

The Secularization of the University of St. Thomas?

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In 1985 the College of St. Thomas celebrated its centennial year. What had tenuously begun as a combination seminary and high school/college with a student body of sixty-two and a faculty of six priests had evolved into a well established Catholic liberal arts college.¹ On the eve of that centennial in a September 28, 1984, report to the college's board of trustees, the then-president, Msgr. Terrence J. Murphy, declared, "Catholicism is the strongest element that binds our college community together."² Reflecting upon the topic of the 1996 Summer Seminar, "The Role of Faculty—Catholic and Non-Catholic—in a Catholic University," I found myself musing about whether such a topic might not be moot in the institution's bi-centennial year of 2085. More explicitly, would the president at that time be able to reiterate Msgr. Murphy's 1984 statement so unequivocally, or even wish to do so? As one who very deliberately sought a Catholic education at St. Thomas in the 1950's, and who later left a tenured position in the California State University System to live and work in the environment of a Catholic liberal arts college¹ I would surely hope so. However, there is clear evidence that the tides of change are flowing against it. If history repeats itself, and if current trends continue, the year 2085 will likely find St. Thomas known by another name. "Thomas University" or something more pretentious like "The University of the Twin Cities," are possibilities. The diocese will probably have a seminary, independent of a university, to educate its clergy—possibly both men and women. If there remains a link at all between the university in 2085 and its Catholic roots, it is likely to be vague and mostly symbolic. The archbishop or another Catholic clergy person might serve on the board of trustees, but the chief executive officer will almost certainly be a layperson.

Any thoughts of the secularization of St. Thomas may be written off as absurd by the current university community. Yet, that is exactly what has happened to most of America's prestigious colleges and universities which were founded as Protestant denominational institutions when they came to perceive that their religious affiliations were more of a burden than a blessing and that secularization was conducive, even essential, to their aspirations of greatness. Catholic universities generally, and St. Thomas in particular may well be headed for a similar fate. A cursory examination of the history of the disestablishment of Protestant universities; the increasing difficulty clarifying the nature of a Catholic university in modern society; and certain indicators that the furtive seeds of secularization may already be planted at St. Thomas should give cause for concern about the future of St. Thomas as a Catholic university.

The Disestablishment of Protestant Universities

The history of higher education in America is replete with examples of former church-related colleges and universities, originally founded to promote the development of Christian wisdom according to various denominational tenets, which no longer retain religious identity. Who wouldn't be hard pressed to name the religious founding groups of such institutions as the University of Chicago (Baptist), the University of Southern California (Methodist), or, more locally, Carleton College (Congregationalist) or Macalester College (Presbyterian)? In the decades between 1880 and World War I, Protestant universities, according to Marsden, "rapidly distanced themselves from most substantive connections with their church or religious heritages, dropping courses with explicit theological or biblical reference and laicizing their boards, faculties, and administrations."³ Volumes have been written on this phenomenon and the multiplicity of factors which produced it. One summarization, especially poignant for St. Thomas, is offered by Marsden in response to why Protestant denominations so willingly abandoned their vast educational empires. He concludes that:

The answer is that they were confronted in the first place with vast cultural trends such as technological advance, professionalization, and secularism that they could not easily control; and their problem was made worse by pressures of cultural pluralism and Christian ethical principles that made it awkward if not impossible for them to take any decisive stand against the trends.⁴

In the same treatise, Marsden identifies three broad categories which he claims have been the ideological contenders for the soul of Protestant universities:

First there was traditionalist Protestantism which was dominant at the beginning of the era, but easily routed by liberal Protestantism, sometimes aided by some version of secularist ideology. Then, from about the 1870's until the 1960's, we have the dominance of a broadly liberal Protestantism which allied itself with an ideological secularism to form a prevailing cultural consensus. Since the 1960's, we see the growing of a more pluralistic secularism which provides no check at all to the tendencies of the university to fragment into technical specialties.⁵

Are similar factors, peculiar to the Catholic Church, now vying for the souls of Catholic universities? Catholic colleges came onto the American higher education scene later than their Protestant counterparts. The first, Georgetown, founded in 1789, trailed the first Protestant college, Congregationalist Harvard, by 153 years.

Georgetown and its early successors had a clear Catholic identity and purpose. Expressly, they sought to prepare immigrant Catholics to assume a place of equality and even leadership in a Protestant dominated culture while concurrently strengthening their knowledge of and commitment to their Catholic faith. That they adhered to their mission and did their jobs well is evidenced by the many Catholics who have come to hold positions of prominence in all segments of American society. Irish Americans, predominantly Catholic, are even acknowledged as the second most affluent ethnic group in the country.⁶ Catholic universities may never again find a sustaining purpose so vital to their existence. Indeed, given the growing divisiveness within the American Catholic

Church and the increasingly pluralistic make-up of the faculties and student bodies of Catholic colleges and universities, it is not much of a stretch to visualize a latter Twenty-First Century historian recounting the secularization of American Catholic universities in a manner only slightly paraphrasing Marsden's earlier summarization of the secularization of Protestant universities. It might read something like this:

First there was traditionalist Catholicism which was dominant at the beginning, but was eventually routed by liberal Catholicism, sometimes aided by some version of secularist ideology. Then, from the mid 1960s until early into the Twenty-First Century we have a broadly liberal Catholicism which allied itself with prevailing ideological secularism to form a dominant cultural consensus within the American Catholic Church. Since then, we see the growing of a more aggressive pluralistic secularism which provides no check at all to the tendencies of the Catholic universities to fragment into technical specialties.

The Catholic Identity Problem

"The tides of secularism are deep and strong in a changing world and in a changing Church within a secular culture...."⁷ This quote is from the aforementioned report of Msgr. Murphy to the board of trustees in 1984. It was uttered in the context of his expressed concern that the greatest challenge faced by any Catholic college president at that time was to maintain the Catholic nature of the institution, an issue he saw as more pressing than either financial or administrative problems.

Maintaining the Catholic nature and identity of a college or university requires, first, a clear understanding of the essential characteristics of a Catholic institution of higher education. This is an elusive requirement. Pope John Paul II, clearly concerned about the changing nature of Catholic universities, attempted to provide some clarification in his 1990 apostolic constitution on Catholic universities, "Ex Corde Ecclesiae." In this document, he delineated what he considered to be four essential characteristics of a Catholic university:

1. A Christian inspiration not only of individuals, but of the university community as such.
2. A continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research.
3. Fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the church.
4. An institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life.⁸

Given the increasingly pluralistic make-up of Catholic universities in the United States, these conditions, alone, will provide grist for contentious debate within Catholic university communities. Even more so, perhaps, will some aspects of Pope John Paul II's "General Norms" which he states must be followed in order to assure that an institution

of higher education is and remains Catholic. Two in particular are certain to cause consternation among American Catholic university faculties:

1. The identity of a Catholic university is essentially linked to the quality of its teachers and to respect for Catholic doctrine.
2. In order not to endanger the Catholic identity of the university or institute of higher studies, the number of non-Catholic teachers should not be allowed to constitute a majority within the institution which is and must remain Catholic.⁹

Some will argue that the former sets up a conflict between two sometimes mutually exclusive entities. Still others will dispute the critical mass of Catholic faculty essential to the assurance that a university is indeed Catholic. This issue will be further complicated by non-Catholic faculty reasonably questioning whether they are more hurtful to the Catholic identity of a university than are proclaimed Catholics who by their words and examples appear to be at odds with the tenets of Catholicism.

Clearly, then, identifying and maintaining the Catholic nature of a university will be a formidable challenge for any Catholic college or university in the coming century. It may be most difficult for those institutions which are not steeped in the tradition of a viable religious order. One such institution, the University of St. Thomas, is clearly struggling to maintain its Catholic identity, and there are indications that the battle might be lost well before the university arrives at its bicentennial.

Seeds of Secularization at St. Thomas

St. Thomas was founded as a Catholic institution by the Diocese of St. Paul in the person of Bishop John Ireland. Its first rector (now called president) was a priest, Father Thomas O’Gorman, as were the additional five members of the original faculty.¹⁰ Not much doubt about Catholic identity there. Although Ireland had assumed that the faculty would forever be predominantly priests of the diocese, that ideal soon gave way to the greater need for priests to serve the diocese in duties more pressing than teaching. Yet, by my own recollection, as late as the mid-1950’s, nearly all major administrators were priests, while virtually all academic departments had at least one priest member. The religion department, the precursor of today’s theology department, was staffed entirely by priests.

From its founding in 1885 until late into the Twentieth Century, the relationship between St. Thomas and its religious founding group, the Catholic Diocese of St. Paul, was clearly evident, even in the matter of financial support. As late as 1947, then-Archbishop Gregory Murray helped pay for the construction of Albertus Magnus Hall by setting quotas for parishes to meet in raising a total of \$1,275,244.¹¹

Today, the relationship between St. Thomas and the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis is steadily growing more tenuous. The president is still a priest of the diocese and the Archbishop continues to chair the board of trustees. A vote of the trustees and a subsequent stroke of the pen could, however, make these dictates of the institutional

charter vestiges of the past. A new process for the selection of the university's president was initiated only a few years ago with the appointment of Father Dennis Dease. He was the first to be appointed following a national search conducted by a university committee. All of his predecessors were hand-picked by their bishop and were unilaterally appointed by him. Additionally, the presence of priests within the faculty and administration is strikingly sparse. Even in the theology department less than fifteen percent of the full-time faculty of over twenty are members of the clergy, giving rise to the possibility that more non-Catholics teach theology than do priest-theologians of the Archdiocese. Finally, and perhaps most indicative of the diminished relationship between St. Thomas and its religious founding group, is the Archdiocese's abandonment of any financial responsibility for the viability of the university.

We have already seen that the relationship between Protestant universities and their religious founding groups had become quite murky by the beginning of the Twentieth Century. Similarly, a little over a hundred years after its founding, the relationship between St. Thomas and its founding group has likewise become obscured.

Lack of clarity in its relationship with the Archdiocese is not the only factor moving St. Thomas down the path toward secularization. For instance, the acceptance of federal loans and grants, as essential as they may be, has reduced the university's autonomy as Catholic. Affirmative Action dictates and the Education Amendments Act of 1972, along with stipulations attached to construction loans and grants, have had significant impact on staffing and admissions policies as well as the ways in which the institution may use some of its facilities.

The exigencies of the marketplace have had their effect on the Catholic identity of St. Thomas. In order to maintain a viable "client base," student demands, regardless of how discordant with Catholic teaching they may be, are often actualized. Only a few years ago, when students insisted that meat should be served in student dining rooms on traditional days of abstinence in the Catholic church, they got meat. More recently, when they claimed the right to organize university-sponsored clubs which might manifest beliefs or behaviors contrary to Church teaching, they got a hearing. Although the jury is still out on this issue, the fact that it would even be considered is an undeniable sign of the changing times. As trivial as these examples may seem, there are numerous others like them and, collectively, they have a substantial role in the secular quest for the soul of St. Thomas.

As earlier noted, Pope John Paul II said that one of the four essential characteristics of a Catholic university has to do with its commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family. In a 1986 address at St. Ambrose University Sister Alice Gallin, O.S.U., stated, "The Catholic college or university must seek to be just in all its own activities and decisions before it can hope to bring about justice in the larger community or, at least it must try to do both at the same time."¹² Both the Pope and Sister Gallin appear to be implying that the manner in which an institution serves its human resources has much to say about its Catholic nature. Although St. Thomas appears to fare quite well in this regard, one does not have to scratch very far beneath its surface to find a few

egregious examples to the contrary. There are instances in which faculty and staff have been speciously dismissed (denial of tenure is too frequently specious), and occasions in which others have been hired with seemingly scant regard for either the moral or legal implications of affirmative action guidelines. Such practices, even when infrequent, take their toll on the Catholic nature of St. Thomas and belie its role as an advocate for social justice.

There are, then, a number of indicators that St. Thomas has taken some substantial strides down the road toward secularization. There is its changing relationship with the archdiocese which founded it. External pressures, especially from the federal government, and internal stressors emanating from an increasingly pluralistic university community are obfuscating its Catholic identity. Instances of dubious ethical practices in interpersonal relations have blighted its Catholic nature. Yet, none of these is as unsettling, or perhaps as prophetic, as a most recent major development. The extensive advertising campaign launched by the university this fall, 1996, is an incredible testament to just how far

St. Thomas has moved in the direction of secularization. According to the September 3, 1996, Bulletin, published by the university, the advertising campaign emphasizes six key image development themes: academic quality, practical orientation, values-based curriculum, location, affordability, and a resource for lifelong learning.¹³ Glaringly absent from these themes is the word "Catholic" or even the word, "Christian." "Values-based" is a weak euphemism at best, and values-based curricula are certainly not the sole province of Catholic universities. Although "come prepared to learn and leave prepared to serve" would seem to be an apt slogan for a Catholic university, St. Thomas has chosen the more indulgent, "come prepared to learn, leave prepared to succeed," which smacks more than a little bit of unadulterated secularism. In lauding the new campaign and its slogan, President Dease affirms: "Our mission is to provide a strong liberal arts education and to prepare students for careers."¹⁴ Might not the presidents of several hundred universities, public as well as private, be justified in making similar declarations? Where, then, is the distinction between Catholic and secular? The binding element of Catholicism that Msgr. Murphy declared, a mere twelve years ago, was holding the St. Thomas community together appears to be losing its adhesive qualities. Catholicism seems to be yielding to pragmatism as St. Thomas pursues wider acclaim and the funding to support it. Could it be that its Catholic identity has already come to be perceived as more of a burden than a blessing? If so, is a secular "University of the Twin Cities" very far in the offing?

References

1. Connors, p. 36.
2. Connors, p. 402.
3. Marsden, p. 41.

4. Marsden, p. 41-42.
5. Marsden, p. 39.
6. Greeley, p. 118.
7. Connors, p. 402.
8. Pope John Paul II, p. 269.
9. Pope John Paul II, p. 274.
10. Connors, p. 46-47.
11. Connors, p. 322.
12. Gallin, p. 29.
13. Bulletin, p. 2.
14. Bulletin, p. 1.

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