

“What Can Catholic Universities Learn from Protestant Examples?”

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Are there historical forces operating that make it virtually inevitable that Catholic universities will follow the path taken by formerly Protestant universities in moving away from meaningful religious identities? One thinks, for example, of Northwestern, Duke, Boston University, Syracuse, Vanderbilt, and the University of Southern California, all formerly Methodist universities, none of which has much more than vestigial Christian identity. Will Notre Dame become, say, within two generations, another Duke or Syracuse? Should that be its goal?

A good case can be made that Catholic universities today are about where their Protestant American counterparts were between the world wars. As late as the 1930s the presidents of schools such as Duke, Syracuse, or even denominationally independent Yale, spoke openly of their schools' Christian heritage and mission. The issue of Christian identity was then often debated. Older faculty had been shaped in the days when their schools had encouraged strongly Christian, even evangelical, commitments, and many still had an explicit sense of Christian calling in their work. Others had no nostalgia for the old days and saw the increased openness as purely a gain. In retrospect, we can see that the handwriting was on the wall; but at the time the subject of keeping a place for Christianity on campuses was a subject



for conferences, symposia, and books of essays. For many it was difficult to imagine private universities without some Christian identity.⁽¹⁾

One theme that emerges from the study of Protestant universities is that the loss of distinctly religious identity is not something that the Christians who led those universities directly chose. Rather, the long-term changes were largely the results of choices that in the short run promised to improve not only the university but also the quality of the Christianity on its campus. So even from the perspective of attempting to sustain Christian identity, the choices were often the right ones for the immediate future. Schools became more open, more inclusive, and less coercive, all in the name of the Christian spirit of the institutions. During the era of transition, such universities enjoyed what from a religious perspective might be regarded as a golden age. For more than a generation (for American Protestant schools, typically from the 1890s to the 1950s) they were far more open than they once had been, but they still retained enough momentum from their church heritages to sustain at least a discernible Christian presence.

During that transitional stage a revealing question that was sometimes asked was, Should a church-related university first of all serve the church or the wider public? Typically the answer would be, Both. The two interests, they confidently believed, could be balanced. Part of the duty of the church after all was to serve the public, particularly through such agencies as universities. Furthermore, Protestants in the United States had a long history of cultural hegemony and hence of equating the interests of their churches and those of the culture at large.

By about the 1950s the church part of the equation had become largely nominal. Church-related universities could still point to their impressive chapel buildings and to voluntary religion on campus. Religious activities, however, had become thoroughly peripheral to the main business of the universities. In the classrooms, almost as much as in research, the dogma was widely accepted that science was autonomous in its own domain.⁽²⁾ Religious truths had their own supplementary values and might be taught in divinity schools,



churches, or campus ministries. Religious perspectives might occasionally be offered by a professor here or there, especially in fledgling religion departments, but such outlooks were largely peripheral to the main business of university education.

The assaults on the WASP establishment beginning in the 1960s easily routed most of the vestigial religious aspects of Protestant higher education. By the 1980s most major campus chapels were no longer exclusively Protestant but were into serving interfaith constituencies. Beginning in the 1960s, mainline Protestant campus ministries declined dramatically. Many of the more traditional student moral regulations were casualties of the cultural revolution of the 1960s. In the classrooms, explicit Christian teaching, which already had been rare, disappeared almost entirely, excepting what might be offered by a few of the older professors or in divinity schools. By the 1980s religion departments typically focused on detached study of the history of religions,⁽³⁾ and the Christianity taught at the handful of major university divinity schools seemed increasingly anomalous in the context of the dominant dogma that religious perspectives should have nothing to do with the highest education.

American University Culture

The example of what has happened to Protestant universities is important not simply because it provides an example of a course that the future Catholic experience might parallel; more fundamentally, the formerly Protestant schools continue to set the standards for the rest of higher education. Essential to any understanding of the current situation is that there is a dominant American university culture that dictates the standards for all who want to be recognized as true universities. This dominant university culture, in turn, has distinctly Protestant origins.

In attempting to understand how that dominant university culture has been defined, the most relevant observation for our present purposes is that American universities had distinctly anti-Catholic origins. The men who established American universities in the late nineteenth century were mostly New Englanders who had roughly the same set of interests as did their compatriots who built American public schools. Education was an essential



component for building an advanced and unified national culture. Higher education would be, like the common schools, *nonsectarian*, but that meant broadly Protestant. It would be based on democratic moral ideals into which all peoples could be assimilated, thus unifying the nation.

Furthermore, it would be *scientific*, with science defined as inquiry free from sectarian prejudice. This truly scientific education would also help unify the nation on the basis of what all educated persons might agree on.⁽⁴⁾ As Andrew Dickson White, the founding president of Cornell, made clear in *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (New York, 1896), authoritarian, Catholicism was the antithesis of this scientific ideal.

Freedom was a primary watchword for both the moral and the scientific ideals on which university culture was being built. Faculty would be free from outside political or religious control. Science would be free from external authority. Students would be free to choose most of their courses and would be taught the values of a free and tolerant society and choosing one's own standards to live by. Once again, to those who first defined American university culture, Catholicism seemed the antithesis to all they stood for. In their view, Catholic political views were undemocratic and Catholic education was hopelessly authoritarian and repressive of free inquiry.

At the same time, the shapers of American university culture excluded the more conservative parts of their own Protestant heritage. Theology, which was considered divisive, was removed as a reference point in other academic inquiry, so that religious viewpoints, such as there were, had strictly to do with morality. John Henry Newman had identified this trend in Protestant higher education even before American universities came on the scene. Morality detached from theological reference might be a means for promoting cultural unity, but it would soon make Christianity as such irrelevant.⁽⁵⁾

University culture has changed a great deal in the past hundred years, but not at all in the direction of welcoming distinctly Christian viewpoints into the classroom. While Catholic



schools and colleges are accepted far more than they were a century ago, they typically are accepted in spite of their Catholicism. Prejudices against Catholicism have, of course, moderated, but they have hardly disappeared. One only has to look at the history of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa honor society to document this point. No Catholic school was granted membership until the late 1930s, and by 1960 the total number of schools so honored was two. By 1989 that number had risen only to twelve.⁽⁶⁾ Catholic schools that wished such recognition had to be careful about letting Catholicism intrude on academic life. Loyola University of Chicago, for instance, was judged to be qualified in every other respect to have a Phi Beta Kappa chapter, but in 1985 was turned down because of objections to a statement in its faculty handbook that forbade faculty from "attacking and ridiculing authoritative Catholic teachings" when speaking as a representative of the university.⁽⁷⁾ Other universities might ban ridicule of other groups and traditions, but banning attack and ridicule of the teachings of one's own church tradition was considered a violation of academic freedom.

Government funding has also been made contingent in part on reducing religious emphases. Many of the court cases testing state aid to religious colleges, especially during the 1960s, had to do with Catholic institutions. Catholic faculty typically testified in such cases that their Catholic beliefs had little influence on what they taught, thus attempting to establish that Catholic schools had essentially secular purposes.⁽⁸⁾ Academic freedom was also an issue for the courts. Chief Justice Warren Burger, for instance, wrote in *Tilton v. Richardson* (1971) on the question of state funding for buildings at Catholic colleges that one reason that the colleges involved could be funded was that they were "characterized by an atmosphere of academic freedom rather than religious indoctrination."⁽⁹⁾ Whatever one might think of the stands of Catholic colleges on these points is a separable issue; the historical point is that they have been facing immense pressures to be less Catholic if they are to be widely accepted.

A disturbing sequel is the recent court ruling denying the rights of a Protestant elementary school in Hawaii to hire only Protestant teachers. (Again, one's views on the wisdom of the



school's policy should be separated from the legal issue involved.) The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, in a ruling that the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review, found that since the Kamehameha Schools were not directly church related and had a "primarily secular rather than a primarily religious orientation," they could not use religion as a criterion for hiring. If such principles were to be applied to colleges and universities, the logic of the courts would be that if schools with religious traditions wish to receive government funding they must prove that they are essentially secular. If, however, they wish to continue to use religion as a consideration in hiring, they would have to prove that they were not essentially secular."(10)

Almost all the pressures seem to be in the same direction of imposing academic uniformity at the expense of religious identity. Even a partial list of such pressures suggests how formidable they are: pressures for separation of church and state; pressures for greater academic freedom; ideals of pluralism and diversity; demands for technological excellence; pressures to meet standards of professionalism defined as excluding religion; faculty and departmental demands for autonomy (especially in hiring); reactions to fears of external control; aspirations for recognition of excellence (How will the *U.S. News and World Report* ratings be affected?); pressures from accrediting agencies; pressures of the market to broaden the base of students and contributors; resulting pressures from increasingly diverse faculty, contributors, students, and alumni; changing student mores. With so many forces arrayed in the direction of producing a standardized academic culture, one must wonder whether there is any place for institutions that are substantially shaped by religious identities, unless they are willing to remain in a second-class status.

Searching for Middle Ground

One way of understanding the issue is as a question about pluralism, and diversity, and multiculturalism--ideals that the dominant academic culture claims to value highly. The way these ideals are currently conceived is to emphasize that institutions should include representatives of as many diverse cultures as possible. That is a laudable ideal. As it is



typically implemented in the dominant academic culture, however, it amounts not to creating diversity among institutions but rather toward making them all look alike. Particular traditions of institutions, including religious traditions, are expected to give way to representing the variety of currently accepted viewpoints.

It should be asked, however, whether our culture has room for diversity among institutions as well as within them. Can it encourage diversity of institutions? Can multiculturalism include concern for the religious heritages that have been at the hearts of most cultures? Can it tolerate the distinctive institutions of such heritages? Schools should indeed still be encouraged to be as internally diverse as they can be, consistent with their heritages and traditions. But are not the institutional expressions of those heritages and traditions just the sorts of things that concerns for diversity should be protecting?

So far as the future is concerned, the most crucial area where these issues play themselves out is in faculty hiring. Once a church-related institution adopts the policy that it will hire simply "the best qualified candidates," it is simply a matter of time until its faculty will have an ideological profile essentially like that of the faculty at every other mainstream university. The first loyalties of faculty members will be to the national cultures of their professions rather than to any local or ecclesiastical traditions. Faculty members become essentially interchangeable parts in a standardized national system. At first, when schools move in the direction of open hiring, they can count on some continuity with their traditions based on informal ties and self-selection of those congenial to their heritage. Within a generation, however, there is bound to be a shift to a majority for whom national professional loyalties are primary. Since departmental faculties typically have virtual autonomy in hiring, it becomes impossible to reverse the trend and the church tradition becomes vestigial. The Protestant experience thus suggests that once a school begins to move away from the religious heritage as a factor in hiring, the pressures become increasingly greater to continue to move in that direction.



Such a conclusion becomes particularly perplexing if one weighs it against the good reasons that schools may have for increasing faculty diversity. Some of the stricter religious schools may exclude valuable faculty perspectives or they may unduly inhibit academic freedom and creative scholarship. Or a strong case might be made that they would better fulfill their Christian missions by serving broader constituencies. Yet, despite the merits of these concerns,⁽¹¹⁾ both the historical precedents and analysis of the forces that drive historical change suggest that opening the doors for such valuable and refreshing breezes soon lets in gale-force winds that drive out the religious heritage altogether.

So the puzzle is how to hold the middle ground. How is it possible, short of reverting to repressive strictures of earlier days, to maintain a vital religious presence, including an intellectual presence, in a modern university? Is there any way to retain the balance of being a university that is both Catholic and open to many other points of view?

The Catholic Difference?

One way to get at the answer to these questions is to ask whether there is anything that distinguishes American Catholic universities at the end of the twentieth century from their Protestant counterparts in the early decades of the century. As one who is new to a Catholic environment, I am not the best person to make such comparisons, but I can suggest the following impressions:

First of all, the most obvious difference between American Catholic and Protestant universities is in typical forms of governance. Most Catholic universities traditionally have been governed by religious congregations whose members have been part of the university faculty and administration. Even though direct control by religious orders has been much weakened in recent decades, the role can still be considerable, as at Notre Dame. For one thing, it guarantees the continuance of a Catholic religious presence for worship. That such a presence is marked especially by the regular celebrations of the Mass points to a central feature of Catholicism that distinguishes it from most of Protestantism. At least vestiges of these features seem likely to persist even if the rest of a university loses its Catholic identity.



Priests, sisters, or brothers in the classrooms also provide a religious dimension in the academic life of Catholic universities. Such a presence may, however, diminish if the supply of clerics and members of religious orders continues to diminish or if pressures to abandon preferential hiring become too strong.

Whether religious orders can continue to play a decisive role in the administration and oversight of Catholic universities is a significant question. That role reflects an oligarchic tradition of governance, rather than a democratic one. Of course, all universities are governed by oligarchies of some sort. Nonetheless, pressures are strong in university culture to incorporate more democratic procedures into governance. For instance, faculties tend to insist on virtual autonomy in hiring and in determining curricula.

A second difference between Catholics and Protestants is that in elite American culture, such as academic culture, Catholics long have been outsiders. Formerly Protestant schools, on the other hand, have always thought of themselves as simply American. Thinking of themselves as simply part of general American culture meant that, as the culture changed, they had to change to keep up with it. Hence as the privileged place for Protestantism declined in twentieth-century culture, these schools had to abandon their religious identities, or else lose their insider status.

Having been outsiders to the larger culture has fostered in Catholics some tradition of resistance to conformity to American cultural trends. On the other hand, it has also fostered something of an inferiority complex and also a strong tradition of Catholic Americanism. Since Vatican II, Americanism has triumphed in much of the church and in American Catholic academic culture. Americanism, of course, has many attractive features, but it can become erosive of Catholic identity if it overwhelms traditions of critical resistance to dominant cultural standards. That may be what is happening to much of Catholic academic culture in recent decades. Such trends are reinforced by many Catholics who were brought up in what they saw as an oppressively restrictive atmosphere of pre-Vatican II Catholic



schooling and who have reacted by regarding any emphasis on a distinctly Catholic viewpoint as merely a step backward.

The crucial question now is whether there is a willingness in the American Catholic church and its academic culture to be different or whether the trend toward ever-increasing conformity to non-Catholic American models will continue. One way in which Catholics are now different from Protestants is that they have their own major universities. From the point of view of a Protestant who values the distinguished heritage of Christian learning, the presence of such universities is something to be valued and preserved.

A final, and most important, difference from the earlier twentieth century cases of Protestant universities is that we now live in a postliberal and postmodern era. By *postliberal*, I simply mean that most of the promises of a liberal consensus, supposed to provide a scientific basis for shared moral ideals, have not been fulfilled. Rather, our culture is built around the question of how to live with moral anarchy and emptiness. That raises the question of whether Catholic universities should aspire to be just like the rest of elite academic culture. Why should Catholic schools wish to be like Vanderbilt or Northwestern? Is there anything about the coherence of the ideals of such universities that Catholic institutions should wish to imitate?

Furthermore, we are in a postmodern era. By that I mean that we are in an intellectual environment in which we do not need to be intimidated by the intellectual shibboleths of liberalism. We ourselves do not have to hold to postmodern epistemologies to see the force of their critiques of old-style liberalism. Much of the old critique of the very idea of Catholic education was based on naive liberal ideas about positivistic science and the possibility of building a consensus of moral ideals. As Catholics said at the time, it is impossible to establish such ideals on purely naturalistic premises. Now postmodernist critics are saying what leads to the same conclusion: There is no adequate intellectual basis for the moral ideals that most contemporary academics hold most dear.⁽¹²⁾ All they have left is campus politics.



So, even if we view the case in contemporary academia's own terms, there is much to be said today for being willing to be different.

Not Just Holding Our Own

The question remains, however, whether any of these Catholic distinctives is sufficient to offset the massive forces in academic culture that push for a homogeneity that marginalizes Christianity. The current state of Catholic universities is in many ways attractive. The Catholic presence, even if diminishing, is still substantial. Yet at the same time the universities are open to wide varieties of opinions and constituencies. Once this opening up has occurred, it is not realistic to think that the process can be reversed on any large scale. Faculty, for instance, who were hired under more open terms can not reasonably be required to conform to more narrowly defined expectations. Rather than setting an institutional goal at reversing the trends, however, it makes more sense to address the problem of how to preserve and build on the present balance between tradition and openness. That in itself will take formidable efforts, since all the momentum and most of the external pressures are on the side of increasing openness. Building from where we are, however, is a far more realizable goal than is turning back a flood that has already risen.

While some specific steps, such as guaranteeing a certain percentage of Catholic faculty, can be taken in attempting to maintain such a balance, they are likely to be only artificial holding actions unless they are accompanied by something far more positive. That positive program must include building a respected tradition of Catholic, or I would prefer to say Christian, scholarship. That would involve getting beyond the stage when the principal options, other than in theology itself, seem to have been neo-Thomism or nothing. In other words the continuing neo-Thomist tradition needs to be supplemented by other vigorous efforts to explore the implications of Christian faith in scholars' explorations of reality. The degree of importance of those implications varies widely among disciplines and will have far more to do with major interpretative issues than with technical questions. Nonetheless, the point



remains that Christian faith can have important bearing on major interpretive issues if scholars are only open to asking such questions.

To build positively an intellectual community that asks such questions will involve consciousness raising and recruitment. Serious Christians who are scholars need to overcome their inhibitions, bred by a century of positivist academic dominance, against asking questions about the intellectual implications of their faith. Furthermore, Catholic universities should recruit scholars at all levels who have shown a willingness to ask such questions. Such recruiting might require special funding so that it could be pursued on an affirmative action basis that would not jeopardize positions or varieties of perspectives already in place. Universities should also establish centers, institutes, and postdoctoral programs for encouraging explorations of the relationships of faith to scholarship.

Such programs will require major funding, but if the program of building a first-rate Catholic university is worth pursuing, it is an ideal that might catch the imagination of potential contributors. No such program to move in a direction counter to major historical trends is going to be accomplished with pocket change left over from normal university activities. It will require a major commitment. That commitment, however, should be directed neither toward retreating to the past nor to simply holding one's own. It should be directed, rather, toward the positive goal of building a new model for the contemporary university that would demonstrate that Christianity can have a vital and positive impact on academic life itself.

Notes

1. [\[back\]](#) My documentation for the historical generalizations in this essay can be found in George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield, eds., *The Secularization of the Academy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford



University Press, 1994). On the immediate issue, see, for instance, Bradley J. Longfield, "'For God, for Country, and for Yale': Yale, Religion, and Higher Education between the World Wars," in Marsden and Longfield, *Secularization*, 146-69.

2.[[back](#)] On this point, see the excellent discussion in Douglas Sloan, *Faith and Knowledge: Mainline Protestantism and Twentieth-Century American Higher Education* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1994).

3.[[back](#)] See especially D. G. Hart, "American Learning and the Problem of Religious Studies," in Marsden and Longfield, *Secularization*, 195-233.

4.[[back](#)] Alasdair MacIntyre offers a telling critique of this outlook in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*(Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

5.[[back](#)] John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press), 20-22.

6.[[back](#)] Richard Nelson Current, *Phi Beta Kappa in American Life: The First Two Hundred Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 210-18, provides a very frank account of such policies.

7.[[back](#)] Based on telephone interviews with Joyce Wexler, March 5,1993, and Frank Fennell, March 16,1993, and Faculty Handbook, Loyola University of Chicago, 1983, 30.

8.[[back](#)] Joseph Richard Preville, "Catholic Colleges, the Courts, and the Constitution: A Tale of Two Cases," *Church History* 58 (June 1989): 197-210. For a discussion of the impact of the pressures at the time, see Walter Gellhorn and R. Kent Greenawalt, *The Sectarian College and the Public Purse: Fordham--A Case Study* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana Publications, 1970).

9.[[back](#)] Quoted in Preville, "Catholic Colleges," 209.

10.[[back](#)] Scott Jaschik, "Hiring at Religious Colleges," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 17,1993, A30. Notre Dame joined a number of schools in a "friend of the court" brief to the Supreme Court on behalf of the Kamehameha Schools.

11.[[back](#)] A frequently heard argument of less general applicability is the claim that the only



way to get "the best people" is to drop all considerations of religion. Doubtless that is correct in some instances. However, the other side of the issue is that some leading scholars might be inclined to come to, and to stay at, less highly regarded institutions just because of a religious emphasis. If a lower-ranked institution relies simply on the open market to get the best people, it must reckon with the fact that more prestigious institutions will always have the upper hand in such competition.

12.[\[back\]](#) Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 515, makes this point.

