

## “Catholic Universities Can Be the Salvation of Pluralism on American Campuses”

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America's leading research universities call for diversity in everything except what they actually do: creating and disseminating knowledge. As they work to insure that their faculties and student bodies are inclusive, they foster ways of conducting scholarship that are exclusive. From the humanities to the social sciences, advancing theory and refining methodology are considered to be the only legitimate ways of treating one's subject. Belletrists in English departments and narrative storytellers in history departments are as irrelevant to the way contemporary academics define their vocation as old-fashioned institutionalists are in economics, public intellectuals in sociology, or historians of political philosophy in political science. Aping the sciences, humanists and social scientists at our top research universities believe that those not at the "cutting edge" of their disciplines have as much standing as creationists would in a biology department.

One exception exists: religious institutions, especially Roman Catholic colleges and universities. Philosophy departments at Catholic institutions continue to be interested in the great ideas of Western philosophy and thus remain relatively untouched by the emphasis in the rest of their discipline on analytic methods and the clarification of scientific concepts. Humanities departments that are concerned with religious themes in poetry, novels, and works of art and music avoid today's penchant for treating those genres as forms of "cultural production"--as if the actual texts were irrelevant to the questions we have about them. And political-science departments in many Catholic colleges and universities pay more attention to political theory, and to political institutions in the real world, than do political-science departments in secular universities--often, in the process, resisting the trend toward empirical methods and formal theorizing.



Catholic colleges and universities thus provide pluralism in our system of higher education: As long as they are vibrant, students and faculty members who appreciate a different kind of education from that offered in the dominant research universities have a place to turn.

That means that a current controversy within Catholic education could have a serious impact on all of American higher education. We would all do well to pay attention.

To flourish, pluralism requires that Catholic institutions retain a commitment to their faith, or else they will become indistinguishable from all other colleges and universities. But they must also remain somewhat independent of their faith, or else they will simply teach dogma rather than examine first principles. For years, religious traditionalists have worried that American Catholic universities are stumbling in their balancing act by becoming too secular. But now, a new threat to their pluralism comes from the other direction.

A heated debate between American bishops and Catholic educators has been raging for the past few months over guidelines that the bishops proposed last November to carry out an important papal document. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* was issued by Pope John Paul II in 1990: An apostolic constitution on Catholic higher education, it instructed Catholic colleges and universities around the world to reaffirm their Catholic identity. A response in November 1996 from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on how to put the document into effect in the United States was returned by the Vatican with instructions to pay more attention to Canon 812 of the Code of Canon Law, dealing with how theology should be taught in Catholic institutions of higher learning. That, in turn, produced the recent draft guidelines from the bishops.

According to the draft, trustees of Catholic colleges should, "as much as possible," be faithful Catholics. The university, moreover, "should recruit and appoint faithful Catholics so that, as much as possible, those committed to the witness of the faith will constitute a majority of the faculty." The bishops also noted that "integrity of doctrine and good character" are expected of all faculty members, especially those in theology. "When these qualities are found to be lacking," they said, "the university statutes are to specify the



competent authorities and the process to be followed to remedy the situation." Finally, "Catholic teaching should have a place, appropriate to the subject matter, in the various departments taught in the university." Colleges have until May to respond, after which the bishops will vote on the document.

Whatever the outcome, the fact that the issue has arisen in the way it has suggests uneasiness in the Vatican over the extent to which leading Catholic universities have strayed from their roots. It has also caused considerable consternation in the world of American Catholic higher education. An article in the Jesuit magazine *America* called the latest guidelines "unworkable and dangerous." The Rev. J. Donald Monan, chancellor of Boston College, and the Rev. Edward A. Malloy, president of the University of Notre Dame, found the document "positively dangerous" to Catholic institutions of higher education and warned of "havoc" if it were adopted. One prominent Catholic historian recently told me: "At times, some people in the Vatican remind me of the House Republicans: obsessive, out of touch with reality, and prone to shooting themselves in the foot."

I believe, as they consider their responses to *Ex corde*, that academics at Catholic colleges and universities have three broad options. Call them rejectionism, parallelism, and opportunism.

The sociologist Max Weber noted the propensity of some religious movements to reject the world around them in favor of doctrinal purity. *Ex corde* gives Catholics who believe that their institutions of higher learning have accommodated themselves too much to the modern world an opportunity to call for rejectionism and to advocate breaking institutional ties with the secular culture by, for example, renouncing federal funds. Indeed, if put into effect, the draft guidelines of the U.S. bishops would place Catholic colleges and universities in conflict with existing U.S. law. Giving preference to the hiring of Catholics, for example, could run afoul of recent rulings by U.S. courts striking down affirmative-action programs that favor specific groups.

Furthermore, as purely religious institutions, Catholic universities could find themselves in violation of the principle of separation of church and state if they use federal funds for



work-study programs or to support faculty research. Some institutions may, indeed, opt for refusing government money and other outside help--but the largest and most successful Catholic universities are too much a part of the modern world to leave it easily behind.

Those outside the faith, too, would pay a price if Catholic institutions were to take a rejectionist stance: the loss of a dialogue with those institutions. American history is replete with examples of hostility toward Catholicism, and rejectionism on the part of Catholic educators would only feed the prejudices of those persuaded that Catholic teachings could be safely ignored. That, in turn, would relieve everyone of the need to engage Catholic moral teachings on issues including abortion, capital punishment, social justice, and global peace.

A second possible response to the situation in which Catholic colleges and universities find themselves is to encourage parallelism. By parallelism, I mean the existence of more than one academic subculture within a national system of higher education, a system structured in such a way that the various subcultures would have little in common with each other and would instead operate on parallel tracks.

Parallelism is popular among those scholars who are religious believers and who see in the rise of postmodernism a potential ally with their commitments of faith. If the academy holds that there is no one road to the truth, parallelists say, then just as we acknowledge feminist or African-American ways of knowing, so we can also make room for Christian ways of knowing. Religious scholars already skeptical of the Enlightenment can only take heart when they see reason and rationality attacked--even if the attackers themselves may be leftists, possibly atheists. Parallelism offers Catholic colleges and universities a way to be in, but not of, America's system of higher education.

By suggesting that theologians at Catholic universities should seek a mandate from the church, *Ex corde* suggests one form of parallelism: Catholic doctrine would be taught at religious institutions in theology departments that would be held to recognizably different standards from those of other departments. But academic life is already sectarian enough: Rational-choice theorists in the social sciences feel that only they can judge the qualifications of other rational-choice theorists. Feminists, postmodernists, Marxists, and those who follow



every other esoteric approach to knowledge take the same exclusionary stance. Each of those subcultures has its own journals, hierarchies of prestige, and career patterns. Under parallelism, Catholic higher learning would survive as its own subculture, one that does not reject the secular world but instead tries to mimic it--on Catholic terms.

And that is the problem. Parallelism does not confront the sectarianism that flourishes in the absence of pluralism: It simply adds to it. Secular institutions are committed in theory to pluralism, but rarely practice it. Religious institutions, by contrast, are not pluralistic in theory, but have been forced by circumstances to practice it in many of their departments. If Catholic education is understood to have more to do with being Catholic than with being engaged in a broader educational effort, the academic vocation at Catholic colleges and universities would suffer. It would become more a subculture within an alien system of learning than an integral part of that system.

I would argue that the third possible response to *Ex corde* is best: Catholic colleges and universities ought to opt for opportunism and develop even further the pluralism they possess.

In theory, America's tradition of separation of church and state ought to have led religious institutions to a withdrawal from society, and promoting land-grant universities--another great tradition in the United States--ought to have led secular institutions to an engagement and involvement with the social problems of the day. Yet, in some ways, the reverse has taken place. Big Ten universities, emphasizing a highly professional and scientific model of academic success, prize detachment, while religious institutions, needing to define for themselves a place in secular society, are constantly reworking mission statements in an effort to emphasize their relevance to the society around them.

We all would suffer if Catholic universities were to forsake the opportunity to promote pluralism, for secular institutions have much to learn from the current soul-searching among religious institutions. Thirty years ago, American colleges and universities viewed themselves as liberal defenders of academic freedom and looked with suspicion on Catholic universities as propagators of dogma: some scholars, such as the philosopher Sidney Hook, denied that



Catholic universities could adhere to principles of academic freedom at all. But having won the battle for liberal ways of learning, the research universities, in particular, found themselves relying on their own dogmas, rarely questioning their commitment to graduate education, their preference for particular kinds of research, and their habit of dividing themselves into departments.

I am not one of those critics prone to find fault with the modern research university, but I do think that it needs to be challenged by institutions whose priorities might be different. Catholic colleges and universities have kept alive a classically based, intellectually rigorous commitment to general education in the face of one educational fad after another. Secular universities need to have that model before them as they wrestle with the question of what they should be doing.

We have seen what can happen to secular universities when pluralism goes out the door. Lacking diverse viewpoints and approaches, they encourage scholarship that is seemingly daring yet bloodless, unorthodox yet thoroughly predictable, and politically motivated without any political content. Historically, religious scholars, distrustful of the secular world around them, also have failed to benefit from exposure to criticism that comes from discomfiting and sometimes unwanted sources. *Ex corde*, in raising anew the question of how faith and knowledge interact, has given Catholic institutions the opportunity to put secular institutions to shame-but only if the Catholic institutions refuse to forsake the mantle of pluralism that secular institutions have dropped.

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