

Paper: “The Catholic University and the Quest for Truth”

Thesis: Academic freedom within Christian Universities is understood as the *corporate freedom* of the university to develop its distinctive identity and pursue its proper mission.

Many of the top universities in the United States mirror the values of our liberal democratic society. The goal of these universities is to transform their student body into cosmopolitan citizens. Thus, each student is encouraged to doubt the goodness of one’s own way and enter into a give-and-take of critical argument about ethical and political choices (Martha Nussbaum defends this point of view in *Cultivating Humanity*). The purpose is not to shape a student’s moral character, political views, etc., for this would maintain that there was a foundational tradition guiding the university and its curriculum. Instead the attempt is to engage the student with a number of traditions so that he or she will always remain traditionless.¹ The university abandons the ideal of corporate community if by that ideal is meant a community united on one (partially or fully) comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral discipline (see John Rawls, especially his Harvard undergraduate class lectures entitled *Justice as Fairness*). In this way the university sees itself as a bastion of free inquiry.

In contrast with the liberal democratic society Christian Universities are defined and guided by the tradition termed *ekklesia* (“church”). An ecclesially based university seeks to initiate and socialize its members into the polity and practices of the church within, for, and often against the polity and practices of the liberal democratic society. Because of this the ecclesially based university is marginalized in academia. As Stanley Hauerwas states, “It has simply become unthinkable that Christian convictions might have something to do with the actual content of the university and with pedagogical practice” (Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001)). This harsh critique has prompted many Christian Universities to alter themselves so that they parallel secular universities dominated by liberalism and the corresponding values (for example, Duke University, originally Methodist, prides itself on being “the Harvard of the South”). Thus, even so-called “ecclesially based universities” agree that free inquiry can only take place outside of a tradition. Granted that academic freedom is an important good, I argue that the vision of academic freedom must be expanded to include a consideration of the *corporate freedom* of the university. What this means for the ecclesially based university is the freedom to be Christian. As William Cavanaugh points out, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* puts consideration of academic freedom in the context of the freedom of the Catholic [or Christian] University to be itself:

A Catholic University possesses the autonomy necessary to develop its distinctive identity and pursue its proper mission. Freedom in research and teaching is recognized and respected according to the principles and methods of each individual discipline, so long as the rights of the individual and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common

¹ A recent article in the Atlantic Monthly chronicled the lives of students at Princeton University (David Brooks, “The Organizational Kid,” Atlantic Monthly (April 2001): 40-54). In this article, Princeton administrators state, “We’ve taken the decision that these are adults and this [moral character building, formation, etc.] is not our job. There’s a pretty self-conscious attempt not to instill character. . . . In general the job of the university is to supply the knowledge that students will need to prosper, and, at most, to provide a forum in which they can cultivate character on their own. This university doesn’t orchestrate students’ lives outside the classroom. We’re very conservative about how we steer. They steer themselves.”

good (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Part II, art. 2, para. 5; William Cavanaugh, “Sailing Under True Colors,” in *Conflicting Allegiances* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 42).

The failure to maintain Christian universities that are recognizably Christian has led to an inability of Christians to articulate the convictions that make them Christian (George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University* (New York: Oxford, 1994); James Burtchaell, C. S. C., *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). My paper will argue that Christians should develop and maintain universities with recognizable identities (in its curriculum, convictions, professors, etc.).² It is only in this way that Christian universities can truly have free inquiry.³ The ecclesially based university will also claim that its understanding of freedom is more complete and more liberating, precisely because it is based on the truth of the Christian faith. The work of the university is best done when the Truth, who is God, is acknowledged. The ecclesially based university does indeed have a different understanding of academic freedom than that of secular universities, but we claim that it inscribes a more complete freedom into the life of a university. The ecclesially based university is better equipped to promote freedom precisely because it has a fuller understanding of the quest for truth.

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² I want to put this argument in dialogue with Alasdair MacIntyre’s comments on the university in *Three Rival Versions* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame, 1990). Specifically his argument for the establishment of a university of constrained agreements in contrast with both the premodern university of enforced and constrained agreements and to the modern university of alleged unconstrained agreements (230-231). MacIntyre’s university would have faculties of encyclopaedists, genealogists, and Thomists, that is, all of the various options for serious inquiry would be included. MacIntyre argues that in time this arrangement might result in the establishment of a set of rival universities. My paper will attempt to argue that this is how a Christian university should understand itself.

³ I will argue that this is what John Paul II means when he states, “A Catholic University is distinguished by its free search for the whole truth about nature, man, and God” (John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*).