The Advantage of a Catholic Curriculum

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"I have come into the country where men do definitely believe that the waving of the trees makes the wind. That is to say, they believe that the material circumstances, however black and twisted, are more important than the spiritual realities, however powerful and pure."

– G.K. Chesterton, In Topsy-Turvy Land

A teacher affects individual students. A curriculum influences generations. I want to defend the claim that this latter fact makes the contemporary university's failure to offer a curriculum adequate to the needs of society at large and students in particular all the more egregious. I also want to argue that a remedy for the grave shortcomings of the North American university curriculum will be found in a curriculum organized around Catholic principles of education.[1]

As university education has become increasingly, over a few generations, a sort of "mass education" designed for virtually anyone able to pay for it, a growing number of critics have raised concerns about the academic credibility of the curricular standards of higher education. "Nature is not democratic" and other such slogans typified the sort of objection leveled against curricula tailored for mass consumption. But far more problematic for the contemporary university is the fact that, in essence, there is only one curriculum in North America. Contrary to the protestations of professional educators and administrators who have made careers out of curricular reform, there is precious little uniqueness in curricula across the country. Regardless of local or regional differences in demographics or economics, and the like, the contemporary university curriculum has become by and large homogeneous. Courses, testing procedures, performance standards and so on do not differ from one institution to another in any meaningful sense. This is evidenced by the fact that a student may travel around the continent attending different schools without encountering anything intellectually distinctive. (This fact does not escape the notice of administrators throughout North America who have been at a loss as to how to justify their refusal to grant degrees to students who have attended a school for only a few semesters; indeed, in the absence of anything unique about their curricula, some schools have ingeniously imposed a "residency" requirement, which has nothing to do with what a student has learned, as a way to ensure that students will "stay and pay" at an institution.)

No doubt there are good practical reasons for institutionalizing a homogeneous curriculum on a nationwide basis. It ensures that students can be trained virtually anywhere and yet still expect to take their place in the North American economic system. It allows universities to use faculty trained anywhere in the entire continent. It enables educational governing agencies to oversee and evaluate universities according to a common standard.

It is a matter of fact, though, that there are a number of viable curricula available to universities. What, then, is the rationale behind the precise curriculum that has been embraced by North American universities? Faculties and administrators sometimes like to think that their curriculum is the product of their own genius and efforts. This is pure delusion. Not only is the obvious homogeneity of North American university curricula a glaring testament to the powerlessness of individual university faculties to fashion or modify their own institution's curriculum, but often when an institution attempts to implement a curriculum really distinct from others, it is marginalized by the academic community.[2] When such places do exist, they are small and find few professional educators willing to participate, regardless of the objective merits of the curriculum.

What, then, is the reason for the choice of the curriculum that reigns in North American universities? One philosopher observed not too long ago that curriculum is fashioned according to what "the dominant classes of a society consider important to be known."[3] What is important is "to keep technology dynamic within the context of the continental state capitalist structure."[4] I am inclined to agree with this view in some modified form. It is true, I think, that the university curriculum is geared toward the promotion of the technology society in all of its forms — from engaging in research in applied technology to producing new members who can contribute to the advancement of technology. It is an all-too-familiar fact that society at large funds universities because it is believed that society's existence and future survival is tied to what technology can accomplish. Anyone familiar with the pay scale at the contemporary university knows only too well that compensation is meted out not on the basis of any academic standards, but according to "market forces." Of course, these "forces" have nothing to do with learning, but everything to do with advancing the power and wealth of society. I do not mean to suggest that there is some sort of conspiracy by some few to control what is taught to generations of students. North American society is democratic in many respects and so the majority of the population who have become persuaded of the unparalleled advantages of technology is in fact influential. Technology offers power and affluence to all who have some share in using it, so it is easy to understand the popularity of university programs that best prepare students to engage in technological activity in applied research or the manipulation of existing technology, or in programs that train students to manage institutions and businesses which are associated with such technological activity. It is profoundly attractive to the average college student to imagine that, simply by taking the right courses, he or she will one day step into a position of considerable power and be compensated generously as well. This is precisely the justification universities rely on when charging enormous sums in tuition.

It would be a mistake to think that at the heart of the technological drive both as it exists in society and in universities is mere greed or lust for control. Powerful as these drives are, there is something more philosophical behind the contemporary devotion to technology. It is the belief that technology is the only real source from which we are able to organize human life and address human difficulties. Technology is, for North American society, the highest expression of our efforts at making order and fulfillment for humans. There is, in other words, a profoundly philosophical commitment to technology as the way humans will constitute, and fulfill as much as possible, their own existence and future. Consider for a moment the almost unconscious reaction to look to technology in some form for solutions to any and all human problems.

But what about the notion that there are other causes of action in the world, other sources of order and fulfillment? To put it bluntly, the preoccupation with the advancement of technology by society and its educational institutions is the direct result of the lack of any philosophical or theological recognition that there are other causes or forms of fulfillment other than material, technological ones. Only in a world of purely physical forces and causes does a technologically dominated education system make sense. If the idea of the presence and involvement of God and other "spirits" like human souls endowed with free will and intelligence had any real place in society, then its educational institutions would prize and foster efforts geared to study these realities. For the most part, universities do not take seriously a curriculum devoted to the consideration of immaterial realities. Even the so-called theoretical disciplines such as philosophy and other humanities are either tolerated at universities as forms of frivolous diversions from the serious business of learning or they are promoted as studies that ultimately serve the technological aims of society, sometimes in spite of the resistance or opposition of individual faculty members; hence, even theology programs are typically justified in terms of their utility in the overall technological curriculum of the university. They serve to convince students that God wants them to be "productive," to obey society’s laws, and not to be a drain on the financial resources of a society. Prayer is sold as a means of coping with day-to-day pressures of life in this society. Students are taught about the moral or spiritual benefits of technology in saving or prolonging the lives of its "useful" members and ending the lives of those members whose lives are no longer "worthwhile." Consider, for example, the sympathetic hearing euthanasia and abortion receive at universities. What better economic answer is there for unproductive members of society such as the aged and infirmed or for those members who interfere with productivity, such as the unborn, than death dressed up in the appropriately sympathetic theological or philosophical language? The corresponding intolerance of "pro-life" students on campuses shows all too clearly the hostility that exists against a more "spiritual" assessment of the value of life. Students of a more spiritual inclination are taught to be concerned only with social issues, hunger, health, and any other cause that serves the goal of society of dealing with and limiting an unproductive underclass of technological misfits. At a more benign level, abstract studies such as philosophy are justified in terms of teaching students to think and write carefully, skills that can be put to good use in the "real" world.

The technological domination of the contemporary curriculum is not limited to studies in philosophy and theology. Even the recent women’s studies and multicultural programs, which began with such wonderful promise, because they courageously questioned and challenged the "canons" of the established university curriculum, have, it seems, slowly embraced and adapted themselves to the technological aims of the university. Women’s studies primarily concern themselves with empowerment efforts — of preparing women to find more powerful and affluent places in the society, of persuading women students that this must be their goal, and of implementing an ideology of empowerment in the curriculum. It may be too soon yet to judge multicultural programs. It is clear that these programs could offer rich opportunities for the North American university to rethink its obsession with technological advancement and affluence. It is not encouraging to see them taking a turn toward the ideology of "voice" or empowerment. In both cases, instead of resisting the curricular movement toward the promotion of technological power, these programs have used their energies trying to get as large a piece of the reigning curriculum as possible. The less benign types of these programs seek the material empowerment of their own members, whereas the more benign seek the empowerment of others. But in each case, the salvation offered seems to be modeled in the terms of material, technological forces.

There are really only two real opponents to the philosophic commitments of technology and hence to the contemporary curriculum — God and Nature. What is missing everywhere from the contemporary university is what it needs most — contemplation of both. The belief that inspires the drive to technological power is that only physical realities exist and that humans reach their highest perfection when they control those realities, regardless of what God or Nature require; thus, the "marketing" of even the most theoretical university disciplines such as philosophy or theology as useful toward the advancement of the technological society has effectively eliminated from them their only real value. These disciplines alone are able to raise the question most important to the life of North American society and to its members. It is philosophy and theology that consider seriously and in an intellectual way whether there are spirits in the world, whether God or Nature provide a norm or source of order for human thought and action, and innumerable questions of this sort.

But a remarkable phenomenon has taken place in North American education. The contemplation of, and the search for, truth as an institutional commitment has been replaced by concerns of a practical sort. Curricula are justified not in terms of their promotion of truth, but in terms of their usefulness to society and in preparing students to work and fit in. After all, in a society completely committed to the acquisition and use of physical forces against human and nonhuman nature, any questions regarding the truth of human dignity or God’s designs could only pose difficulties. Faculties are nothing if not practical regarding their own self-interests. If they engage in the business of asking why society regards the acquisition of technological mastery as its ultimate end, they will set themselves at odds to their own administrations and hence to their source of livelihood. This is, of course, the ultimate trump card in the contemporary university as it is most everywhere else; furthermore, the danger of seeking truth is that it may end up imposing demands on the activities of those involved in education.

What the contemporary university needs is not more programs exclusively dedicated to preparing future participants of the technological society. What it and society need is an "antidote" to the materialistic, technological myopia that it has suffered for generations. Put in other words, contemporary society needs universities to adopt a curriculum dedicated not to the ever-increasing amassing of power and wealth, but one that is concerned with grasping the truth — especially about the existence and activity of God or other "spirits" like humans endowed with intelligence and free will.

A Catholic university could, in theory, offer a sort of antidote to the modern malaise of materialism and the lust for power. Because it is tied to and inspired by another, independent society, the Catholic university can allow itself the luxury to be concerned with the investigation of and the promotion of the truth, without concerns of power and wealth. In remarkable simplicity and without guile, the Catholic university can insist upon the truth of the Incarnate Word, upon the dignity of humans as both spirit and body and upon the efficacy of spiritual forces unleashed through prayer; yet, most of these concerns rarely receive serious treatment in the curriculum. For example, some would have us believe that it was not the loaves and fishes that were multiplied but the number in attendance at this supposed banquet — as if such material multiplication was beyond the abilities of the same Reality that is responsible for the existence of the entire material universe. I recall a well-meaning colleague trying to come to the defense of the value of prayer insofar as it makes the person feel better about things outside her immediate sphere of (presumably physical) control. This is another instance of a fatal championing of Christian thought. To regard prayer as a type of mantra that has only dubious psychological effects misses the central, albeit discomforting, claim of the Catholic faith. It asserts unequivocally that, merely by uttering certain propositions or phrases (often in private), real-world effects will undoubtedly occur. It is not clear which is most discomforting to proponents of technology — that it flies in the face of their materialism or because it might possibly be true!

The Catholic Church has had a hard time in technological society. Whenever it insists on its own ideals of higher learning, it has been criticized for being too idealistic with its emphasis on contemplation of the truth; for being too arrogant and exclusive with its insistence on the truth of its own doctrines about Christ, the Church and the sacraments; for being too idiosyncratic with its traditional curriculum, which centers on philosophy and theology in their most abstract form. At root, an authentically Catholic curriculum often offends. An authentically Catholic university is, in the mind of a technologically obsessed society and educational system, an illness rather than an antidote. It is as though, if only the Catholic Church would stop insisting on truth and adapt itself to the practices, the standards and the curriculum of public universities, then its universities would be fine. And to no little degree, Catholic universities have done this. Instead of being a "voice in the wilderness," many a Catholic school has opted not to provide what the technological society really needs and instead has begun to try to provide what society wants. And what society wants are more members convinced of the ultimate importance of technology and convinced that the only realities are physical. Even some Catholic educators, theologians included, have stopped insisting on these truths out of a misguided sense of openness and desire to conform.

Educators unaware of what a Catholic school could offer have raised objections to the notion of a really Catholic curriculum. More than once I have heard people complain, even people sympathetic to Catholic education in some sense, that Catholicism has nothing to do with curriculum. They argue that there is no such thing as "Catholic" biology, "Catholic" history or "Catholic" psychology. This is, of course, true in the obvious sense. Looking through a microscope is not somehow different when a Catholic does it. But it is also true that these disciplines are in the business of offering explanations about the world, about history and about humans. Here a Catholic school can offer two distinguishing elements. In the first place, it can offer profound philosophical and theological arguments for resisting a purely materialistic account of nature or history or humans. And more importantly than this, a Catholic curriculum, if implemented correctly, serves only one cause — truth. The contemporary university curriculum, on the other hand, serves another cause — the advancement of the technological society.

One might wonder whether the current status of North American universities is the product, not of any deliberate attempt to avoid or silence opposition to its exclusive interest in techno-economic mastery, but merely an inadvertent result of pursuing certain "practical" goals. The fact is that the current curricular and institutional situation is the direct result of choosing economic and technological superiority even when such preference requires the abandonment of spiritual (or Catholic) ideals. If you will forgive me this last excess, what seems patently clear to all is that it is not possible to serve two masters. Let me summarize.

(1) A university curriculum is adequate for meeting the authentic needs of students and society if and only if, above all else, it aims to present students with a complete and accurate account of the realities and causes present in the universe, including a full account of humans as both physical and spiritual entities.[5]

(2) The contemporary North American university curriculum does not profess this complete account — preferring to offer only a partial and distorted, materialist version of reality compatible with its program of advancing technology.

(3) Hence, contemporary North American university curriculum is not adequate.

(4) But a curriculum based on Catholic principles does, above all else, aim to present students with a complete and accurate account of reality.

(5) Hence, such a curriculum is adequate for meeting the authentic needs of students and society.

Notes

1. It comes as no surprise to professional educators who know that if a teacher has had something to say about an institution’s curriculum, then that teacher will have infinitely more impact on any number of anonymous students than those encountered in the classroom. It also explains both why debates about curricula are so hotly contested and why curricula are so jealously guarded by faculties.

2. I am thinking of schools that have embraced Great Book curriculums, for example, Thomas Aquinas College, or have erected a curriculum based on Catholic principles such as the Franciscan University of Steubenville.

3. George Grant, Technology and Empire. House of Anasi: Toronto, 1969, p. 113.

4. Grant, p. 113.

5. This would include a full account of humans as both physical and spiritual entities.