Christian Liberal Arts: Impossible or Irresistible?

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Is the notion of Christian liberal arts higher education viable in a postmodern educational milieu dominated by radical democratic individualism? Has the concept actually become oxymoronic? By examining the liberal arts and liberalism, radical democratic individualism, historic liberal arts education, values, ethics, and truth traditions in higher education, Christianity and postmodernism, and Christianity and moral relativism, I will argue that the answer to the question of viability of the Christian liberal arts college in today’s world is, “yes, if…”

The Liberal Arts and Liberalism

The liberal arts and political liberalism today are often seen as closely associated, in part because the two appear related on the surface via the shared but oft-misunderstood term liberal. Additionally, the two are frequently associated via notions that free inquiry can exist only where unimpeded by any imposed truth canon and that academic freedom must mean complete freedom of ideology rather than freedom to address controversial aspects of one’s academic discipline within the context of classroom lectures. However, the historic foundations of the liberal arts education are rather far removed from late twentieth-century liberalism.

Historic Liberal Arts Education

Originally, an education in the artes liberales – a liberal arts education – was a freely- or widely-ranging education that was the privilege of the free or non-slave individual, and an education that helped one more freely understand truth and wisdom, free of certain chains of ignorance. Hence, liberal can be seen as referring to freely in the above contexts, not necessarily free as in absent external or imposed restraint. Indeed, as developed below, a liberal arts education originally was rather strongly oriented toward truth, ethics, and morals. Mark Schwehn writes, in Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America,

Whether we look to the Platonic Academy or to the teachers of ancient Israel or to St. Augustine at Cassiciacum or to the medieval university or to Pico della Mirandola’s disputatious Florence or even to the small colleges of early nineteenth-century America, we find learning flourishing in communities formed by the conscious practice of spiritual virtues (45-46).

Through much of America’s history, concern with truth, ethics, and morals lay at the core of all education, and instruction to provide moral compass was considered fundamental to all valid educational processes, and George Marsden points out that, “Almost every American university was founded with a liberal arts colleges (sic) at its center to act as a sort of moral flagship for the institution” (4). Over time, however, this center did not hold; after enduring assault after assault it fell, and “(T)he humanities came to function as a sort of substitute religion – a Scripture embodied in the “canon” of great literature and art” (5).
Truth, Values, and Ethics in Education

Today, then, in a direct inversion (or perversion) of its historical roots, American higher education generally eschews, even ridicules, the very idea that a canon of truth, values, and ethics can exist outside the individual himself or herself. Regarding the values climate in higher education today, Stephen Davis explains that,

Moral teachings cannot be quantified, measured, tested, or reconciled with naturalism, so they are outside the university’s pale. Apart from a rather amorphous and selective recommendation of multicultural tolerance, accompanied usually by a poorly thought through moral relativism, the university no longer sees itself as a moral authority, with directive statement of multicultural tolerance, accompanied usually by a poorly thought through moral relativism, the university no longer sees itself as a moral teacher. I say amorphous because the official doctrine of the university is that we are to be tolerant of the views and practices of any and every group, except that almost everybody in academia believes – as I do – that the Nazi and the terrorists, for example, are not fit objects of tolerance. I say selective because just in the area of religion, items like Native American religion, New Age spirituality, and goddess worship are apparently honored and celebrated at the university, but not evangelical Christianity or conservative Catholicism. Many Christian faculty and students sense a genuine degree of intolerance of them and their views. So it is anything but clear what exactly the contemporary university’s commitment to diversity and tolerance amounts to. Perhaps it is simply incoherent.

...secular academia today has lost its belief in God. (Individual professors, administrators, and students are certainly allowed to believe in God, but only on the condition that they keep quiet about it and accept that it must remain at the level of private experience.) And no coherent worldview has replaced belief in God. Many philosophies and viewpoints have been tried in academia since the eclipse of God. Enlightenment rationalism, Americanism, pragmatism, existentialism, postmodernism – but all fail to command assent. All that is left is a kind of intellectual anarchy tied to naturalism and a kind of inchoate “me first-ism” (“Eight Hundred Years...” 23-24).

Useful examples of “me first-ism” thinking can be found Martha Nussbaum’s Cultivating Humanity, which exhibits strong biases toward humanism, radical democratic individualism, and moral relativism, and hostility toward any imposed canons of ethics or truth (other than that of postmodernism).

Radical Democratic Individualism

While in the process of criticizing such outstanding institutions of higher education as the University of Notre Dame and Brigham Young University, Nussbaum writes, “Love of the neighbor is a central value in all major American religions. These religions call us to a critical examination of our own selfishness and narrowness, urging more inclusive sympathy” (292). This statement looks fairly amiable at first glance. Upon deeper critique, though, one must ask if loving one’s neighbor is really the “central” value of all (American) religions? Isn’t the primary directive of Christianity to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37)? And then...after full submission to God’s external authority, his imposed truth and values system, one is then to apply this system to the challenge of loving one’s neighbor as oneself.

Next, do most major religions really urge us toward “more inclusive sympathy” via “a critical examination of our own selfishness and narrowness?” Only where the “self cart” has gotten placed in front of the “God horse”. Christianity in particular is significantly exclusivist. Such
words as, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the father but through me” (John 14:6), and “I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers” (John 10: 7-8), certainly don’t encourage inclusive sympathy for other religions or other gods.

Nussbaum also writes that, “It seems plausible that a religious university can thrive only if it protects and fosters inquiry into all forms of human culture and self-expression” (emphasis mine) (259). The assumption here is that a religious university cannot remain viable without elevating the self to a central position – i.e. elevating humanism or radical democratic individualism to a place of overarching authority and rejecting traditional biblical (or other outside, not of-the-self) authority. Nussbaum also writes that her discussion of selected religious universities

...challenge(s) the claim that religious institutions of higher learning are in peril because they have followed the norms of academic freedom and merit-based promotion that are current in the secular academy. In fact, they are in peril to the extent that they do not do so (291).

So “norms of academic freedom” (that is, what is accepted as normal in most secular institutions of higher education: a virtual systematic theology of radical democratic individualism), must be accepted as dogma at any institution of higher education that wishes to be considered viable by followers of postmodernism. Finally, Nussbaum writes that a selected religious university’s, “commitment to education and to the arts, long a great strength...is in jeopardy – precisely because standards of freedom that are derided in some quarters as “liberal” and “secular” have not been taken seriously enough as essential elements of human respect in a democratic culture” (291). But what is this “democratic culture” that might provide a philosophical argument against the very viability of any non-secular, non-liberal institution of higher education? It is, again, a culture of radical democratic individualism.

It appears that Nussbaum has joined the chorus of Americans who mistakenly consider our united group of states to be both purely democratic and completely centralized. This is an erroneous concept that Eric Springsted also reminds us of when he refers to America as “a democracy where each person is regarded the equal of any other”, a “democratic society” a “liberal democracy”, a place of “philosophical liberalism”, and a “national society” requiring a “central government” (467-478). But isn’t America actually a democratic republic, a united group of individual states, themselves a conglomeration of discreet counties and containing any number of unique cities and towns, governed from the local level onward by elected representatives?

These distinctions are more important than might appear at first glance, for leaving the ‘republic’ out of ‘democratic republic’ further validates notions of radical democratic individualism. Further, it seems unlikely that America’s fiercely independent and centralization-skeptical founders envisioned at any time a nation that could be characterized by a dominating centralized government. In fact, it is doubtful that early colonists would have united as a group of cooperating, distinctive states at all if the character of each state was not to be honored as unique, separate entities to be celebrated in its individuality and independence.

Radical democratic individualism regards the equality of individuals in an extreme manner that extends to a presumption of the equal validity of each person’s morality, worldview, canon of ethics, and understanding of truth. But given that every American possesses unique capacities, abilities, background, past development, and future potential, it seems illogical to describe each
American as “the equal of any other” (Springsted 467). While every American indeed holds a vote of equal weight,¹ that vote was designed for selecting competent and qualified representation – to freely choose representatives judged to be uniquely gifted and skilled to represent the voter in lawmaking bodies. The democratic vote was not conceived for the purpose of achieving and leveraging a dictatorial 51% bloc on myriad local and – especially – national issues, much less for the purpose of establishing matters of truth, ethics, and values. But this indeed describes the postmodern world in which we live.

**Christianity and Postmodernism**

Postmodernism (humanism’s late harvest) celebrates inclusivism, with the striking exclusion of any model that holds to the existence of one truth, Christianity especially, orthodox and evangelical flavors of Christianity in particular. In self-contradiction, postmodernism holds the one universal truth that there is no universal truth. Via postmodernism, the radically individualized self-god selects at will from a chaotic smorgasbord of morals, ethics, values, and truths, the most popular of which fatten the self but starve the soul.

Christianity, however, is not about the self. Eric Springsted explains elegantly how, for Christianity,

> Autonomy is not the central concern. In fact, for Christianity, autonomy at its limit is best represented by Milton’s Lucifer, who thought it better to rule in hell than serve in heaven. Christian faith in contrast emphasizes that in certain important cases it is far better to trust another than to be self-reliant. And not only does it teach that we are not self-sufficient, it also teaches that we are not all-important, for while we may have a purpose, a goal, we ourselves are not the goal. *What is good, while not unreasonable, is not always understood by reason alone, for goodness lies in the source of the one who alone is truly good* (emphasis mine) (468-9).

Indeed, Christianity looks outward, toward the other, especially to one great Truth that is embodied in the Lord Jesus Christ, whose words as noted above can seem highly exclusivist. Christianity embraces a philosophy of fallenness, of profoundly flawed humankind, no more capable of finding its own way to wisdom and life than of creating a universe out of nothing. But postmodernism embraces not only humanism (self as god capable of creating its own truth and wisdom), but at its core the existence multiple truths, selected at leisure by the self-god in question (moral relativism).

**Christianity and Moral Relativism**

Postmodernism, upon establishing residence in one’s mind, immediately turns its attention toward seducing one’s heart into moral relativism. I would agree with Stephen Davis, who notes, “I am suspicious of postmodernism because I am convinced that in the end it cannot avoid embracing some version of moral relativism” (“A Second Look…” 39). Therefore, I would argue that postmodernism and Evangelical Christianity are not merely exclusive of one another, but may be considered fundamentally hostile toward one another. If Christianity and postmodernism are indeed inherently incompatible, should postmodernism comes to rule exclusively in the

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¹ Although one might suggest that it might be fairer for each American be given a vote reflective in weight of the comparative amount of taxes that he or she forfeits under threat of imprisonment to a bloated, paternalistic government; this would rapidly bring about flat taxation — a less larcenous system — but that’s another essay.
political, social and educational arena, it seems logical to expect that religious institution, Evangelical Christian institutions in particular, will become radically marginalized, even forcibly closed.

**The Good News**

But there is hope. Because both Christianity and liberal arts institutions of higher education historically embraced a truth canon of accepted values rising from outside the individual, Christian liberal arts colleges may be uniquely positioned to shine great light into the value-darkened world of higher education. George Marsden writes,

Schools with strong religious commitments…are in a position to provide the missing basis for coherence via a shared religious faith. To do so they need not return to simplistic religious answers or to formulas of earlier generations…such as that the Western canon is the best source of the sublime. Rather they can critically engage the latest in their disciplines but from religiously shaped frameworks that attempt to bring coherence to disciplines and provide rationales for the relationships among disciplines. They can provide communities that have some rationale for relating learning to lives of service” (8).

Marsden “would argue…that, contrary to much of the standard wisdom of the twentieth century, institutions with strong religious commitments will be better able to maintain liberal arts ideal (sic) than if they lacked those religious commitments” (7-8). While non-religious liberal arts colleges may be too deeply entangled in postmodern thought to ever regain their historic role in teaching truth, morality, and ethics, Christian liberal arts colleges may be perfectly positioned to do so, if they doggedly holds to their identity and passionately resists the encroachment of postmodernist thought and theology. Stephen Davis has high hopes for Christian liberal arts colleges, and has outlined a plan for achieving quite significant impact upon general academia.

I believe that there are three areas where today’s Christian liberal arts colleges, small and sometimes overlooked as they are, can provide leadership for academia as a whole.

The first area is ethics. It is clear that today’s university has abdicated any authority, or even any desire, for telling right from wrong.…. The second area has to do with a shared worldview. This is something that the medieval educators and students had. They knew who they were – children of God. They know where they came from – God had created them. They knew their purpose in life – it was to serve and honor God. And they knew where they were hoping to go – to the Kingdom of God.…. The third area is integration of what we know…it is the process of thoroughly and courageously asking what one knows or believes in one area has to do with what one knows or believes in other areas. For Christian scholars, it means relating their faith to their secular learning (“Eight Hundred Years…” 25).

So Christian liberal arts institutions of higher education can indeed survive, remain viable, and realize their great potential in today’s cultural milieu as long as their Christianity is much more than a unifying social element, a discreet (or even pervasive) part of the curriculum, a means to reach and attract applicants, or a way to enhance distinctiveness. In these institutions, Christianity must provide the *ultimate lens* for viewing everything that takes place within the campus arena, *especially* in the classroom. These institutions must strive to “make Christianity

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2 I appreciate the elegance of Eric Springsted’s argument that the very vitality and pungency of the (denominational, in his argument) Christian liberal arts institution revolve around the “crucial tensions” provided by the “diametrically opposed principles” (here quoting de Tocqueville) inherent in the secular elements of the Liberal Arts and the religious elements of Christianity,” that “mollified the worst excesses of individualism” (Springsted 475).
the real threat to democratic liberal individualism that democratic liberal individualism is to the life of serious religion” (Springsted 477). and must enthusiastically embrace the sentiments of Bernard of Clairvaux when he writes about the purpose of education:

“There are many who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge: that is curiosity. There are others who desire to know in order that they may themselves be known: this is vanity. Others seek knowledge in order to sell it: that is dishonorable. But there are some who seek knowledge in order to edify others: that is love [caritas]….” (Schwehn 60).³

³Quoting Bernard of Clairvaux.


Fallon, Daniel. “The Liberal Arts in the World Emerging.” (Running Draft, 09.28.01, of unpublished article, used by permission).


