

Reply to Dr Bruce on organized religion at Saint Mary's

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I propose that Saint Mary's University sever all its remaining ties to organized religion. Beth McIsaac Bruce thinks Saint Mary's should maintain these ties. Bruce's positive argument for maintaining our ties seems to be that there is value in continuing a tradition. Most of Bruce's response, though, consists in denying that Saint Mary's is harmed by its ties to organized religion.

I can see no reason for holding on to a tradition just because it's a tradition. (Likewise, I can see no reason for dropping a tradition just because it's a tradition.) The question always and only is whether benefits outweigh burdens and harms. Bruce gives no evidence that Saint Mary's would lose something important were it to sever its ties to organized religion. So let's turn to her contention that since its ties to organized religion do not harm Saint Mary's, Saint Mary's would gain nothing important by severing them.

As it happens, sometimes a faint whiff of religion can be detected within the classrooms and halls of Saint Mary's University in 2008, but not often, and it's never more than faint. Professors and students here think of themselves as a community of intellectuals; we don't think of ourselves as a community of believers. Our needs and ideals, as members of the Saint Mary's community, are simply the needs and ideals of intellectuals. Given this, our ties to organized religion are harmful to us in two ways, and threaten to harm us in a third.

The first way in which they harm us is by encouraging on campus deference to religious sentiment and religious authority (there is still that whiff). As intellectuals, though, we should pay no more (and no less) attention to religious sentiment and religious authorities when we go about our business than we pay to any other sentiment or authority. Were we entirely a secular institution, we would be both less reticent than we are to discuss religion and its institutions critically or anthropologically or scientifically and less offended when one of our members does.

The second way they harm us is by misleading people into thinking that there is a strong air of religion on our campus. Our statement of objectives, as found in the Saint Mary's University Act, 1970, and featured in our Calendar, includes "to give special emphasis to the Christian tradition and values in higher education." We do no such thing here, and, apart from the serious wrong of misrepresentation, it is in two ways harmful that we say we do. One, students expecting to breathe religion in the air will be disappointed. Two, prospective students fearful of having to breathe religion will apply to other schools instead. People who turn to the Chaplaincy section at the back of the

Calendar after reading the statement of objectives will be confirmed in their misunderstanding.

The potential for harm is this: Our Board of Governors is responsible for seeing that our university serves its objectives. Happily, the Board is shirking its responsibility. Now it certainly could not win were it to try to get us to give special emphasis to the Christian tradition. Still, none of us wants to be worried about having to fight any such battle. Were no board members appointed by religious organizations, we could rest assured that we won't have to.

Severing our ties need involve neither disrespect toward any organized religion nor a repudiation of any important values we continue to honour. We will continue to be a university concerned to be accessible to everyone and a university engaged with the communities around us. We will work hard to see that Saint Mary's strives to make higher education available to those from the working class, as is our tradition, and we will acknowledge that those responsible for this tradition were moved by their faith. We, though, as a community of intellectuals, are faithless and, for the reasons I've outlined above, would do better were our institutional arrangements to reflect that fact.