

Restoring Religious Studies in Public Universities

A presentation before the New York Metropolitan and Mid- and Upper-Hudson Valleys Chapters of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists on March 31, 2000 by Candace de Russy, Ph.D., Trustee, State University of New York.

Candace de Russy, Ph.D., is one of America's most courageous defenders of higher education, admired by millions for her stalwart defense of the university's pursuit of knowledge and truth in conditions of authentic academic and religious freedom. The syndicated columnist, Professor Howard Adelson, writing in The Jewish Press, describes Dr. de Russy as a "Catholic lady of impeccable credentials. . . a fearless advocate for freedom and for the American ideal." "Our public educational institutions," Dr. Adelson goes on, "could do with many more trustees of the caliber of Candace de Russy."

A member of the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York, where the former college professor chairs its Academic Standards Committee and serves on the Ad Hoc Committee on Charter Schools, Dr. de Russy is a contributing editor of Crisis Magazine and has published articles on education and cultural issues in The Chronicle of Higher Education, The New York Post, Academic Questions, Heterodoxy, and other journals and newspapers.

Dr. de Russy is a member of the Trustees Council of the National Alumni Forum, the National Association of Scholars, and the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics. She currently serves on the advisory boards of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education and the Independent Women's Forum. Formerly a senior fellow at the Council on Culture and Community and a member of the Executive Committee of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy, Dr. de Russy was Executive Officer of the American Foundation for Resistance International, an organization that specialized in human rights abuses in the Soviet Union.

Dr. de Russy was honored by the Society of Catholic Social Scientists in 1998 with its Wilhelmsen-Bozell Award for Catholic Social Action, which was the predecessor of the Blessed Frederic Ozanam Award. She serves on the Advisory Board of the Society. In March 2000 Dr. de Russy was the keynote speaker at a Conference on "Religion and Public Higher Education" sponsored by the New York Metropolitan and Mid- and Upper-Hudson Valleys Chapters of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists and organized by Msgr. George P. Graham, Ph.D., its President. The event was hosted by another Board of Advisors member, Msgr. Eugene V. Clark of historic St. Agnes Church, where the conference was held. Dr. de Russy's paper, "Restoring Faith Perspectives in Public Universities," appears below. A panel consisting of SCSS members from the Mid- and Upper-Hudson Valleys Chapter, included Thomas G.

Conway, J.D., member of of the Bars of New York, the District of Columbia and the Supreme Court of the United States, who spoke on "' Religious Studies' in Public Universities, An Evasion of the Constitution?"; George A. Morton, M.A., Editor, Parish Visitor Magazine and Director of Public Relations, Parish Visitors of Mary Immaculate, who spoke on "Campus Ministry or Campus Misery: Witnessing to Jesus on Campus"; and Donald J. D'Elia, Ph.D., Professor of History, SUNY New Paltz, and Co-Chairman, Board of Advisors of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, who prepared a talk on "The View From Tamworth Reading Room After Forty Years, or John Henry Newman Revisited." The panelists' articles will be forthcoming in the Review.

Today it is all too true that, as one political scientist quipped, "If a professor proposed to study something from a Catholic or Protestant point of view, it would be treated like proposing to study something from a Martian point of view." Indeed, when I asked one militant feminist why religion and ethics were completely left out of a certain infamous sex conference, she responded, "Just what *have* you been smoking?"

Of course the prevailing culture in higher education, especially in public higher education, which is slow to change, *is* one of non-belief. And the trend there for some time has been to marginalize, suppress and even deride the venerable and age-old pursuit of relating faith to learning. Professor George Marsden of Notre Dame has summarized the main reasons for this rejection, with which you here are familiar. Many academics "hold to a scientific positivism that rules out all religion-based statements as insufficiently empirical to meet the standards of modern academia." Others "fear . . . religious dogmatism" and even "a reinstatement of [in particular] a Christian establishment." It is also believed that "religion . . . has just been relocated in a private domain and this arrangement is beneficial to all. . . . Not only does this relocation . . . avoid the danger of the *de facto* establishment of one religion, it also helps diverse peoples to keep the peace and to work together more efficiently."

Such vehement disestablishment of religion can, however, result in bias against religious studies. SUNY-Buffalo, for instance, has a long-established and in many circles well-regarded core curriculum entitled "American Pluralism." Faculty who teach this course are required to treat, and I quote, "Issues of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sex, Class and Religious Sectarianism." When one professor asked why "Religious Sectarianism" and not simply "Religion" appeared on this list, he was told that this phrasing would offend, in a public university, against the separation of Church and State. In this way struggle and strife between religions is allowed as a curriculum topic, but our modern secular faculty do not want students to be taught what religion is. It would seem they are afraid of something.

Yet others "are exorcising religious ghosts from their own experience and believe that all right-thinking people should do the same." Moreover, as

Professor D.G. Hart laments in *The University Gets Religion*, an overwhelming number of academics are " 'apathetic, indifferent, or hostile toward--ignorant about the study of religion.'"

So it comes as no surprise, as shown in a recent study led by the American Academy of Religion, that religious studies in public universities have the lowest standing, from the point of view of both curriculum and financing, as compared to other humanities and social sciences. This no doubt largely accounts for the dark pessimism about the future of religious studies in public universities, as compared to private institutions and the seminary world. More than their peers in other sectors, large percentages of those surveyed in public universities think religious studies departments will not flourish, will decline, and indeed may not survive.

Both within and without the academy, however, there are signs that the pessimists are wrong. First, religious perspectives are increasingly included in the disciplines of politics and law. For example, the so-called church-state studies, that is, courses dealing with the relationship between religious and political communities, are flourishing. Secondly, in the wider society, there is evidence that the political and legal support for strict church-state separation is weakening. This should work against the rejection of religious studies in the academy.

Within the academy, specifically concerning debates over liberal political and legal theory, Professor Stephen Macedo of Princeton University observes that religious belief is not only taken seriously by many important academics but "transparently" supported by a number of highly respected ones, for example, Michael Walzer, Sanford Levinson, John Noonan and Mary Ann Glendon. Some of our greatest living philosophers, including Alasdair Macintyre, Alvin Plantinga and Peter Van Inwagen embrace an explicitly Christian perspective in their work. Macedo cites others who "are concerned that our 'secular' state makes unfair demands on believers," for instance, John Rawls in his book, *Political Liberalism*. Professor Macedo also claims that, with the exception of the fearsome George Kateb of Princeton, "Virtually no one in the academy attacks religious beliefs as such." Another notable exception is the English biologist, Richard Dawkins, proselytizer for the view that all organisms, including people, are nothing more than vehicles for the spreading of the "selfish genes" inside them.

As I have mentioned, a similar sign of fresh interest in the study of religion is the recent growth of "church-state" studies. As analyzed in a study by professors at Baylor University, there are several reasons for this growth in interest. In this country, first of all, increasing numbers of traditionalist, activist Christians recognize that their values are reflected hardly at all in law and public policy; for example, with respect to abortion laws. These Christians are seeking to study religion in its relationship to politics. Similarly, the vast and

sophisticated authority of the nation-state has increasingly marginalized and reduced the cultural role of religious communities around the world. This too is fueling the demand for new, revisionary approaches to the church-state relationship. In addition, the spread of religious pluralism has created a competition among religious sects that did not exist in earlier societies dominated by a single religion. For instance, as a result of the American Constitution's prohibition against any single religious group dictating public policy, myriad religious groups and coalitions now vie to influence government, and thus have an interest in church-state studies.

In a related vein, the surge of interest in ethics, documented in this same Baylor study, may well spark interest in religious studies.

A promising development outside the academy that augurs well for faith perspectives is what some see to be the passing of the era of strict church-state separation. Professor Jeffrey Rosen of George Washington University reports that a great "paradigm shift" is upon us. Over the last 30 years there has been a "realignment" of Protestants, Catholics and Jews. The historic conflict between Protestants and Catholics is over. Southern Democrats, for instance, no longer fear the effects of government aid to parochial schools, and African-Americans have become supporters of school vouchers. Evangelicals and conservative Catholics do, however, fear "creeping secularism," and they have joined forces to fight against it. Jews have become more culturally assimilated, and Jewish neo-conservatives have concluded that faith is good for society and that they have more in common with traditionalist Christians than they had hitherto supposed. At the same time, many legal theorists now agree that equal treatment for religion might be a better model than church-state separation for protecting religious liberty.

And the Supreme Court seems to agree: in 1981, it held that a public institution in this case, the University of Missouri at Kansas City, is required, when it opens its doors to private speakers, to treat religious and non-religious groups alike; in 1995, in a case involving the University of Virginia, the Court held that journals of student opinion with a religious point of view could no longer be excluded from receiving campus funding. As Rosen concludes, this "new vision of equal treatment for religion might be seen as a return to a more normal vision of separationism, which insists that religious activity should be initiated and controlled by individuals rather than by the state."

On a more speculative note, another factor within the academy may paradoxically lend itself to a greater openness to linking faith to learning. Is it not possible that the spiritual blackout on campuses has become so stifling as to have run its course? Is not this soul-sickness often so excruciating as to undermine itself? Is it not also--as David Walsh puts it in his superb article, "Newman on the Secular Need for a Religious Education"--"simply too boring"

to endure? Might not some, a growing number of academics, be simply weary of it all and poised to rethink their reflexive dismissal of spirit?

Even John Henry Cardinal Newman could not have foreseen the bleakness of intellectual discourse and the nihilistic antics of militants on many campuses today. As Walsh reminds us, Newman seems at worst to have imagined certain ill effects of behavioral psychology and a certain "well-bred hedonism." But he could not have imagined the loony skepticism of the postmoderns, such as Jacques Lacan or Jacques Derrida, whose followers deny the difference between self and other, and history and fiction. And most surely he could not have dreamed of the use of undergraduate colleges by sexual ideologues to glorify and even to sell pornography.

It remains to ask what can be done. What can those of us determined to halt such degradation and to renew the academy, and who also believe in the ameliorative role of faith on campuses, do to hasten such renewal?

First, as Catholics we must strengthen our own faith "literacy" in order to *show*, throughout public and private higher education, how our theology and religious traditions relate, and how they can contribute positively to academic exchange. Catholics should indeed be proud to establish new, private institutions and think-tanks of their own and to preserve them from the creeping secularization that has afflicted so many Catholic colleges and universities in the past. Following the example of Lord Acton, the great historian of liberty, we should also defend Catholicism's brilliant contributions to civilization. As recalled recently by Father Robert Sirico, these include "the [very] institution of the university, the flourishing of art and music, the idea of individual human rights, the separation of the ecclesiastical and civic functions of society, the rescuing of the wisdom of the ancients in the Middle Ages and even the idea of liberty itself."

It strikes me as particularly crucial in our own day--a time of rampant cultural disorientation--for us to re-establish the linkage between university studies and faith, freedom and order. The clarity with which Russell Kirk reminded us of this connection bears note. "Out of faith," he said, "arises order; and once order prevails, freedom becomes possible. . . . For the university, as for society generally, freedom and order are ends of equal importance."

Then there are the extraordinary insights of Eric Voegelin regarding the modern university's role, particularly that of the German university, in denying man's connection to divine-transcendent Reality and thus fostering spiritual vacuums. As Voegelin observed, these vacuums have been filled in modern times by mad political religions, such as Marxism, Fascism and German National Socialism.

We can further demonstrate the harmony between faith and the life of learning by harkening back to John Paul II's majestic encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. Taking up this same theme, Ralph McInerney asserts that the believer brings to

the university a great "confidence" in the power of the mind to grasp the truth through reason. The believer knows that we and the cosmos exist in the inner life of God and that only with God can we explain ourselves and the cosmos. The believer is confident that reality is intelligible and that his knowledge is marked by rationality and goodness. By sharing this confidence with our secular brothers and sisters, they too may recover their faith in reason and knowledge.

All the while acknowledging the different principles underlying ordinary rational discourse and theological discourse, the believer must explain that banishing theology from the disciplines distorts the accuracy and completeness of all knowledge. The specialist in a single discipline thus becomes, in Newman's phrase, a "man of one idea."

But as he stated more forcefully: ". . . Religious Truth is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge. To blot it out is nothing short . . . of unraveling the web of University Teaching." Moreover, the exclusion of religious truth harms the secular disciplines and ultimately dehumanizes man. Cast adrift from an ordering spiritual viewpoint, the arts and sciences become incoherent. Absent a higher spiritual restraint, academics tend toward self-aggrandizement: they imagine their discipline to be the answer to all things and become ideologues. Without spiritual grounding, and subject to what Newman calls the "wild living intellect," they also deny and seek to conquer human nature; reducing man to biological components, neuroses and group identity, they move on finally to sacrifice his freedom. In C.S. Lewis' phrase, they effectively "abolish" man.

Beyond this I shall leave to you scholars here the task of establishing on a more sophisticated level the epistemological bases of faith. As a point of departure, I recommend Newman's *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* with its emphasis on conscience as the preeminent source of our knowledge of God.

Now various defenders of religious perspectives have offered yet other examples of how belief in God, and in the order of God's creation, might add to the academic debate. For instance, one scholar suggests simply reminding the academic community that the issue of whether theism is true has not been decided in the negative. Another invites believing scholars to count like stars the ways in which most fields of learning, whether physics or philosophy, have been nurtured by historic Christian civilization. Someone else proposes a theological anthropology based on the conviction that we are made in God's image. Yet another notes that non-religious academics would likely welcome informed responses to "creationists" who literally interpret Genesis 1, such as attesting that God may have used all manner of secondary means, including evolutionary ones, for creating and shaping the universe.

Next, turning to more mundane approaches to restoring faith perspectives in learning, I ask you to note trends within the academy that may be turned to advantage.

First, it strikes me as a promising, albeit ironic, idea to defend our prerogative to include relevant religious perspectives by invoking academic freedom. However--lest we contribute to the perpetuation of the corrupt *status quo*, that is, the vogue of justifying today's "garage-sale" curriculum in the name of freedom--we should view this defense with reserve and make use of it only on a temporary basis. Nonetheless, I think we may call upon this right in insisting on the rightful place of religious perspectives in our lectures, curricula, course requirements, research, conferences, and so forth. A consistent commitment to such freedom, which has already accommodated Marxism, Afrocentric and Hispanic studies, varieties of feminism, gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender studies, and now even *men's* studies, cannot exclude religion. Academics of faith *can*, at least as a transitory measure, lay claim to the benefits of "open admissions."

We should make students of faith aware of their right to express their religious or moral views in the name of academic freedom. In 1996, a student organization at SUNY-Buffalo called "University Students for Life" asserted this right by filing suit against the University. In response to this organization's request to hold a prolife demonstration, the campus had required a security deposit, even though such a deposit had not been required of other student groups. In 1998, the campus administration, mindful of constitutional concerns, settled the case.

Second, I see no reason not to draw upon the arguments and rhetoric of multiculturalism. Do not believing scholars and students have a distinctive worldview and culture that entitle them to multicultural respect and privilege? Why should multicultural concern extend only to the preferred constituencies of the radical Left, such as ethnic minorities? In the name of religious diversity believers too should demand tolerance. And thus, my friends, go forth into the world and institute new courses in "Christian Studies." Or "Catholic Studies." Or perhaps this new multicultural curriculum might better be labeled "Irish Studies"!

Third, I suggest mounting a campaign to make accrediting agencies more tolerant of institutional pluralism. I refer to their untoward efforts to force religious campuses to conform to the same kind of policies required of public campuses.

Fourth, it would open the way to greater exposure to religious studies--to spiritual diversity, if you will--if more of our taxpayers' money were allowed to follow students to the college or university of their choice. More students would then have the opportunity to choose campuses with a religious

affiliation, and the resulting competition might force public campuses to confront their moral bankruptcy.

Fifth, let us not underestimate the power of the ancient and life-giving store of religious wisdom to hold its own on the Internet. Scholars such as yourselves must make full use of your campus websites to display your syllabi and other academic information that shed light on these riches.

Efforts such as these will do much to restore faith to its rightful relationship to learning and to satisfy the palpable hunger for God in higher education. It may well be that the spiritual shadow lands in which the academy now dwells are giving way to a new dawn. And who can tell? As one scholar-wag opined, given academics' zeal for intellectual innovation at all cost, religious studies might become the latest academic fashion.

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