

Academic Freedom in a Catholic University – In Search for Safety

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Social Work

Perhaps the point to consider is not the level of indulgence or the quantity of repression but the form of power that was exercised.

Michel Foucault, 1978

Entering the seminar on academic freedom in a Catholic university was not unlike entering a postmodern movie where you eventually discover the beginning is actually the middle. There are many players in this educational drama, including students, parents, alumni, faculty and staff, the board, the Bishop and the magisterium. The Catholic university is not an island in a secular sea. The mixing of funding, government guidelines and different disciplinary expectations complicate boundaries and create identity dilemmas.

This was the second time that I, as a non-Catholic, had seriously entered into a debate about my role as an educator in a credo-based institution. The first time was three years ago; during my hiring process I was asked about how compatible my teaching was with the mission of a Catholic university. Forewarned about the "Catholic Question" I was nervous about the impending dialogue but left feeling that there was a great deal of compatibility between the mission of St. Thomas and my teaching style, belief system and disciplinary commitment to social justice.

Service learning is an integral part of the University of St. Thomas which is mirrored in the bachelor of social work degree's requirements for two internships in social service agencies. The belief that learning and giving in the community is as important as being in the classroom certainly coincides with my belief system. Many of our host agencies are involved in major battles for social justice on behalf of those who are oppressed and this too is compatible with the mission of a Catholic university. Also the Catholic university makes a clear commitment to spiritual development which provides an arena for expanded dialogue about the complex make-up of a person. The relationship of social, psychological, economic, physical and spiritual is inherently part of the eco-systems approach taught in the social work curriculum. Despite the many areas of compatibility there are also areas of dissent.

Since my initial hiring interview, the rituals of convocation, graduation, and an occasional "flare up" of a moral question spark debate, but, overall, the daily teaching is disciplinary focused. Like many other departments in the university, there is a danger of

"disciplinary atheism" but as Shank (1995) states "addressing what is meant by the 'joys and hope, sorrows and anxieties of the women and men of this age,' is not only the task of the Catholic Church's social teaching, but also of Catholic social work education" (p. 48). So that the compatibility factor is high between social work and the church's commitment to fighting social, economic, and cultural injustice. This argues well for social work's place in a Catholic university but does not address the opposite question of whether Catholic belief has a place in social work.

The social work profession until fairly recently has maintained a professional distance from religion. Social work has been for the most part a profession practiced within bureaucratic settings, supported by government funding. Hence the clear separation of church and state have been part of the practice life of most social workers despite the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of the profession's code of ethics. It is interesting to note that the separation of church and state in the federal government is no longer quite so clear cut. President Clinton just released a thirteen page presidential directive on religious freedom in the federal workplace. Even proselytizing is now permitted in hallways and parking lots as long as the "person being proselytized does not ask that it stop or demonstrate that it is unwelcome" (Evening Standard, August 15, 1997). Symbols and religious books can be displayed in offices as Clinton wants the new rules to be a "source of harmony and strength."

This wind of change has impacted social work as well. Whereas religion and credo have been defined outside the boundaries of most social work practice, spirituality is a bit less clear. In working with individuals, families and small groups the social worker cannot escape the spiritual realm and its inherent link to physical and cognitive functioning. The professional social work literature is beginning to reflect a growing acceptance of spiritual issues for clients and communities. (Netting, Thibault, Ellor, 1990; Sands, Nuccio, 1992; Cowley, 1993; Derezotes, 1995) This is occurring in the discipline of science as well: "...science has bracketed God and the supernatural ever since the Enlightenment. It is therefore, all the more encouraging that, at present, there is a growing science-religion dialogue among scientists, philosophers and theologians worldwide" (Gruenwald, 1995, p. 151). If this dialogue is occurring in all university settings, a major question then for social work educators in a Catholic university is "does the dialogue expand or, constrict academic freedom?"

Certainly the Pope's *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (1991) produces much food for thought as to how much freedom academics have in relation to the revealed truths of the magisterium. Is the document a guide to assist in identifying the boundaries of discourse or is it as some critiques state 'void for vagueness'? Is Catholicity supplemental or transformational in the educational process? Hesburgh (1994) claims that these are unproductive question and that the more important question is how can a great university have faith and credo as part of the learning community?

How then do the social work educators integrate faith into their teaching when "the first loyalties of faculty members will be to the national cultures of their professions rather than to any local or ecclesiastical traditions" (Marsden, 1994, p. 193)? This raises the

complex problem of overlapping jurisdictions as the profession of social work must answer to the Council on Social Work Education's rigorous accreditation process. Although non-Catholic universities also have to address dual accreditation standards, the role of religion in the academic dialogue as proscribed by the magisterium adds a potentially conflictual standard. The principle of subsidiarity raises the thorny question of whose standards take precedence in making decisions concerning academic expectations and professional conduct. Certainly the threats to academic freedom are a constant challenge in all universities as Catholic universities must ascertain the role of the Bishops and the public institutions must deal with legislators in maintaining space for discourse free from restraint and reprisal. Amidst real and imaginary pressures to be politically astute, the belief in the 'common good' belies the lack of consensus in society, the Church and in the social work profession about what is the common good.

How can the social work educator confront the lack of consensus about the common good and the presence of competing real and imaginary forces which mitigate against academic freedom? "There will always be some tension between faith and science, between revelation and reason, and between religion and the academy... We can only have a Catholic university if the two values-religious and academic-are maintained in a creative, dialectical tension that always remains open to change and development" (McBrian, 1994, p. 158). The major challenge is to insure that this creative dialogue is possible and then maintained. If dialogue requires the ability to express dissension, modeling must occur in the classroom, faculty forums and in the board room of the university. "Every university, Catholic or not, serves as the critical reflective intelligence of its society" ("Land O'Lakes Statement," 1967, p. 9).

Yet in the case of Father Curran, his critical reflections resulted in his academic freedom being sanctioned and due process being denied ("Academic Freedom, Tenure and Due Process," 1990). Although these sanctions are to a priest teaching theology in the Catholic University of America, the reverberations impact anyone teaching in a Catholic university. But professors are rarely denied tenure over what they say; more often they are denied tenure over what they do not say or do. The silence of non-publication or failure to live up to standards of the department are major reasons for not granting tenure. How does the social work educator make sense of the two extremes in deciding on their day to day comportment with students, faculty and their professional community?

Because there is a genuine fit between the Church and social work concerning issues of social justice, the level of agreement is high around many issues effecting people and their communities. But there are certain moral positions that create unavoidable differences of opinion and divergence of viewpoints. Although Ryan (1995) posits that Catholic theology is not incompatible with academic freedom, he provides the caveat: "as long as academic freedom is properly conceived" (p. 138). The proper conception of academic freedom as defined by Ryan allows for dissent within the confines of "previously settled magisterial teachings" (Ibid., p. 139). Herein lies extremely difficult terrain for the non-Catholic social work educator. For example, Ryan goes on to quote McInerney: "The charge of homophobia has almost silenced the commonly recognized (and authoritatively taught) truth that homosexuality is a perversion and a sin." (Ibid., p.

143). Ryan does not critique the fact that this is not a universally held truth and for all intensive purposes the debate seems closed to any further exploration. Is there room for competing truths in a Catholic university and can they be debated without personal shaming or condemnation? Certainly social work has a commitment to personal dignity and a belief in the right of individuals to choose their way in life, which may not be in accordance with the teachings of the magisterium.

Silence is an important component to any dialogue, but if the silence is a result of fear of reprisal, then the discourse becomes a monologue. Historical and current sanctions to free expression are potential impediments to academic freedom. Each individual, Catholic or not, will have experienced personal and institutional sanctions that shape her or his willingness to speak or remain silent. Learning to maximize academic freedom requires some deep soul-searching of one's own barriers. But the university must also do the same critical reflection as to how it impedes or supports dialogue. Although there are dramatic and poignant examples that truths can come forward without freedom (e.g., Michnik in Poland, Mandela in South Africa), the ideal of a free arena for discourse has been part of academic culture since the inception of university education.

"All universities are totally committed today to human development and human progress in the natural order of events. This whole endeavor is ultimately a fragile thing and, left to itself is often laden with frustration and despair" (Hesburgh, 1994, p. 11). Hesburgh goes on to argue that faith is an important antidote to despair; Catholic universities have the unique ability to integrate faith as part of the equation in searching for truth and meaning. Social work has a commitment to working with the whole person which includes the acknowledgment of the equal importance of the psychological, physiological, social-economic and spiritual components of each human being. But in acknowledging the complexity of the human species, the Catholic university must create a fertile learning environment for people of all walks of life. "We expect education to change individuals; and we expect a spiritual life to do the same; and we do not always know where the change will lead us or what it will call us to do" (Meara, 1994, p. 207). An assurance of safety or what may be referred to as academic freedom is essential if the uncertainty can be tolerated and in fact nurtured so that creative conflict will forge the best in human aspirations.

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