analyze
the conditions that give rise to this confliction, and call attention to problematic
connections between institutional rhetoric and practice, and individual belief and
expression. I conclude that Kierkegaard's notion of incommensurability in *Fear and
Trembling* makes sense of the origin of spiritual dysphoria; but as with all things
Kierkegaardian, it is difficult—very difficult—to see how there can be any kind of
resolution to such conditions.

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[1] The word "confliction" is used quite purposefully because of its flexible meaning. It
implies a conflict which can arise due either to opposing principles or principles that
appear to be in opposition but in fact are not. Given the topic I am focusing on, this
distinction becomes important, and makes a big difference with respect to how one might
address the confliction. My analysis proceeds accordingly.

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The occasion for thinking of this analogy is my reflection upon a personal acquaintance with someone who has experienced gender dysphoria for over a decade, and from the conversations we have had over those years. After coming to grips with this person's story of suffering, especially how the suffering arises out of a conflict between one's self-identity, on the one hand, and the dominant cultural default regarding gender norms, on the other, it struck a chord with me on a spiritual level. It struck me that the sort of conflict and deep discomfort associated with gender dysphoria is remarkably similar to the sort of deep spiritual conflict and discomfort that many people have reported to me, and that I myself have experienced, at Marquette University, a Catholic, Jesuit university. And it struck me that the conditions that give rise to gender dysphoria are remarkably similar to the conditions that allow spiritual dysphoria to arise.

For a fruitful discussion, some definitions are in order. Let us begin with the term "gender dysphoria" itself. Gender dysphoria is sometimes called "gender incongruence," and, until quite recently, was called "gender identity disorder."[2] For many decades, gender dysphoria was considered a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association.[3] Earlier this year, however, the World Health Organization removed "gender identity disorder" from its list of mental health diagnoses. It is now called "gender incongruence," and is now classified as "a condition related to sexual health." The World Health Organization defended this change in classification by explaining that "the classification of gender identity disorder as a mental disorder was inaccurate and stigmatized those [who experience] . . . gender incongruence."[4] Given this recent change in classification, along with the quickly changing social understanding of the issues involved, I want to emphasize that I am highly aware of the sensitivity with which this discussion must be conducted. Although I will be quoting a source that was published when gender dysphoria was conceived as a mental disorder, I am not maintaining that it is a mental disorder. The primary reason that I will be referring to this source is that it gives context and clarity to the discussion at hand, and is still largely recognized as authoritative.

The source in question is the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, released in 2013, by the American Psychiatric Association.[5] It gives the following summarized definition:
"Gender dysphoria involves a conflict between a person's physical or assigned gender and the gender with which he/she/they identify. People with gender dysphoria may be very uncomfortable with the gender they were assigned, sometimes described as being

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[2] For a sustained analysis of this history, see "Gender Incongruence / Gender Dysphoria and its Classification History," Titia F. Beek, Peggy T. Cohen-Kettenis, and Baudewiintie P.C. Kruekels, *International Review of Psychiatry* Vol. 28, Issue 1 (Feb. 2016): 5-12.
[3] See, for example, "Mental Health and Gender Dysphoria: A Review of the Literature," Dheine, Cecilia, Van Vlerken, Roy, Heylens, Gunter, and Arcelus, Jon, *International Review of Psychiatry* Vol. 28, Issue 1 (Feb. 2016): 44-57.
[4] Source: National Post, posted 30 May 2019. See https://nationalpost.com/news/world-health-organization-gender-identity-disorder (accessed 1 June 2019.
[5] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition [DSM-5] (Arlington, Virginia: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013).

uncomfortable with their body (particularly developments during puberty) or being uncomfortable with the expected roles of their assigned gender."[6]

In adolescents and adults, gender dysphoria is diagnosed in the following way:

"[It] involves a difference between one's experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender, and significant distress or problems functioning. It lasts at least six months and is shown by at least two of the following:

1. A marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and primary and/or secondary sex characteristics
2. A strong desire to be rid of one's primary and/or secondary sex characteristics
3. A strong desire for the primary and/or secondary sex characteristics of the other gender
4. A strong desire to be of the other gender
5. A strong desire to be treated as the other gender
6. A strong conviction that one has the typical feelings and reactions of the other gender."[7]

Given these introductory remarks on the nature of gender dysphoria, I wish to draw attention to some aspects that are relevant for this paper. First, the self-identity of the person involved is at odds with the identity that the community perceives the person to be. In particular, the person is deeply uncomfortable with, and highly anxious about, what the society or culture at large expects from her/him/them. The person's gender identity itself becomes a deeply distressing problem under these conditions; the way in which the person wants to express her/his/their identity becomes an obstacle to their flourishing in those circumstances. There is a way in which society at large expects a boy (or man) to look and act, and a way in which it expects a girl (or woman) to look and act; for a person experiencing gender dysphoria, one comes to grips with the disconnect between the way in which they see themselves (and want to express themselves), and the way in which society perceives them (and expects them to act). As a result, there is much suffering and distress involved for the person experiencing dysphoria, often in silence and isolation.

Gender dysphoria can get in the way of one's interaction with others, and can lead to alienation and rejection, even from close friends and family members. It can even lead to violence being perpetrated against them, in response to their expression of their gender identity—even rape and murder.[8] The possibility of rejection from family and friends,

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[6] https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria (accessed 5 August 2019).
[7] https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria (accessed 5 August 2019).
[8] See, for example, "Gender Nonconformity as a Target of Prejudice, Discrimination, and Violence Against LGB Individuals," by Allegra R. Gordon and Ilan H. Meyer, *Journal of LGBT Health Research*, Vol. 3, Issue 3 (2007): 55-71; see also (in that same journal issue) "A Study of Transgender Adults and Their Non-Transgender Siblings on

and of violence from strangers, hangs heavily over their heads, and takes a very heavy toll. Not uncommonly, persons experiencing gender dysphoria are led to try to find acceptance in a new community totally separated from the community in which they grew up. Such communities that accept them as they wish to express themselves are typically small, and thus have little power and influence over the broader community. Gender dysphoria can lead to a life in which there is little integration, and instead there is careful crafting of walled-off areas where one's own personal identity is hidden from others. For these reasons, it is no surprise at all that gender dysphoria can lead to a myriad of problems, not only at the personal level but also at the professional, economic, and social levels. Being able to flourish is a tall order for a person with gender dysphoria.

III

Allow me now to establish the analogy between gender and spiritual dysphoria. As with any analogy, it breaks down at some point, and I wish to avoid any misunderstandings or confusions. One element that makes the comparison apt is the importance of self-identity. For many of us, gender goes to the core of our understanding of our own self, and how we express our self; so too, for many of us, spirituality goes to the core of our own self-understanding and self-expression.   The expression of our selfhood implies that there is another to whom we relate. This is a second element crucial to understanding the analogy I am drawing.   The way in which we express ourselves to others establishes and defines the kind of relationships we enter into. These relations can be to other individuals or to groups. The way we express our self-identity can lead to relations in which we, as private individuals or as career professionals, either flourish and advance or become marginalized, ostracized, even victimized. What makes possible the flourishing of our self and our self-expression in our relationships to others are the fundamental social and cultural norms and structures in which we exist. Sometimes, these fundamental social and cultural norms do not have clearly defined parameters, or at least are not recognized except by a few. Sometimes these fundamental norms and structures themselves pose obstacles to flourishing.

For instance, with respect to gender dysphoria one thing that makes possible the condition of distress is a cultural default in which gender is conceived of as binary. A binary conception of gender is one in which gender is classified as either male or female. Many of our institutions explicitly employ this binary conception. For instance, a birth certificate indicates that a baby is either male or female—there is no other category, and the default framework seems to presuppose that there are not degrees to either male-hood or female-hood. However, many persons experience gender as non-binary.[9] Thus, the

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Demographic Characteristics, Social Support, and Experiences of Violence," by Rhonda J. Factor and Esther D. Rothblum, pp. 11-30. See also "Effects of Violence on Transgender People," by Rylan J. Teta *et al*, *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, Vol. 43, Issue 5 (2012): 452-459.

[9] See, for example, "Bisexual, Pansexual, Queer: Non-binary Identities and the Sexual Borderlands," by April Scarlette Callis, in *Sexualities* Vol. 17, Issue 1-2 (2014): 63-80.

cultural default conception of gender, which is binary, along with the default cultural norms of gender expression, create the conditions for dysphoria to arise. Not surprisingly, it is very difficult for a person who suffers from gender dysphoria to flourish in such conditions.

So, the fundamental norms and structures of our culture play key roles in creating the conditions in which is it possible to experience dysphoria. Now that this has been established, focus can be given to spiritual dysphoria. Spiritual dysphoria, as indicated previously, is the deep unease and distress an individual experiences when the person's spiritual identity, and the expression thereof, conflicts with the cultural norms and parameters of the community's understanding of spiritual identity.

As indicated at the outset of this paper, I maintain that spiritual dysphoria arises on the campuses of many religiously affiliated colleges and universities; but I will restrict my discussion to a community that identifies itself as Roman Catholic and Jesuit—which is what Marquette University, my own institution, proudly identifies itself to be. For a university to be Roman Catholic, it must have an official relation to the Catholic Church in Rome that is recognized as such. The Church's cannon law clearly lays out the conditions under which a university's identity is aligned with the identity of the church and when it is not.[10] It is the responsibility of the university to establish that its identity as a university is Catholic.[11] It is a very complicated story that properly explains the relevant details of what constitutes the identity of a Catholic university, but suffice it to say that the rise of secularism in the mid to late 20th Century, and the Church's attempt to face this sort of challenge, especially in the form of Vatican II, provides much of the backdrop. For the sake of clarity, yet without going too far into the historical details, a few important issues will be addressed here relevant for this essay. The analysis of these issues and events will help to explain what gave rise to the conditions that makes it possible for spiritual dysphoria to emerge.

For the past fifty years on the campuses of Catholic universities and colleges, there has been a dispute regarding how the Catholic identity of the school can be authentically lived out and expressed in an age in which secularism has become the cultural default.[12]

See also, "Non-binary or Genderqueer Genders," by Christina Richards, in *International Review of Psychiatry* Vol. 28, Issue 1 (Feb. 2016): 95-102.

[10] For the relevant portion from the *Code of Canon Law*, see http://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib3-cann793-821_en.html#CHAPTER_I. (accessed 5 August 2019).

[11] For a sustained discussion of these issues, see "'Catholic' as Descriptive of a University: A Canonical Perspective," by Robert J. Kaslyn, in *American Catholic Higher Education in the 21st Century: Critical Challenges*, edited by Robert R. Newton (Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts: Linden Lane Press at Boston College, 2015), p. 61-87.

[12] The literature on this topic is immense. For a small sample of relevant books, see *Handbook of Research on Catholic Higher Education*, edited by Thomas C. Hunt, Ellis A. Joseph, Ronald J. Nuzzi, and John C. Geiger (Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2003); *Handbook of Research on Catholic Education*, edited by

Ever since the publication of the "Land O'Lakes Statement"[13] in 1967—with its call for academic freedom and autonomy from Church oversight—and the response from the Church nearly a quarter century later in the form of the apostolic constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae*[14] in 1990—with its response that the makeup of a Catholic university must be constituted of mostly Catholics,[15] and that bishops have great influence in determining over whether or not a university's identity is truly Catholic[16]— battles have waged over what it means to for an institution of higher education to be both truly a modern university and truly Catholic in a post-Vatican II world.

Not uncommonly, the literature on this issue is averse to an actual engagement with the other side; instead of dialogue, one finds mostly different forms of protest. Philip Gleason's *Contending with Modernity* set the tone for what was to come, painting a bleak picture, from a conservative perspective, of the future of Catholic higher education.[17] John C. Haughey's book entitled, *Where is Knowing Going?*[18] took the discussion in a practical direction. He suggested the importance of facing the facts that more and more faculty, students, and administrators at Catholic universities have little or no connection to the Catholic tradition. The influence of these two books, at least in the realm of Catholic higher education, is hard to overstate. Over the last decade and more, many Catholic colleges and universities have had extended discussions of these books that included faculty, staff, and administrators from the highest levels. At Marquette

Thomas C. Hunt, Ellis A. Joseph, and Ronald J. Nuzzi (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001); *Negotiating Identity: Catholic Higher Education Since 1960*, by Allice Gallin (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); *Independence and a New Partnership in Catholic Higher Education*, by Alice Gallin (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); *From Backwater to Mainstream*, by Andrew M. Greeley (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969).

[13] The document itself can be found in Alice Gallin's book entitled *American Catholic Higher Education: Essential Documents*, 1967-1990 (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), p. 7-12. For an online version of the document, see https://cushwa.nd.edu/assets/245340/landolakesstatement.pdf (accessed 5 August 2019).

[14] The document itself can be found in Alice Gallin's book entitled *American Catholic Higher Education: Essential Documents*, 1967-1990 (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), p. 413-437. For an online version of the document, see http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html (accessed 5 August 2019).

[15] See *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, Part II, Article 4, paragraph 4.

[16] See *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, Part I, A, 3, 28.

[17] See Gleason, Philip, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Gleason's discussion of the state of higher education received a great amount of attention from scholars concerned about Catholic higher education. His book was the basis of a faculty discussion group that I was a part of during my pre-tenure days at Marquette University, and served to draw out passions on all sides of the debate.

[18] See John C. Haughey's book entitled, *Where is Knowing Going? The Horizons of the Knowing Subject* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009).

University, the entire philosophy and theology departments had a discussion of these books with the president, provost, and all significant administrators also in attendance. So many discussion and debates on the issue of Catholic identity were held on the campuses of Catholic Jesuit Universities and Colleges, that it led the 28 U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities and the U.S. Jesuit Provincials to publish a self-evaluation assessment tool entitled "Some Characteristics of Jesuit Colleges and Universities" in 2012.[19] Even the most recent edition (2019) of *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*[20] is focused on the seemingly impossible task facing Catholic higher education: fulfilling their Catholic missions in a secular age.[21]

On the one hand, a Catholic university is an extension of the Catholic Church; as such it plays an explicit role in the salvation of humanity.[22] Thus, its role is not only

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[19] See https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55d1dd88e4b0dee65a6594f0/t/56043648e4b0eddaf bc448b4/1443116616873/Characteristics+FINAL+Dec+20122.pdf (accessed 5 August 2019).

[20] *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, No. 55 (Spring 2019).

[21] For a remarkably thorough discussion of what is (and can be meant by) a secular age, see Charles Taylor's, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). Other helpful sources on the nature, meaning, and significance of secularization include the following: *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, edited by Michael Warner, Jonathan Van Antwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010); *A Short History of Secularism*, by Graeme Smith (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co., Ltd., 2008); *Secularism: Volume I, Defining Secularization: The Secular in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, edited by Bryan S. Turner (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Inc., 2010). For a series of essays on how secularism has effected higher education in general, see *The Secularization of the Academy*, edited by George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). For a somewhat contrary view on the rise of secularism, see *The Desecularizasion of the World*, edited by Peter L. Berger (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999). For a discussion of the tension between meeting the expectations of both sides, see *Uneasy Partners: The College and the Church*, by Merrimon Cunninggim (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.

[22] That this is so is made explicitly clear in *Gravissimum Educationis*. In the introduction to that work, the following is stated: "To fulfill the mandate she has received from her divine founder of proclaiming the mystery of salvation to all men and of restoring all things in Christ, Holy Mother the Church must be concerned with the whole of man's life, even the secular part of it insofar as it has a bearing on his heavenly calling. Therefore, she has a role in the progress and development of education. Hence this sacred synod declares certain fundamental principles of Christian education especially in schools." See http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html (accessed 5 August 2019).

inherently spiritual, but it specifically presupposes the spirituality of the Catholic Church. Thus, to be a Catholic university, according to the Catholic Church, its spirituality must be opposed to conceptions of spirituality that entail the falsity of the Catholic conception or which are inconsistent with it. This entails that the expression of a spirituality that is at odds with the expression of spirituality approved of by the Catholic Church is problematic. It is for this reason that the Catholic Church officially requires its universities to have a majority number of Catholics in all its various departments and in leadership roles.[23] On the other hand, in the western hemisphere, it is a cultural expectation that a university be an autonomous entity, with academic freedom to oppose any world-view. Moreover, in the west, a multicultural conception of the good is presupposed, with no worldview or spiritual tradition beginning with a default privileged position that cannot be removed from its privileged position. (No doubt every culture has a default worldview or tradition, but it is up for debate in the west, but they can be replaced by other competing conceptions, unlike the cultural default for the Catholic Church.) In addition, the west is becoming more and more secular, and so the Catholic conception of education, which maintains an essential connection between learning and spirituality, is seen as highly dubious.[24] Moreover, according to the Catholic Church, one is either a member of the Church, that is to say, one is either Catholic, or one is not; one is either in communion with the Church or one is not. One might say that, according to the Church, being Catholic is a binary thing: one either is one, or is not. To be Catholic, one must believe certain things and engage in certain forms of expression; if one does not believe those things or engage in those forms of expression, one is not Catholic—at least not from the perspective of the Roman Catholic Church.[25]

With these issues brought to the fore, we can now outline the conditions under which spiritual dysphoria arises. On the campuses of Catholic, Jesuit universities, a cultural identity is presupposed—one in which an education is an extension of a spiritual dimension of life, and in which the purpose of education is to improve the human community and to glorify God. (This is explicitly stated in Marquette University's mission statement: the university's mission is to make the world a better place and to glorify God.) A Catholic university must live out its mission, and must hire people who agree with its mission; this entails that a Catholic conception of spirituality plays a crucial role in which the education model is expressed (for example, in the curriculum

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[23] *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, Part II, article 4, paragraph 4. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html (accessed 5 August 2019).

[24] For a brief discussion in support of the claim I am making here, see *A Twentieth-Century Collision: American Intellectual Culture and Pope John Paul II's Idea of a University*, by Peter M. Collins (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 2010).

[25] For further clarification of this matter, see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, available online at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM (accessed 10 September 2019).

choices).[26] But how many highly-qualified academics will agree with a mission like that, or go along with what it entails? Not many, given that most highly qualified academics are not Catholic, let alone religious. Many academics are either atheists or agnostics who could not in good faith assent to such a mission statement or to all that it fully entails.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of leading administrators recognized that these conditions are not amenable for Catholic, Jesuit universities to remain in business.[27] They recognized that meeting the requirements of the Catholic Church and the cultural requirements of the West demanded a compromise. So, these administrators made compromises, and they began to speak in a coded language that sounded like what the Church would approve of, but they acted in a way that met the cultural approval of the West. They began to hire more and more non-Catholics, to the point where today most of the faculty are no longer Catholic. And they put into positions of leadership more and more people who were not Catholic. The administrators who have taken steps to create these conditions often justify their actions by appealing to the secular academic standards prevailing in the West, including the demands of accreditation agencies and challenging market conditions. But they only speak candidly of such matters behind closed doors, and often in language that smacks of double-speak.

Their intentions were doubtless to reduce the stigma associated with a Catholic approach to education, or to increase its acceptance, in what is now a secular age. I argue that the actions of these administrators have created the conditions under which spiritual dysphoria cannot help but arise. The cultural default on campus is officially Catholic; but any expression of that Catholic identity that excludes or marginalizes others is found to be at odds with its Guiding Values.[28] But, of course, a Catholic expression of spirituality in academia will make a Hindu or Buddhist feel a kind of unease, distress, and anxiety that is quite pronounced, especially if they are devout in their identity as a Hindu or Buddhist. On the other hand, someone who is an agnostic or atheist will no doubt feel like they have to conform (at least to some extent) to the mission statement of the Catholic university in question, especially if that university states explicitly in their job advertisement that the qualified candidates must be able to contribute to the mission statement of the school—when the mission statement explicitly affirms a commitment to an educational model that finds its highest and ultimate expression in giving glory to God. There is simply no way that such people can live out their authentic spirituality on a campus that officially is at odds with, and thus institutionally rejects, agnosticism and atheism. The agnostic or atheist will have to quell their desire to authentically express their spirituality; or, to the extent that they do not quell it, their expression may very well threaten the authentically Catholic identity of the school, and thus undermine the standing of the school in the eyes of the Church in Rome.

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[26] See, for example, Marquette University's mission statement; available online at https://www.marquette.edu/leadership/values.php (accessed 5 August 2019).
[27] This started with the "Land O'Lakes Statement" of 1967, but has continued in a variety of ways ever since.
[28] See https://www.marquette.edu/leadership/values.php (accessed 5 August 2019).

But it also works the other way. For example, in some departments at Marquette University wherein atheists hold the majority, there are some atheists who have a disdain, even a contempt, for the Catholic Church. In this environment, a culture has been established in which Catholics who try to authentically live out (or express) their Catholic spirituality in the classroom or in their research will sometimes find themselves on only the unimportant committees, and often without much power in their departments. So, these Catholics, due to their deep unease and fear of both personal and professional retribution, will feel pressured to not fully express their spiritual identity.[29] This is perhaps most pronounced with respect to professors whose research projects focus on issues involving Catholic identity in higher education; for the research produced by such projects are likely to be published in so-called second- or even third-tiered journals, not at so-called first rate journals, which are typically secular in nature, which are unlikely to consider such research worthy of publication. At Marquette University, publishing in such so-called second- and third-tiered journals results in one's research counting for less, which leads to less pay and less esteem within the department and the university at large.[30]

Perhaps those who are not on the campuses of Catholic, Jesuit campuses will be surprised that spiritual dysphoria arises for both Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Perhaps the recognition of these conditions, on the other hand, will lead to a solution that is difficult to discern. Indeed, it is difficult to see how Catholic, Jesuit universities can meet both the requirements of the Catholic Church, which defines what it means to be Catholic, on the one hand, and the requirements of the increasingly secular west that demands a variety of conceptions of the good and spiritual expression.[31]

IV

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[29] The dysphoria extends even to personal communications between Catholic professors when they are on campus. At Marquette University, the Title IX online training that all professors must take maintains the following: that if two professors were to be discussing, in the office of one of the professors, the official position of the Catholic Church, in which homosexuality is considered sinful, and if another person walks by, hears their conversation and becomes offended as a result of hearing that conversation, then those two Catholic professors are in violation of Title IX, and thus put the university in legal trouble. So, it is not just at the professional level that Catholic professors must be on guard, but at the personal level as well.

[30] For a related discussion of the way in which the leading administrators of Catholic institutions of higher education are motivated more by the goal of trying to rise in the school rankings of the *U.S. News and World Report* or *The Princeton Review* than they are by strengthening their schools' Catholic identity, see *Status Envy: The Politics of Catholic Higher Education*, by Anne Hendershott (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009).

[31] For a discussion of how Jesuit thinkers have recently addressed some possible solutions, see *Jesuit Postmodern: Scholarship, Vocation, and Identity in the 21st Century*, edited by Francis X. Clooney, S.J. (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2006).

One helpful (and novel) way of analyzing dysphoria is to utilize the concept of incommensurability that Søren Kierkegaard puts forth in his analysis of faith in *Fear and Trembling*.[32] Incommensurability is the quality or state of being incommensurable, which means "that [which] cannot be measured or compared by the same standard or measure; without a common standard of measure."[33] Given the previous analysis of dysphoria (both gender and spiritual), incommensurability seems especially promising to account for the *origin* of the dysphoria. It is promising, however, only in a Kierkegaardian sense precisely because the way in which it accounts for dysphoria's origin is due to conditions that are essentially paradoxical.

Let us begin by summarizing how Kierkegaard's appeal to incommensurability is relevant to the matter at hand. One of the main themes in *Fear and Trembling* is a sustained analysis (not an explanation) of the way in which Abraham, as the father of faith, can be coherently seen as admirable (as opposed to monstrous) for how he conducted himself in the *Akedah*.[34] According to Kierkegaard, the traditional and leading views of his time are all mistaken. On the one hand, Abraham is not admirable according to the philosophical framework of his time because the ethical principles by which Abraham acted must be conceived of as universal; but any attempt to universalize what Abraham did will result in not an ethical *admiration*, but ethical *condemnation* of Abraham.[35] Thus, Kierkegaard argues, according to a philosophical analysis of the *Akedah*, Abraham is a monster; or as Kierkegaard is wont to say, "Abraham is lost."[36] On the other hand, the traditional religious interpretation is mistaken because although it is true that Abraham "was willing to offer [God] the best,"[37] and that he withheld nothing from God, if anyone were to do what Abraham did, he would be lambasted for being a moral monster.[38] Yet, as Kierkegaard observes, the preacher tells everyone to be like Abraham; but anyone who were to attempt to sacrifice one's own son would be arrested and cast out of the community.[39]

Given these failures to make sense of Abraham's greatness (in an admirable sense, not a monstrous sense), Kierkegaard proposes the following: Abraham's greatness is due to an incommensurability between the standards by which things are measured by God (in his kingdom or realm) and the standards by which things are measured by human beings (on

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[32] See *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*, edited and translated by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 34, 39, 40, 55, 68, 69, 111. Henceforth in the footnotes my references to this work will appear as *Fear and Trembling*, followed by the page number.
[33] *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, deluxe second edition (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 923.
[34] *Fear and Trembling*, p. 15-23, 60.
[35] *Fear and Trembling*, p. 54-61.
[36] *Fear and Trembling*, p. 113.
[37] *Fear and Trembling*, p. 28.
[38] *Fear and Trembling*, p. 11, 76, 77.
[39] *Fear and Trembling*, p. 28, 29.

earth).[40] In other words, to say that "Abraham is justified by faith," means that Abraham is justified because he entered into a relationship with the divine; but any attempt he makes to express that faith on earth (in a manner that makes it understood on a universal philosophical framework) must fail. As Kierkegaard puts it, Abraham entered into "an absolute relation to the absolute"[41] (that is, he entered into a relationship with the divine), and precisely because of that, he was unable to adequately express this relation to any other human being on earth. That is why Abraham could not disclose his intentions to Sarah, Eliezer, or Isaac.[42] No matter how he was to try to express himself, whether by word or by deed, he would not be able to be understood by any human being. As Kierkegaard puts it, Abraham must "remain silent,"[43] because he is, in a very real sense, shut-up within himself, unable to speak in a way that makes him understandable to others. His faith in the divine, and his expression of it, is incommensurable, Kierkegaard maintains, with "the whole of actuality."[44] For this reason, Abraham must live incognito, living a life in which what is most essential to him must be hidden[45] from those he lives among—even his closest family members.

Let us now see how this Kierkegaardian analysis is relevant for the topic of this paper. Recall that individuals who experience dysphoria are deeply uncomfortable with what the society or culture at large expects from them. The person experiences suffering that arises out of a conflict between one's self-identity and the dominant cultural default regarding norms. Kierkegaard maintains that Abraham experiences a kind of distress, paradox, and anxiety the likes of which most human beings have never even imagined. The analogy I am drawing suggests that the people who experience both gender and spiritual dysphoria experience, in like manner, a very deep kind of distress and anxiety. I conclude my essay with the assertion that what gives rise to this phenomenon of dysphoria on the campuses of Catholic, Jesuit universities is a set of conditions that cultivate the absurd because of the commitments and policies the administrators of these schools have embraced.

V

Precisely because of the conflicts regarding what it means for Catholic universities to be both truly Catholic and truly modern, as discussed previously in section three, administrators have enacted policies and embraced principles that attempt to construct a community in which all people are welcome and celebrated, regardless of their faith commitments, gender identity, or worldview. In the attempt to meet the market conditions of the west in the early twenty-first century, as well as the requirements of the Catholic Church, mission statements were formed that articulated this community, and groups of administrators held long retreats so as to formulate the guiding

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[40] *Fear and Trembling*, p. 34, 111, 112.
[41] *Fear and Trembling*, p. 62, 93.
[42] *Fear and Trembling*, p. 82ff.
[43] *Fear and Trembling*, p. 87, 88, 113.
[44] *Fear and Trembling*, p. 34, 111, 112.
[45] *Fear and Trembling*, p. 82-99.

values by which the community would live. But these conditions are inherently paradoxical. Allow me to illustrate this by appealing to the mission statement of Marquette University, and to the guiding values it abides by. Marquette's mission statement indicates that its educational mission begins and ends with God—more specifically, its mission is to glorify God.[46] It also indicates, under the heading "Faith" that "As a Catholic university, we are committed to the unfettered pursuit of truth under the mutually illuminating powers of human intelligence and Christian faith. Precisely because Catholicism at its best seeks to be inclusive, we are open to all who share our mission and seek the truth about God and the world, and we are firmly committed to academic freedom as the necessary precondition for that search. We welcome and benefit enormously from the diversity of seekers within our ranks, even as we freely choose and celebrate our own Catholic identity." My claim is that these commitments create conditions under which the absurd and paradox cannot but help to arise.

On the one hand, Marquette University identifies as university whose reason for existing is to glorify God. It seeks knowledge under the framework in which both human reason and divine revelation are necessary to arrive at the truth. Yet it welcomes those who reject this conception of how the truth is arrived at, and insists that it benefits enormously from them. How can atheists, which Marquette welcomes, self-identify with a university that holds the glory of God as its end? It is clear that atheists cannot accept the view that Christian revelation is an essential part of the search for truth. So how, exactly, is the university going to benefit at all, let alone enormously, from conditions under which atheists are an essential part of the Christian community? It becomes even less apparent how the Catholic university, which claims that God and divine revelation are essential in the search for truth, will benefit when there are not just a few atheists on campus, but so many that they make up nearly half of the university community.[47] That, I suggest, is the epitome of what Kierkegaard would recognize as an illustration of conditions under which the absurd and the paradoxical cannot help but arise.[48]

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[46] "Marquette University is a Catholic, Jesuit university dedicated to serving God by serving our students and contributing to the advancement of knowledge. . . . All this we pursue for the greater glory of God and the common benefit of the human community." See Marquette University's mission statement: https://www.marquette.edu/leadership/values.php (accessed 5 August 2019).

[47] For a thorough analysis of how Catholic institutions of higher education might make progress on issues related to mission and Catholic identity, see *Revisioning Mission: The Future of Catholic Higher Education*, by John Richard Wilcox with Jennifer Anne Lindholm and Suzanne Dale Wilcox (North Charleston, South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2013).

[48] For some models of how religious institutions of higher education, both Catholic and non-Catholic, might find success in the future, see *Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Success in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Richard T. Hughes and William B. Adrian (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

The difference here, and where the appeal to Kierkegaard breaks down, is that atheists reject the standard that Christians appeal to, and Christians reject the atheistic standard in so far as they see atheists as leaving out something crucial—namely, God and God's revelation. Instead of appealing to incommensurability, it seems more apt (in my view at least) to say that these two worldviews are inconsistent. However, administrators at Catholic, Jesuit universities such as Marquette act and speak in such a way that they insist that the two worldviews are not inconsistent. As such, it appears that they think their line of reasoning is more in line with what Kierkegaard refers to when he talks about the incommensurability of faith with "the whole of actuality."

If this is analysis is correct, it follows that various members of the community will always be in a very difficult position, for they will inevitably feel a deep, fundamental discontent were they to express their deeply held identities. They will feel that the expression of their identity is not actualizable under the conditions in which they exist. They must, instead, pay close attention to the apparent (but not actual) contradiction (at least according to the community's leaders) between what they most closely identify with, on the one hand, and what the university's administrators officially hold that the university identifies with, on the other. Just as Abraham's existence was inherently difficult, so, too, is existence for those of us on the campuses of Catholic, Jesuit universities such as Marquette University. Just as Abraham understood that his identity could not be adequately expressed to his community, and therefore did not even attempt to do so without inevitably being mistaken for a monster, so is the plight of those who exist on the campuses of Catholic, Jesuit universities such as Marquette University. Living this way is, as one might imagine, quite difficult.

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