

A university hospitable to the faithful

The Cranky Professor

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Saint Mary's University should sever its remaining ties with organized religion. Or so I have proposed.

The question whether it should sever its ties to organized religion comes down the question what would Saint Mary's lose and what would it gain were it no longer to have those ties. A good argument for severing them would show that gains outweigh losses, while a good argument for retaining them would show the opposite.

I want to discuss here an interesting argument for retaining official ties to organized religion. It is that severing our ties would change the character of campus life for the worse. Let us begin, though, with the argument in favour of severing them.

Everyone accepts that the ties Saint Mary's presently has to organized religion are few and minor. The Archbishop of Halifax has an official role as advisor and counselor to the president of the university. The Archbishop and the Vicar-General sit on the Board of Governors, along with four other members appointed by Roman Catholic organizations. Six members, then, of the 33-person board that oversees our university—but only six members—are seated at the pleasure of institutions of organized religion.

As well, one of the objects of Saint Mary's, given in the Saint Mary's University Act (1970), is "to give special emphasis to the Christian tradition and values in higher education." The Board of Governors has, by the Act, the "powers necessary or convenient to ... achieve the objects of the university." Moreover, the Collective Agreement between faculty and the university requires that those evaluating a candidate for tenure must consider whether she or he "will promote its [Saint Mary's] objectives as set out in the Saint Mary's University Act, 1970" (11.1.22).

To sever our ties would amount, then, to no more than refiguring the Board of Governors and removing the object to emphasize the Christian tradition.

Why we should sever our ties is plain. Because in fact we don't at Saint Mary's give emphasis to the Christian tradition, severing our ties would bring our charter into line with our reality. It would ensure that our board's outlook is secular and it would relieve the union and the university of their official responsibility to the Christian tradition. It would help administrators to overcome their deference to religious sensibilities. Finally, prospective students would neither favour nor reject Saint Mary's on the misapprehension that in fact there's a religious aspect to our character.

The interesting objection to severing our ties is that it's not a bad thing that students at Saint Mary's feel the presence of religion on their campus. That organized

religion currently has a sinecure at our university makes Saint Mary's a hospitable place for the faithful to study and to play.

At entirely secular universities, the objection notes, religious people often find themselves called on, in both classroom and cafeteria, to justify their beliefs and attitudes. Occasionally they are mocked or taunted. Most of their colleagues and classmates are atheists, some of whom are stridently opposed to religion, and the atmosphere that that creates is oppressive to people of faith.

At Saint Mary's, on the other hand, official ties to organized religion serve to make being religious natural, unexceptional, even respectable. Were Saint Mary's to sever its ties to organized religion, likely enough, before long, the faithful on campus would be as put upon and uncomfortable as the faithful are at other universities.

I heard this objection a couple years ago from a student in my Plato course, herself a practicing Catholic who had come to Saint Mary's from an entirely secular university. At Saint Mary's, she said, she can be a Catholic openly without having to be prepared to make a case for her beliefs. Muslims can be Muslims, Buddhists Buddhists. The comfort and security with which one can be a devoted practitioner of a religion on this campus, she said, is something important that would be lost were Saint Mary's to become an entirely secular institution.

I continue to think that much more would be gained than lost were Saint Mary's to sever its ties to organized religion. What this objection comes to, I think, is a challenge to our university community. We want, as intellectuals, to investigate beliefs and ways of life critically, without being punished or rewarded for what we conclude. Controversy and the challenges it poses to thinking are never to be shunned. But we want also, as a community of intellectuals, to discuss and debate respectfully, and to live together pleasantly, even with those with whom we disagree.

The point doesn't apply only to quarrels between the faithful and the faithless. It applies to any division within any controversy.

Making Saint Mary's an entirely secular institution is an important project for us to undertake, as I've explained above. Also important, though, is the project of training ourselves to be dispassionate inquirers and discussants. For such an inquirer, her fellows are not her enemies even as she speaks critically about their views and practices.