“Just Say No”

BY PETER STEINFELS

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Two months ago I found myself engaged in one of those embarrassing and guilt-producing activities that I am sure most of you are familiar with--I was cleaning off my desk. There I discovered under the debris a letter from a sociologist. It was accompanied by a study entitled "Does Being a 'Church-related' College Make Any Difference?" Given the fact that I had agreed to discuss related topics this fall, first at Seton Hall University and now here at Boston College, I was both astonished at this discovery and intrigued. The sociologist had compared courses and requirements in three types of liberal-arts colleges--Presbyterian, evangelical and religiously unaffiliated. He had set out to test the claim, frequently highlighted by the Presbyterian schools, that although, unlike evangelical schools, they might no longer insist on transmitting denominational doctrine, they nonetheless emphasized, in their courses and campus life, a concern for values, for moral and religious reflection, and for ethical responsibility to the larger community.

But the study showed something different. Southern Presbyterian schools still required some explicitly religious courses, such as ones on the Bible. But otherwise the Presbyterian-affiliated colleges were no more likely than the religiously unaffiliated to require or offer either religion courses or non-religious values courses dealing with contemporary moral issues, from medical ethics to environmental equity. It was, the author concluded, "a stark refutation of the frequent claim that 'we may no longer emphasize religion, but we do emphasize values."

The letter accompanying this study referred to something I had written on Catholic higher education. My correspondent said, "The question that you raised interests and at times obsesses me: i.e., whether a college can achieve academic freedom, while at the same time encouraging religious faith as a serious personal and intellectual option (or, to put it a
different way, whether there is a middle ground in higher education between a coercive religiosity and complete secularization)."

The letter, I should add, contained an invitation to speak at the author’s Midwestern college. Unfortunately, it was dated March 29, 1993.

I think this study and its author’s outlook are part of a pattern, and not just the pattern of newspaper reporters to have sinfully disorganized desks and minds that are not much better. It is a pattern of reevaluation that extends across religious groups. It is a demand for honesty and a pattern of skepticism toward well-intentioned educational and religious rhetoric that has often obscured fundamental shifts in purpose and policy. It is a pattern of dissatisfaction with the status quo on campuses generally. And it is a growing realization that genuine pluralism requires not just putting a lot of very different people into rough proximity to one another but also maintaining institutions that keep alive and pertinent, and in real conversation, all our dense heritages of belief and memory.

In 1990, as religion correspondent for *The New York Times*, I took up this question of how universities could maintain their religious identities and also meet the highest standards of scholarly excellence and academic freedom.

I was interested in Southern Baptist Baylor and Methodist Emory and Lutheran Valparaiso and Mormon Brigham Young and Jewish Yeshiva. But I was especially interested in Catholic institutions. I was myself a grateful product of them, and in any case they were the largest, most impressive family of schools and the ones where the most dramatic changes were under way. The ultimate question, of course, was whether any of these schools could find a path other than what the historian Richard Hofstadter once called "the oldest and longest sustained" theme in the history of American higher education, "the drift toward secularism."

It was that apparently inexorable dirge that had left many of the nation’s greatest universities with somewhat anachronistic chapels, a few vestigial ceremonies during graduation week, and here and there puzzling Latin inscriptions—the meager remnants of the deep religious faith and convictions that had animated their founders and supporters a century or so earlier.
What I discovered in my reporting and interviews was the difficulty that many Catholic colleges and universities were encountering in even discussing the issue. There was confusion and euphemism and evasion. There were smoldering resentments from old battles between lay faculty members and sponsoring religious orders. There were hypersensitivities and terrible fears that certain topics were too delicate or explosive to be aired. The president of Notre Dame warned that there was no guarantee at all that most Catholic institutions of higher learning would not within half a century "shuck off their religious identity as they become more academically sophisticated."

"If it happens," he added, "it will not be by way of vote, but simply by default." I suppose that this is what shocked me into a continuing interest in this question: the possibility that the institution most explicitly committed to the Socratic dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living should let its own future life be determined by default or by an almost-willful refusal to examine the choices before it.

More than five years later this decision by default seems far less likely. On campus after campus the question of Catholic identity has forced itself to the surface, still surrounded by suspicion and anxiety but more and more proving to be something that faculty and administrators can discuss without the sky falling.

One sign of the changed atmosphere is the project of research and discussion that the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities has undertaken under the title "Catholic Higher Education: Practice and Promise." A year ago, when some 400 educators gathered at St. Thomas University in St. Paul as part of that conference, I had the opportunity to describe what had surprised me, over the past five years, as a steadily emerging consensus about the religious identity and mission of Catholic colleges and universities. Let me summarize that consensus in somewhat different terms than I used then. It begins negatively—with four nos, set like stakes in the ground marking where a foundation is to be placed.

The first no is, of course, the no to the historical pattern of secularization that I have already mentioned and that George M. Marsden so magisterially traced in his book The Soul of the American University. It is common now to hear Catholic educators acknowledge that the
religious identity of their institutions is at risk or threatened or uncertain or in need of clarification. Their language is frequently guarded or tentative and for good reason. Concerns about Catholic identity have often been advanced with an accusatory edge—as though Who is to blame? was a more important question than What can we do? Educators are understandably reluctant to avoid alarmist language that would seem to cast aspersions on the past decades' educational leaders and their very real accomplishments.

The no to secularization is not always accompanied by a firm sense of what the alternatives might be in a wide range of schools serving very different populations. The consensus is less about the exact nature of a Catholic alternative or alternatives than it is about the necessity for the search.

The second no is of a different sort, since it is affirmative rather than critical of much that defines today’s academy. This is a no to any surrender of the academic freedom and the rule of scholarly peers in academic matters that have been hard won in Catholic higher education over the past two decades. It is this no that is likely to make infringements on academic autonomy by non-academic church authorities counterproductive.

The third no follows closely: it is the rejection of any arrangements that would make non-Catholic students or non-Catholic faculty unwelcome interlopers or second-class citizens on Catholic campuses. The presence of scholars of other faiths and of no faith is indeed a contribution to Catholic identity. In many cases, Protestants, Jews and other believers as well as agnostics and atheists bring critical scholarly insight and goodwill to the religious mission of Catholic higher education far beyond what many Catholics offer. Interestingly, Notre Dame’s new provost is an evangelical Christian, and the dean who just successfully oversaw a yearlong forum on Georgetown’s Catholic heritage is, I believe, a Lutheran. Sometimes non-Catholics are able to venture where many Catholics, burdened by anger from old wounds or remorse for old faults, hesitate to go.

The fourth no is simply the refusal to be beguiled by the idea of returning to a golden age. Recently Monika Hellwig, the distinguished theologian who now directs the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, noted all the changes in Catholic life since Vatican II, in
American family structures, in employment patterns, in cultural pluralism and in the computer revolution. Assuring "the Catholic character and mission," she concluded, "cannot be a matter of simply continuing past forms and is not a matter of something we have lost and must retrieve. It is a matter of discovering how to do something we have never done before."

If these four nos set an outside boundary--no drift to secularization, no backtracking on academic freedom, no exclusion of non-Catholics, no return to a golden age--there are other, less certain elements of the emerging consensus.

One is that Catholic identity must be reflected not only in campus ministry, liturgical events, student-life policies and community service, but also in the central activity of higher education: its intellectual life, the teaching and research agendas of the faculty.

Another is that Catholic identity is something broader than the place and character of theology. A history department, a literature department, a sociology department should offer courses or address questions within courses that one would not be likely to find at the state university down the road. The science faculty should include people ready to engage discussions at the meeting points of science, faith and ethics. The economics and business departments should have the capacity to join in examining the interrelationship of commerce, Christian tradition and social justice.

And finally there is the most fragile and yet, I believe, the most critical part of the emerging consensus--the conviction that maintaining any kind of distinct identity implies somehow bringing that factor into the hiring process. Exactly how remains wide open to dispute. On the one hand, no one wants the checking of baptismal certificates, monitoring of Mass attendance or hovering over private lives. On the other hand, no one takes seriously the procedure whereby, at the end of a lengthy and exhaustive process of recruitment and interviews, an administrator hands the chosen faculty prospect a vaguely worded mission statement, asking, "Do you feel comfortable with that?"

Likewise, no one doubts that academic competence must remain the sine qua non in hiring. But also no one doubts that, just as particular departments favor candidates whose research
and teaching agendas fit into that department’s special needs or self-selected emphases, the college or university ought to be able to do the same with its distinctive needs and overall character.

One of these days, I believe, Catholic educators will appoint a blue-ribbon committee of scholars with impeccable credentials, mixing Catholics with non-Catholics, those teaching on Catholic campuses with those at premier non-Catholic schools. The committee will spend a year or two reporting on how religion, either in terms of personal commitment or scholarly interests, can be legitimately weighted into hiring. The result, I wager, will be so commonsensical that most academics will puzzle over why they so long feared to examine this issue candidly.

Until now I realize I have assumed rather than explained why all this should matter. What, in fact, would be lost if Catholic higher education went the way of the nation’s most venerable colleges and universities? The rationale for Catholic higher education can hardly remain, as it once was, largely defensive: to protect Catholics from secular education. The vast majority of Catholic university-age students are already enrolled on state and private secular campuses, where they enjoy all too few of the Church’s resources. No, the rationale for maintaining a distinctly Catholic variety of higher education must be to offer not something instead but something alongside—not a substitute but a leavening.

My own argument focuses on the role of such colleges and universities in contributing to the future health of three realities: Catholicism, pluralism and the university itself. It has probably been more common than not to view these three terms in opposition or tension rather than as converging and mutually supportive. We are all familiar with George Bernard Shaw’s quip that a Catholic university is a contradiction in terms. Too many Catholic leaders have consciously or unconsciously agreed with him. They doubt the compatibility of Catholicism with the open, pluralistic exchange and investigation of the university.

On the contrary, I join with those who think that Catholicism, which largely invented the university, needs it, as an arena where the faith is in constant conversation with every current of contemporary thought and scientific discovery. That is the only way that a tradition can
be enlivened, enlarged, challenged and deepened. These kinds of conversations can go on elsewhere, of course. But on Catholic campuses they can proceed more explicitly, with a concentration of people sharing, if not always the same beliefs, then at least a vocabulary and set of concerns that permit a depth not likely in environments where religion is largely privatized, such as most secular and state universities and, for that matter, The New York Times.

In return, the university needs Catholicism. That could be argued in the strong sense, as when John Henry Newman maintained, in effect, that it was a secular university that is a contradiction in terms, an institution that has amputated itself by excluding from its organization the systematic study of a central set of questions, about God and revelation. But in more practical and immediate terms, the university needs Catholicism’s historic efforts to relate faith and reason, defending both against voluntarists, skeptics and rationalists—three of the tribes that today often seem to be zealously sawing off the intellectual branches on which they are perched. The university needs Catholicism’s historic rejection of a purely instrumental view of learning, its concern with the integration of knowledge and its stress on both contemplation and moral purpose in education and intellectual life.

There is, in fact, a receptiveness in the intellectual and academic environment for what a distinctly Catholic higher education represents. On the philosophical level, it is more readily admitted that there is a search for truth standing outside all presuppositions and all communities of searchers. On a much more practical, immediate level, there is a widespread dissatisfaction with both the scholarly side of academia—its fragmentation and credentialism—and with the moral disarray and anomie of much of campus life.

Finally, what is the relationship between maintaining institutions of distinguishable Catholic higher education and pluralism? Pluralism implies diversity, but it is not simply diversity. The recently found appreciation of both pluralism and diversity in the United States has made us abandon the image of a melting pot. Jesse Jackson conjured up a great quilt. Former New York City Mayor David Dinkins spoke of a glorious mosaic. The idea is the same:
different components retain their special patterns or color while contributing to the beauty of the whole.

But human beings are not solid and unchanging like catches of cloth or pieces of a mosaic. They are alive and they are social. A pluralism of people requires a diversity of a special sort: a diversity of communities, of living traditions, bound together by their own memories, convictions and ways of life—but also renewing those memories, convictions and ways of life under the challenges of changing circumstances. A zoo is diversity. A forest—an ecology of living species—is pluralism.

But to renew and reproduce themselves as living species, not captured or stuffed specimens, communities and traditions demand institutions of learning, transmission, research, inquiry and discussion. One fundamental such institution in this age is the university. The complication, of course, is that universities also demand a certain internal pluralism, yet if every university felt compelled to re-create within itself an identical pattern of diversity and pluralism, it would be destructive of the latter pluralistic project. It would strip communities and living traditions of a powerful resource. It would raise the prospect that our society’s pluralism could paradoxically evolve into a bland oneness or at most a melee of superficial and ornamental differences churned up by the manufacturers of cultural novelty.

As a Georgetown task force has pointed out, the irony is that if Catholic institutions drift from their special identity, they will "actually end up diminishing the amount of real diversity in the country." The task force offers a suggestive phrase for what will empower Catholic colleges and universities to contribute to American higher education and society: a "centered pluralism."

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