

“Marley's Burden”

BY MARTHA NUSSBAUM

From *Boston College Magazine*, Fall 1996, by permission.

"Why on earth was I invited to be on this panel?" I asked my hosts when I received this intriguing invitation. As a convert to Judaism from Protestant Christianity, as a scholar who has spent her career in the secular academy, as an outspoken liberal critic of some conservative positions and thinkers--I wondered what exactly I have to contribute to a discussion of Catholic higher education. (In fact, I have written a chapter on higher education in the religious university in a forthcoming book on liberal education, and in the process I have spent a lot of time on the campus of Notre Dame, which was one of the 15 schools I've studied, but my BC hosts were not aware of this, my one claim to competence.) The reply I received from my inviters was, roughly speaking, Just exactly that: the perspective of the outsider. I speak, then, as someone whose career has focused on issues of moral value but who has done so in a secular context and whose own religious affiliation, while important in my life, is distinctly non-Christian. Let me begin by talking about a book that I love, which will explain why I feel both at home and a stranger in the world of the Catholic university, and use this as a starting point to reflect on the challenge Catholic universities face as we enter the new century.

In Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge receives, on Christmas Eve, a strange visitor: the ghost of his former business partner Jacob Marley. Scrooge is astonished to see that Marley's ghost is dragging a long and heavy chain made of cash boxes and even more astonished when Marley announces that this chain, which he must now drag through all eternity, is the product of a life spent attending to money rather than to the lives and needs of his fellow human beings. "I wear the chain I forged in life," Marley sorrowfully concludes. "I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it." Scrooge himself, the ghost adds, drags a similar chain, though even heavier because he has now lived seven years longer. Marley's doom is to walk the whole



earth dragging this chain, looking for the first time at the reality of the lives and needs of men and women of many different classes and nations--and to grieve because he is forever unable to help them. This is his fate because in life his spirit never walked the earth, but chose to stay within "the narrow limits of our money-changing hole."

Scrooge, distressed at these strange discussions of life outside the office, says, trying to lighten things up, "But you were always a good man of business, Jacob."

"'Business!' cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. 'Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!'"

I feel at home on the campuses of Catholic universities I have visited because it seems to me that, more than most secular institutions of higher education, they take to heart the ideas embodied in this text--especially the idea that our business as human beings involves much more than money-making, involves, in fact, a benevolent concern for all human life. More than most institutions, they have taken as their mission the development of the whole person rather than just the preparation of students for a trade or a livelihood. They have understood that one's trade is usually only a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of one's business, and they have set themselves to educate students for the whole business of life. The critique of reductive utilitarian notions of well-being, an enterprise I have spent a lot of time on in my career, receives a rich and warmly supportive hearing in these institutions, as it does not always at my own home university and other great secular institutions. When I go to Fordham or Georgetown or BC or Notre Dame to talk about mercy and compassion, I enjoy the fact that I *don't* have to engage in combat all the time about some fundamental human issues. Notions of intrinsic value and of the human being as an end provide a common language in which we can, without preliminary skirmishing, converse.

On the other hand, I do encounter other types of intellectual and ethical combat on Catholic campuses. As I try to translate Dickens's vision of citizenship into modern terms, thinking about what a modern citizen needs to be able to see with sympathetic understanding, about



the distances that a modern citizen needs to be able to walk in imagination and in love, I focus on four areas of human diversity. First, we need greater understanding of the experiences and needs of non-Western societies. Second, we need to see more clearly the lives of racial minorities within our own nation and the barriers to full citizenship that they face. Third, we need to focus on remaining barriers to the equality of women, in our nation and in the world, and on the need of women for equal respect and well-being. Finally, we need to deliberate better, as a society, about the civil rights and liberties of lesbians and gay men. I have spoken on these topics at Catholic schools, and that experience has not always given me an entirely positive view of deliberation on those campuses. Let me take these two poles as my starting point, both the at-homeness and the strangeness, the sense of deliberative richness and a worry about deliberative impoverishment.

Many U.S. universities produce graduates like Scrooge: very good at business but ill equipped to think well about human beings. Narrow vocational and preprofessional models of education are increasingly prevalent in a time of material insecurity. Even when the good old notion of liberal education is respected in speech, it is not always respected in practice: students frequently fulfill such requirements with a smorgasbord of ill-connected courses that do not equip them to think well about the lives of their fellow citizens or to engage in a truly deliberative community about matters of common importance. The result is that our democracy has itself become all too much like the business that is Scrooge's entire world: a marketplace of clashing interests, uninformed by deliberation about the common good. It seems to me that Catholic universities have shaped young citizens in ways that well promote the broader view of life that Marley belatedly obtains, and this for two primary reasons: because of their commitment to philosophy, Boston College, like many other Catholic universities describes its mission as involving an education of the whole person. Now, of course, sometimes the language of a mission statement is aspirational and doesn't accurately reflect what goes on in courses. But to judge from my experience at Notre Dame, it really is true that questions of moral value--questions about what human beings are, what they need and what they should pursue--are central in ways that they usually are not in



secular schools, where those questions tend to be concentrated in a few humanities courses. In Catholic schools it is common to find discussions of such ethical questions in the economics department and in science departments, as well as in philosophy and theology. Economists don't simply assume that human beings are machines producing utility; they engage in a lot of foundational criticism of standard models of growth, welfare, and development. This produces a rich deliberative community in which students are strongly encouraged to think about how their courses fit together in forming the skeleton of a full, complete and valuable life.

Aquinas tells Dante, in Paradise, that a good Christian life requires self-examination by reason, including a philosophic use of reason: "He ranks very low among the fools who says 'yes' or 'no' without first making distinctions... Far worse than useless... is the quest of a person who...fishes for the truth without the art." Our major Catholic institutions have with remarkable success brought this idea to life, communicating to students that the Socratic goal of the examined life is an important part of the Catholic life. Our democracy badly needs this respect for reason and argument, and requiring undergraduates to take courses in philosophy is an essential first step toward building a more deliberative public culture.

Now let me turn to my second question: how well does a Catholic higher education today prepare students to travel around the world, understanding with sympathy and accuracy the lives and concerns of their fellow citizens, not only in the United States but in the larger global community? Let me take the four areas of human diversity one by one.

First, the need for international understanding, particularly understanding of non-Western cultures. Boston College's Academic Planning Council speaks of a need to internationalize the University and its curriculum. This is a need that all U.S. institutions of higher education face, in a time when many of the most pressing problems we face as citizens involve reflective dialogue among nations. This is so even in business but all the more so when we consider issues such as the containment of aggression, global ecology and the status of persecuted peoples. In his October 1995 address to the United Nations, the Pope spoke eloquently of the need for all people--Catholics especially--to achieve a greater level of understanding of



non-Western cultures and religions. "To cut oneself off from the reality of difference," he said, "or, worse, to attempt to stamp out that difference, is to cut oneself off from the possibility of sounding the depths of the mystery of human life." He continued by saying that our attitude toward this learning should be one of open-mindedness and humility, bearing in mind that every culture has something to teach us about the central questions of human life.

Internationalizing the curriculum means reorganizing standard core courses, creating new elective courses and infusing a comparative element into many familiar courses so that students learn systematically to see their own culture as one among many. Such transformations require new faculty hiring, new library resources and faculty development on many levels.

Catholic institutions have and should continue to have a special mission: to help students understand their own tradition. Courses in theology and church history should be strongly supported. But even in those courses a comparative element can promote an understanding of the Catholic tradition as one among many world religions, and like other institutions, Catholic institutions must actively promote better teaching and learning about Judaism and Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

This emphasis on diversity does not undermine the institutional goal of maintaining a distinctively Catholic identity. It would be a narrow picture of Catholicism indeed that held that Catholics don't need to learn about the rest of the world, and one woefully out of step with the norms of Christian sympathy and curiosity so well embodied in my Dickens passage and indeed in the Pope's address.

Second, no institution can produce citizens who are prepared to be informed and sensitive participants in public deliberations unless it has acquainted them with the history and the struggles for equality of the major ethnic and racial minorities in this country. Again, this will require reconceptualizing standard courses and creating new courses. The Academic Planning Council statement suggests that more scholarship money should be devoted to recruiting minority students, but this should go hand in hand with curricular development



that makes it clear that Boston College is a community that respects minority traditions and experiences. I think it's important that African-American studies and other ethnic minority studies are cultivated as sources of learning for all students, not as a place for minority students to affirm a separate identity. This is very difficult to do, and the institution will need to deliberate well about how to integrate those studies into the curriculum and how to face separatist pressures that arise.

Third, the need for women's studies. "The Catholic Church is not exactly a feminist institution," an outspoken male philosophy student said to me at Notre Dame. He went on to criticize the institution for the way in which it has not yet made women feel like fully equal citizens, in part because it has done so little to incorporate the study of women into the curriculum. Former Notre Dame President Theodore Hesburgh argues convincingly in his autobiography that there has been great progress. In 1952, he reports, 95 percent of students opposed coeducation; by 1972 they were overwhelmingly for it. And yet, even his narrative of the happy change inspires unease:

Coeducation has had a marvelous effect on Notre Dame. First and foremost, we had always maintained that we were in the business of educating students for leadership, and now we have broadened that commitment to include the other half of the human race. Almost as important, the women brought their great gift of femininity to our campus. During its all-male years Notre Dame tended to be a kind of rough, raunchy, macho place. Our women students brought a good measure of gentility to the campus and enhanced the family feeling of it. With women actually there, the men could stop thinking about them as a breed apart. Hesburgh's intentions are evidently of the best, and his description is quite plausible.

Consider, however, the situation of women on a campus that expects them to civilize raunchy, macho athletes, and to represent the "gift of femininity" rather than simply to go about their business of learning. Hesburgh criticizes students who regard women as "a breed apart," but he may be doing so in his own way. And even today women at Notre Dame seem under stress, tentative, relatively silent in class.



Here we are on the brink of great and divisive issues: the nature of the family, the role of women in the Church, the Church's traditional picture or pictures of women's role. I hope we can agree that any U.S. university in this day and age must respect women as equal citizens and learners. We may argue about what "equal" means, but we should agree that it means effective measures against violence and sexual harassment *and* a curriculum that incorporates the history and contributions of women as an important part of what every undergraduate should learn. I would argue that it therefore also means support for a program in women's studies, which will be a likely source of more specialized scholarship and course offerings as well as a place where scholars working on women's issues can find interdisciplinary dialogue. All students should come to know how women live and have lived in the major regions and cultures of the world; how they have suffered from discrimination in political life, from physical abuse and violence, from unequal nutrition and health care; and what they have achieved despite those obstacles.

Finally, homosexuality. No issue is more divisive on Catholic campuses, both in social life and in curricular matters. Let me share what I do and do not favor. It is clear that the Church's position on homosexuality is contested within the Church itself. It seems unreasonable for a Catholic institution to shut off this debate on campus and highly reasonable to foster the exchange of argument in a climate of reason and mutual respect. While I was teaching at Brown University, a number of us organized a conference on Homosexuality in the Major Religious Traditions, which was an attempt to bring liberals and conservatives from each of the major denominations together in dialogue. At Brown we had to work hard to gain a respectful hearing for the conservative positions: we quoted John Courtney Murray's statement "Civility dies with the death of dialogue" at the opening of each session. At some Catholic schools it may be necessary to work to get a hearing for liberal positions, especially when expressed by students. It seems to me that all levels of the University should actively seek a deliberative community on this important issue while strongly protecting the rights of lesbian and gay students and faculty to learn and inquire in a climate free from intimidation.



I may seem to have moved rather far from Charles Dickens since our world is different from his world. But the core idea remains the same: a liberal education should equip the imagination to venture beyond the narrow confines of job and personal history to encounter the world of human beings in all of its diversity. Catholic universities have special resources to tap as they seek to make themselves truly catholic. Let us hope that their commitment to values of love and sympathy will lead them beyond some remaining failures to inquire vigorously and to see clearly, so that they can truly say with Marley's ghost, "Mankind is my business. Charity, mercy, benevolence, forbearance, are all my business."

Martha Nussbaum is the Ernst Freund Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago. Her books include *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Goodness in Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge University Press, 1986) and *Poetic Justice*:

