

Bad arguments against a secular Saint Mary's

The Cranky Professor

The Journal, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, Vol. 15, No. 5, 7 October 2009

Mark Mercer

Department of Philosophy

Saint Mary's University

Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

(902) 420-5825

mark.mercer@smu.ca

Saint Mary's University should sever its remaining official ties with organized religion. The argument in favour of this proposal is that these ties serve no good function while causing or threatening harm.

Our remaining ties are merely that six out of 33 members of our Board of Governors are placed by agencies of organized religion, that the Archbishop of Halifax is an official advisor to our president, and that one of our official objects is to emphasize the Christian tradition in education.

Harm our ties cause or threaten to cause is, first, to our mission as a place of inquiry and discussion. They do this by encouraging deference to religion and religious sensibilities. Second, the board is empowered to achieve the object of emphasizing the Christian tradition and, officially, both the university and the faculty union are committed to the integrity of that tradition. These facts put our way of life as intellectuals at risk. Third, students thinking of coming to Saint Mary's might be either encouraged or put off by their thought that we are in some way a religious university.

I've heard but one interesting argument in favour of maintaining our ties to organized religion, the argument I discussed in this column last week. Most of the arguments I've heard are terrible.

The argument I've heard most frequently is embarrassingly bad. It is that we have these ties by tradition. Well, yes, that's right—but should we maintain the tradition of having ties to organized religion? Why? (Each reason for severing our ties is also a reason for abandoning our tradition of having these ties.)

It's a mistake to think that abandoning a tradition implies that tradition itself is without value. It doesn't imply this, at least if the idea of tradition is the idea of a settled way of life. That removing a tradition would unsettle a way of life is indeed a reason, though rarely a decisive reason, not to remove it. The question is ultimately what would be lost and what would be gained were the tradition abandoned.

Those who mention tradition often add that to sever our ties would be to show disrespect to the founders and builders of our university. It was their faith that moved them to create this institution of higher learning, and they intended it to live and grow within the ambit of the Roman Catholic Church.

There's no inconsistency, though, between respecting those who have bequeathed to one an inheritance they worked hard and lovingly to create and using that inheritance the best one knows how. A home owner, for instance, can think admiringly of those who

a century ago designed and built her fine house even as she removes a wall or adds a skylight. Just so, Santamarians today can revere those who passed Saint Mary's on to us even as we work, in light of our current circumstances and needs, to change it for the better.

A final bad argument is that many people would be upset were we to sever our ties with organized religion, many people, that is, who presently donate money to Saint Mary's. I'd mention in response to this argument that the ties that exist right now are so weak and peripheral that no one who supports Saint Mary's could possibly think she was giving to a deeply religious institution, except that that point would distract us from what's really being said in this argument. What's really being said is that raising funds is more important than the good of the university for which the funds are raised.

If we take up the project of severing our remaining ties with organized religion, we will have to consider the matter how and when. It's not up to us, in the end, to be an entirely secular university. It is up to the provincial legislature. Our politicians, though, have no incentive to change our charter in accordance with our will that it reflect our reality. That is, there is nothing for our politicians to gain by courting those in favour of change while there is something for them to lose by going against those opposed to change. We should, then, put off the project, at least for a while. So goes an argument for caution.

One reason for thinking that we need not be cautious is that the most recent change brought to the legislature, that of having the university itself name its chancellor rather than having it accept the Archbishop of Halifax, went smoothly, with no visible opposition. Even though we are wise to be suspicious of our elected representatives' ability to act disinterestedly in the public good, maybe we are wrong to suppose that those opposed to an entirely secular Saint Mary's will mount an effective campaign.

Either way, our task right now is to make clear, both within and outside the university, the virtues of an entirely secular Saint Mary's.