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Can Notre Dame Be Saved?

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I am a member of the United Methodist Church and a graduate student of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. One might ask why a United Methodist would go to a Roman Catholic university to study philosophy. The answer is, I am at Notre Dame because I cannot study philosophy at a Methodist university. There no longer are any. All that remains is a collection of secular universities that were originally founded by Methodists as Christian universities. The list includes some whose Methodist history is indicated by their names, such as Wesleyan and Southern Methodist. But it also includes a number of schools whose Methodist heritage is unknown even to most Methodists: Emory, Duke, Boston University, Northwestern, Syracuse, Vanderbilt, and the University of Southern California. Some of these universities still have organizational ties to the United Methodist Church, but they are Christian in name only.

I am not the only Protestant in Notre Dame's Philosophy Department. Approximately one–third of the graduate students now studying philosophy at Notre Dame are Protestants who decided to study here rather than elsewhere because of the Christian reputation of Notre Dame's Philosophy Department. The Department's faculty includes not only several of the best Catholic philosophers in the country, but also several of the best Protestant philosophers as well. No other philosophy faculty approaches Notre Dame's in combining high standards of academic excellence with commitment both to Christianity and to a belief in the philosophic importance of Christian faith–whether Catholic *or* Protestant.

I am concerned, however, that the process of secularization that removed the Methodist universities and, before them, most of the Ivy League schools from the ranks of Christian academic institutions is now setting in at Notre Dame. After all, the Methodist schools did not become post–Christian overnight. They abandoned their Christianity gradually, as a result of many decisions made by many people over a period of decades. There are indications that Notre Dame is now heading down that same trail. At the inaugural Mass of Notre Dame's 1954–55 academic year, Fr. Theodore Hesburgh said, "Here is an apostolate that no secular university today can undertake–for they are largely cut off from the tradition of adequate knowledge which comes only through faith in the mind and faith in God, the highest wisdom of Christian philosophy and Catholic theology." In the 1990s, however, the challenge is to prevent Notre Dame from becoming merely one more secular university.

Part of the problem facing Notre Dame is that there are people there who are embarrassed by the fact that it is a Catholic university and are working to hasten the day when it no longer is. But it is not actually these who pose the greatest threat to the Catholic identity of the University. The real danger comes from a much larger group of persons who believe that Notre Dame can strive for ever–higher standards of academic excellence–and use the same criteria of excellence by which the best secular universities in the land are judged to be excellent–without forfeiting the Catholic character of the University.

Some of those who believe that Notre Dame could never cease to be Catholic are not at all surprised that the Protestant schools have lost their Christian identity. But what are the relevant differences? One difference is simply that many of the Protestant universities are older than Notre Dame and have thus had more time to undergo erosion. Another important difference is that, at least until recently, Catholic universities have done a better job of resisting the pressure to adopt liberalism as their governing philosophy.

The influence of liberalism on America's Christian universities has been twofold: first, it has led to the rejection of the belief that there is one correct conception of the human good and one correct way to pursue human happiness; and second, it has led to acceptance of the belief that government should be concerned with ensuring a context within which individuals can pursue their various freely chosen goods and adjudicating the dispute when one person's pursuit of happiness conflicts with another's, but not with telling people how best to pursue their happiness. At a point in history when the bankruptcy of Communism is no longer deniable, we need to be more alert than ever to the vices of liberal democracy. In a fallen, sinful world, liberal democracy may be the best alternative for structuring political institutions, but it is not our best option for structuring Christian churches and universities.

From my perspective as an outsider on the inside, it appears that many of the problems within the Catholic Church in the United States today are related to the attempt by American Catholics to apply the political system of their government to their Church. I invite all Roman Catholics who would like to belong to a more democratic church to become United Methodists.

The Protestant emphasis on the need for a personal relationship with God, if not balanced by an emphasis on the need to belong to a community of others who are also rightly related to God, can lead to an excessively individualistic understanding of human society. There are clear historical relationships between the Protestant Reformation, the rejection of the Thomistic understanding of the common good, and the growth of liberal democracy. And nowhere is that more true than in this country. The birth of Methodism as a Protestant denomination, distinct from the Church of England, was closely related to the American Revolution. We severed our ties not only with the King of England but also with the Archbishop of Canterbury. And the organization of the new church was influenced by that of the new government.

Today most Methodists neither know nor care what their bishops believe about morality and all are free to attempt by democratic methods to change any of the church's moral positions they do not like. Every presidential election year we have our own political convention to determine democratically what will be right and wrong for the next four years. At the 1988 General Conference of the United Methodist Church in St. Louis, legislation affirming that "we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching" was adopted by a 765–181 vote of the delegates. The gay rights lobby was unsuccessful–for now. What was most significant about this vote, however, is not that a moral position inconsistent with Christian Scripture and nearly two millennia of Christian tradition was defeated overwhelmingly, but rather that the question was even brought up for a vote in the first place.

The reason liberal democracy may be appropriate for our civil society is that as a pluralistic society, we have little hope of reaching complete agreement concerning the human good and the proper way to pursue happiness. But among Christians, there ought to be good reason to hope we can agree on the main points, if not in every detail, about what constitutes the good and how we should pursue happiness. All Christians are called to holiness. Having that much in common is infinitely more significant than any differences in our understanding of that call.

There is an historical, although not a necessary logical, relationship between liberal democracy and the moral anarchy of contemporary America. The step from "we should all be free to decide what is good for us" to "what we decide is good for us *is* good for us" is an all–too–easy one to take. So is the step from "there is no good common to everyone" to "there is no good." We have transferred the beliefs and practices of liberalism not only from the political realm to the ecclesiastical, but also to the moral. The result is the combination of ethical subjectivism, relativism, emotivism, and nihilism so much in fashion in Western democracies today. (Of course, one cannot consistently be a subjectivist, a relativist, an emotivist, and a nihilist; but it is also fashionable today to be unconcerned about logical consistency in matters of religion and morality.)

As American Catholics bring liberalism into their Church and academic institutions, they bring with it the moral confusion that usually accompanies it. Perhaps simply noting that the absence of moral authority was once considered deplorable can help us understand how far we have regressed. At least one description of ancient Israel sounds very much like modern America: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6, 21:25).

A battle for the soul of the University of Notre Dame is being waged, then, between traditional Christians and people whose *Weltanschauung* is rooted primarily in the Enlightenment. I will use "secular humanism" as a label for the post–Enlightenment, nontheistic faith of the large and growing number of Westerners who have abandoned Judaism or Christianity without adopting another species of organized religion. Although "secular humanism" is a term used most frequently by Protestant Fundamentalists, it was Justice Hugo Black–in delivering the opinion of the United States Supreme Court in a 1961 case, *Torcaso v. Watkins*–who distinguished between "religions based on a belief in the existence of God" and "religions founded on different beliefs," such as "Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism, and others." In 1980 Paul Kurtz, a SUNY–Buffalo philosopher, published a "Secular Humanist Declaration," which was signed by a number of prominent scholars. In the Introduction to his Declaration, Kurtz shows an understanding of the relationships among secular humanism and the Enlightenment, (liberal) democracy, and the Catholic Church:

> Secularism and humanism were eclipsed in Europe during the Dark Ages, when religious piety eroded humankind's confidence in its own powers to solve human problems. They reappeared in force during the Renaissance . . . and their influence can be found in the eighteenth century in the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment. Democratic secular humanism has creatively flowered in modern times with the growth of freedom and democracy. . . . Regrettably, we are today faced with a variety of anti–secularist trends: the reappearance of dogmatic authoritarian religions; fundamentalist, literalist, and doctrinaire Christianity . . . the reassertion of orthodox authority by the Roman

Catholic papal hierarchy. . . .

To see how far down the path to secular humanism the University of Notre Dame has already traveled, one need only read the official statements made about the University by its administrators. The term "values" appears frequently in these statements. For example, the 1990–91 edition of the University's *Fact Sheet*, a widely distributed, six–panel brochure, includes the following passage: "Notre Dame has a unique spirit. It is traditional, yet open to change. It is dedicated to religious belief no less than scientific knowledge. It has always stood for values in a world of fact. It has kept faith with Father Sorin's vision." I seriously doubt that Fr. Sorin–the founder of the University–ever envisioned a dichotomy between value and fact. It would be difficult to imagine a vision further removed from the Roman Catholic moral tradition.

Among the philosophers whose works contain the seeds of this dichotomy is David Hume: "If we take in our hand any volume–of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance–let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

The clearest–and therefore most clearly absurd–articulation of this dichotomy in its fully developed form is given by another British philosopher, A. J. Ayer: "Since the expression of a value judgment is not a proposition, the question of truth or falsehood does not here arise. . . . In saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement." Not surprisingly, Ayer was one of the signers of Paul Kurtz's "Secular Humanist Declaration."

C. S. Lewis' recognition of a fact–value dichotomy within an argument against ethical subjectivism in *The Abolition of Man* has no doubt contributed something to the frequency with which "values" is used by both Catholics and Protestants who want to defend "traditional values." But Christians should never accept a dichotomy between facts and values. To say, for example, that Hitler and Stalin were evil men or that we should work to relieve the suffering of the poor is *both* to make a value judgment *and* to state a fact. Many people would no doubt disagree; but how could a Christian do so?

My point in calling attention to use of the term "values" in Notre Dame documents is not to criticize the anonymous author of a public relations brochure, but rather to point out the depth of the confusion concerning ethics at Notre Dame today. This is more than an issue of technical terminology. The leaders of the University pride themselves on the fact that "we believe in values." The implication is that persons at secular–humanist universities do not. But of course everyone has ethical beliefs and every university offers ethics courses. To the extent that there is any significant moral difference between Notre Dame and non–Christian universities, it is not that Notre Dame "believes in values" and the others do not, but rather that our values are different from theirs. Our objective should be not merely to teach values, but to teach values radically different from and superior to those taught at secular universities.

But, of course, we cannot say that Christian values (or virtues) are better than, for example, Kurtz's "democratic secular humanist values" unless we believe ethical statements are factual statements and are either true or false. And it is far from clear that those who administer or teach at Notre Dame believe that. In fact, the school is home to a large, though shrinking, group of people who hold traditional Catholic beliefs on specific issues such as abortion and euthanasia, but who at the same time hold many beliefs about ethics that are indistinguishable from the subjectivism, relativism, emotivism, and nihilism of secular America.

Despite the tendency at Notre Dame toward self–congratulation about commitment to values, undergraduates are not even required to take an ethics course. There is more emphasis on community service than on classroom instruction–an emphasis entirely consistent with the belief widely accepted in our society that values, while they may be created and clarified, can be neither true nor false. If there is no fact of the matter, there is little point in assigning ethics a central role in the formal curriculum. Notre Dame deserves praise for the many opportunities it gives students to volunteer their time. But to understand moral education primarily in terms of extracurricular activities is to reject the Catholic moral tradition and to adopt the model someone has called "value–added education." The difference between a Catholic university and a secular–humanist university with a Newman Center should be more than a difference of scale.

The gap between the rhetoric and the reality of ethics education at Notre Dame is qualitative as well as quantitative. Not only are there fewer ethics courses than the value–talk would suggest, but little attention is paid to which values are taught. Some of the ethics courses offered at Notre Dame are consistent with Catholic moral teachings and some are not: to maintain that certain moral theories are better than others might offend someone. This diversity is in keeping with the liberal doctrine that all values are created equal. But liberalism is not really neutral with regard to *all* values. Those who tell us that morality is relative are usually quick to add that, because morality is relative, we should tolerate those whose moral beliefs differ from our own. There are some moral absolutes after all. In our attempt to be committed to ethics without being narrow–minded concerning whose ethics we are committed to, we have actually replaced the four cardinal *virtues* of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance with the four cardinal *values* of openness, equality, tolerance, and diversity.

To suggest that there should be standards of quality control for ethics courses at a Catholic university is, of course, to enter the debate concerning "academic freedom." I am no opponent of academic freedom; but I believe Christians should not let civil libertarians and secular humanists decide for us what it means to be free. I find it incredible that a commitment to Christianity is supposed to be irrelevant to an understanding of academic freedom.

The well–known distinction between negative and positive freedom is helpful at this point. Negative freedom is freedom from restraint; positive freedom is freedom to pursue a worthwhile objective. It is the distinction made, *mutatis mutandis*, in biblical passages such as Romans 6:16–23. We can choose between freedom from divine authority and freedom with regard to righteousness. In neither case are we absolutely free. To be free from God's authority is to be a slave to sin. To be free with regard to righteousness, on the other hand, requires submission to God's authority.

The political freedom of liberalism is negative political freedom, just as the academic freedom of secular humanism is negative academic freedom. While it may be desirable to allow a high degree of negative political freedom in our country, academic freedom at a Christian university should be positive academic freedom. If academic freedom at a Catholic university means the freedom to teach anything whatsoever, even if it contradicts the teaching of the Catholic Church, what distinguishes a Catholic university from any other kind of university? To answer the question merely in terms of having a clergyman as president, a crucifix in every classroom, and a chapel in every residence hall is to abandon a rich intellectual tradition.

True academic freedom is not freedom from ecclesiastical authority, but freedom to speak the truth. And Christians have an understanding of truth not shared with secular scholars. Yet Notre Dame's description of "academic freedom and associated responsibilities" in its *Faculty Handbook* offers no indication that it is shaped by a distinctively Christian understanding of freedom. There are, according to the *Handbook*, three principles of academic freedom: "freedom to teach and to learn according to one's obligation, vision, and training; freedom to publish the results of one's study or research; and freedom to speak and write on public issues as a citizen." The first of the associated responsibilities is "respectful allowance for the exercise of these freedoms by others." Many people believe that academic freedom is "value–free." But Notre Dame's statement clearly assumes liberal values. Each individual has a right to the greatest degree of (negative) freedom consistent with respecting the right of every other individual to the same degree of (negative) freedom. Far from being value–neutral, academic freedom at Notre Dame is rooted in the four cardinal values.

Some people at Notre Dame believe that we cannot have a genuine university in the modern world without laissez–faire research and teaching–that a university must be a "marketplace of ideas." Professors, it is maintained, are not in the business of sheltering students from intellectual challenges to their faith. I grant that one of the things a Catholic university should do is introduce students to intellectual positions opposed to Christianity. But to place a higher priority on challenging students' faith than on teaching them how to defend their faith against attack is simply imprudent. Most Notre Dame undergraduates arrive at the University without knowing the basics of their own moral tradition–and most graduate in the same condition. To attack faith without first nurturing it is like teaching people to swim by dropping them in the middle of the ocean.

I am not arguing that Christian universities should have less academic freedom than non–Christian universities. On the contrary, I am claiming that only genuinely Christian universities are truly free. One of the roles of a Christian university is that of exploring ways to further the development of the Christian tradition. But there is a difference between working within a tradition to help it progress and stepping outside it in order to attack it.

I am saying nothing new. The Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes* emphasizes the need for scholars to be free, but states that this freedom must remain "within the limits of morality and the general welfare." And *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the 1990 Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, states that academic freedom must remain "within the confines of the truth and the common good." In order to determine whether a university conforms to these documents, some system of identifying the limits of morality and the confines of truth–and of keeping a university within these boundaries–is required.

Until relatively recently, those systems were external to Catholic universities. In his recently published autobiography, Fr. Hesburgh describes his efforts to pull Notre Dame and other Catholic universities out from under the Church hierarchy in order to preserve their "autonomy and academic freedom." But if a university is liberated from external ecclesiastical authority, an internal system of discipline must be instituted in order to ensure that its teaching remains consistent with the tradition to which it belongs. There is no such internal system at the University of Notre Dame today. Because of the decision in the 1960s to transfer control of Notre Dame to a lay board of trustees, the Congregation of Holy Cross is no longer in a position to preserve the Catholic character of the University. The problem today is that no one else has accepted that responsibility. We believe in values but it doesn't much matter which ones.

Fr. Hesburgh clearly understands the need to restrict autonomy in some areas. He explains in his autobiography how he brought the "autonomous fiefdom" of legendary football coach Frank Leahy under his control. But why is "bringing the athletics department to heel" so much more important than establishing quality–control measures for the academic departments in order to prevent Notre Dame from becoming a post–Christian university?

Discussions of academic freedom are naturally closely related to discussions of academic excellence. Many of the decisions that are contributing to the secularization of Notre Dame are being made in the name of excellence. The arguments go something like this: If Notre Dame is to become and to be recognized as a truly great Catholic university, our faculty must include many outstanding scholars. It would be desirable to appoint outstanding scholars who are also committed Christians, but we cannot become a great university by appointing second–rate Christian scholars instead of first–rate non–Christian scholars. Therefore, we should hire the best scholars money can buy, without considering their religious and moral beliefs. Of course Notre Dame is and always will be Catholic. What could be more absurd than suggesting that Notre Dame might someday cease to be a Catholic university?

This is precisely the type of reasoning responsible for Notre Dame's drift toward secular humanism. Because the salaries of Notre Dame's entry–level faculty positions are relatively high, many applicants respond to announcements of openings. And because most of these scholars are not Christians, a policy of disregarding the religious and moral beliefs of applicants will result in a predominantly non–Christian faculty. In short, to decide that religious commitment is irrelevant to hiring decisions is to decide that Notre Dame will cease to be a Catholic university. What does it profit a university to gain worldwide recognition as an excellent research institution and forfeit its soul?

No one connected with the institution could do anything but endorse with enthusiasm the idea of working to make Notre Dame an excellent university. But how could it become a "Catholic Princeton" without ceasing to be Catholic? Besides, why should we let non–Christians decide for us what it means to be excellent? Are Christian standards of excellence inferior to secular standards? Roman Catholics are in a better position than anyone else to look to their own intellectual tradition for guidance in understanding what it means to attain academic excellence.

One might ask, By what right does a Protestant criticize a Catholic university for giving up its Catholic identity? Are not people like myself a major part of the problem? Indeed, if Notre Dame were to become so concerned about preserving its Catholic character that it expelled Protestants, I could accept that decision. It would be much better *for Protestants* to have one American university so committed to Catholicism that it excluded Protestants than to have one more American university so committed to what is laughably called "cultural diversity" that it excluded no one. Still, anyone who cares about preserving the Catholic identity of Notre Dame can recognize that if the greatest threat to the Catholic character of the University were Protestantism, the situation would be a far happier one *for Catholics* than is the present situation. In fact, the leaders of Notre Dame, when attempting to measure the Catholicity of the faculty, would do well to move beyond a binary distinction between those who have Roman Catholic baptismal certificates and those who do not. The religious and moral beliefs of some Protestants are much closer to Rome than are those of many nominal baptized–but–unconverted Catholics.

What every Christian academic institution needs is not merely faculty members who are Christians in some minimal sense, but scholars who take their Christian faith so seriously that they believe it should be integrated with their scholarship. To believe that whether or not scholars are Christian is irrelevant to the excellence of their scholarship is to reject a rich philosophical and theological tradition and to adopt a form of the fideism for which many Catholics justly criticize many Protestants. The point is not that Christian universities should never enlist the services of non–Christian scholars. But Christian universities should look beyond how many journal articles potential professors are likely to publish. Notre Dame should appoint only excellent scholars; but we should realize that we have more than one option when it comes to understanding academic excellence.

Notre Dame cannot remain indefinitely at some position between Roman Catholicism and secular humanism–nor should those of us who teach there hope that it might. Such a compromise is self–contradictory and unstable. Should Notre Dame become a post–Christian university, it will remain one. After the momentum passes a certain point, there will be no return, even if many members of the Notre Dame community then see and regret what they have allowed to happen. The Methodist universities are not only lost; they are irretrievably lost. Moreover, if Notre Dame becomes a post–Christian university, it probably will not be a very good one. How, for instance, could it compete with the best secular institutions in the land without the financial support now coming from people who precisely believe it to be a Catholic university?

Iam not suggesting that I have a simple solution to the problems confronting Notre Dame. I am arguing neither that instituting academic discipline would be an easy corrective to the secularization of the University nor that we should attempt to turn the clock back several decades. I am more concerned with Notre Dame's future than with its past. Most Christian academic institutions see themselves as forced to choose between Christian commitment and academic excellence. Some Catholic and Protestant colleges have chosen the former. The majority of Christian colleges and universities have chosen the latter. I believe that Notre Dame should choose both. Perhaps no university has been both genuinely Christian and truly excellent since the University of Paris in the thirteenth century. But if Notre Dame is interested in carrying on the tradition of the University of Paris, it certainly will not achieve that objective by emulating Harvard, Yale, and Princeton.

In addition, I am mindful that adopting the type of freedom I am proposing would most likely bring Notre Dame into conflict with the American Association of University Professors' understanding of academic freedom. And because of current or future interpretations of the First Amendment, the school would perhaps have problems with governmental funding. Whatever might prove to be the solution to these or other problems, it would certainly not lie in conforming to the standards of non–Christian universities.

In any case, if positive action to halt and reverse the secularization of the University of Notre Dame is not taken soon, the question will be not whether, but when, Notre Dame will be a Christian university in precisely the sense that Northwestern University is now Christian. The leaders of the University–faculty, administrators, and trustees–have a responsibility of stewardship to pass on to future generations the heritage of faith at Notre Dame.

If Notre Dame is indeed a Catholic university, there should be no hesitation on the part of its leaders to state that moral truth is not a matter of individual taste, that the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church will not be compromised on the Notre Dame campus, and that anyone not interested in teaching at a Christian university should teach elsewhere–perhaps at one of the formerly Methodist universities. Merely to recite platitudes about "values," thereby implying that Notre Dame students are being educated at a Christian university without taking steps to ensure that they are, is to commit–no other term seems to suit–fraud.

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