

The place of organized religion at Saint Mary's

The Cranky Professor

The Journal, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, Vol. 73, No. 6, 24 October 2007

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Saint Mary's is not a secular institution. Our Chancellor, the titular head of our university, is, by the Saint Mary's University Act of 1970, the man who is the Archbishop of Halifax. (Right now no one is the Archbishop.) Our Vice-Chancellor is the man who is the Vicar-General. The Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor, by the Act, sit on the Board of Governors of Saint Mary's University. The Board of Governors is our university's highest authority. By the Act, four other members of the Board of Governors are appointed by Roman Catholic organizations. That means six people on the 33-person board that oversees our university were seated at the pleasure of institutions of organized religion.

One of the Objects of Saint Mary's, again by the Saint Mary's University Act, is "to give special emphasis to the Christian tradition and values in higher education." (See p. 2 of the Saint Mary's University Act or p. 8 of the 07-08 Academic Calendar.) The Board of Governors has, by the Act, the "powers necessary or convenient to ... achieve the objects of the university" (Act, p. 5).

There is at Saint Mary's an office of University Chaplain. Space and staff for the Chaplaincy is maintained and paid for through the Director of Student Services by a grant to the university.

The Saint Mary's University Students' Association lists in its Constitution as one of the Objects of the Association "to promote *religious*, artistic, literary, educational, social, recreational and sporting activities for its members and others" (Constitution of SMUSA, p. 4, my emphasis). (In By-Law II: Purpose of the Association, this list is repeated, except that "religious" is gone and a comma follows "recreational" (p. 9).)

I, myself, have never stopped to think whether in my teaching or research I give special emphasis to the Christian tradition and values in higher education. I'm not sure what these values are, but I wouldn't be surprised to learn that some of the values that inform my life as an academic are inconsistent with Christian values. My case cannot be unique. I suspect that very, very few professors at Saint Mary's care one way or the other whether their work is in line with Christian tradition and values. I suspect that the practice of at least a few of us would prove inconsistent with those values, were anyone to check.

Happily, nobody is checking. No one is looking to see whether any professor's research or teaching is consistent with Object (b) of the Act. No department head or Dean or Vice-President could care less, and no one on the Board of Governors is spying on anyone. I should add that I'm not aware of any decision by the Board of Governors that was intended to promote religion or that had the effect of promoting religion. (On the other hand, last year's SMUSA sought to justify

allowing a psychic fair on campus by adverting to its constitutional obligation to promote religious activities.) So why should we be concerned to see that Saint Mary's become a secular institution?

Saint Mary's *ought* to be an entirely secular institution. No group other than staff, alumni, students, and faculty ought to be appointing members to our Board of Governors. There are two reasons for this. One is just prudence. The religious institutions that appoint members to the Board of Governors could use their appointments to further their interests. We don't want to have to bother resisting a movement to have Saint Mary's give special emphasis to the Christian tradition. The other is simply self image and aspiration. Our values are secular and we would like that to be acknowledged in our charter. We want to think of ourselves as masters in our own house, our house being a secular university.

There is as well, of course, the strange deference to religion and religious sensibilities that continues to mark even many non-believers. This deference, I think, is at least partly responsible for our administration's mishandling of the Peter March affair, back in 2006, and for its coddling of the students who charged that March harassed them or whatever. Were we officially and clearly a secular institution, perhaps we could more easily see that a person's religion and all that goes with it has no more significance for personal, social, or institutional relations than any other of a person's choices.

But that Saint Mary's ought to be a secular institution does not immediately imply that we should be working to make it a secular institution. So long as religious interests are not in fact guiding board members and no one cares that we lack any relation to the Christian tradition other than one of history, we all of us have more important matters to attend to. Still, should an opportunity to sever our ties to organized religion present itself, we should take it. We needn't attempt to create such an opportunity. But certainly we should seize any that comes along.

Maybe, though, an opportunity to make Saint Mary's a secular institution has just now, out of the blue, fallen into our laps. Right now there's a proposal in the works to sever the tie between the office of Archbishop of Halifax and the positions of Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor. Soon, it seems, the decision who is to be our titular head will rest with Saint Mary's. The Saint Mary's University Act is about to come before the provincial legislature for amendment. My thought is this: If one or two of our ties to organized religion is to be cut, we might as well agitate to have all of them cut. Why not now?