

Evangelization in the Plural

A few years ago I spoke at a symposium that had as its theme “Religion and the Quest for Peace.” One after the other, the representatives of various religions described how completely opposed to warfare they were. A Moslem quoted from the Koran to demonstrate its hatred for violence, a Sikh explained why he carried a knife in the service of peace, a Jew quoted the famous passage from Isaiah about beating swords into ploughshares, and so forth. Hearing all this, I decided to take a different approach and so began by acknowledging Christianity’s glorification of a certain sort of fighting—the Crusades, chivalry, the just war. I even tried to justify this element of our history by insisting that there is something worth fighting for, something that is more important than peace or is, at least, a necessary condition for it: truth. We all admit this at the personal level for, whatever the grief to our families, friends, or associates, we must build our lives on what we come to believe about the world. George Eliot, as Mary Ann Evans, loved her evangelical father deeply and would have moved mountains to spare him suffering. But there was one mountain she could not remove, her loss of faith in Christianity. The truth, as she had come to see it, commanded her allegiance however greatly her change grieved and embittered her father against her.

Agnosticism as a World View

George Eliot belonged to an age when the corrosive scepticism of today had not yet eaten away man’s conviction that he could know the truth about the world. It is tempting to decry the intolerance produced by the absolute certitude of the nineteenth century, but in doing so we should realize two aspects of the contemporary facile recognition of every-and-any view. The first is that such tolerance is only possible because man has abandoned as hopeless the quest for religious truth; where there is no truth, there is nothing that can require absolute allegiance. The second is, paradoxically, that this so-called tolerance, in its ridicule and rejection of religion’s claim to possess the truth about God and man, is as intolerant as any bigotry of the past or present. Agnosticism is a complete and comprehensive worldview, as narrow and specific in its tenets as the fiercest Moslem fundamentalist. Consider, for example, the typical attitude of the agnostic towards religion in his insistence that all religions are equally true. It seems magisterial and impartial, wonderful in its universal sympathy, until one examines it more closely. It turns out too mean that all religions are equally false. For if all religions are “true,” the agnostic will find only in the tiny area of their overlap his kernel of truth. It amounts too a recognition that man has an unquenchable conviction that reality is not limited too what can be seen. The arts, philosophy, culture, religion, even science, all witness too an ongoing attempt to penetrate they mystery of existence. What this indefinable unknown is the agnostic cannot say. He is sure of one thing, however: that no one else knows what it is either. The specious tolerance of the agnostic or sceptic is more pose than reality, for he is as complete in his rejection of religious commitment as an astronomer would be of a geocentric universe. My claim then is that everyone, whether he knows it or not, is a proponent of a worldview; everyone is an “evangelist” and an “educator” in that everyone has a view of things to propagate and the means of justify it. Materialism, atheism, and agnosticism are all based on the conviction that one

knows the truth, even if that truth is nothing more than that man cannot know for sure what is true.

A Comprehensive Worldview . . .

As comprehensive systems, each of these –isms has a place in its scheme for all aspects of human life. The world’s religions, for example, will be regarded as a series of symbols that together provide strong evidence of man’s desire to find meaning in the world, but also, in their variety, equally strong evidence of his actual inability to do so. Hence, for the spiritual sceptic, all religions are false in their specifics: the Jews are not the chosen people because there is no chosen people; the Koran is not directly from Allah because Allah has not spoken; Jesus is not the God-man because the Word was not made flesh and did not dwell among us; and so on. It is not surprising, then, that the agnostic finds in the negation of Buddhism man’s supreme spiritual achievement, the touchstone for all religions. As G.K. Chesterton quipped, “students of popular science, like Mr. Blanchford, are always insisting that Christianity and Buddhism are very much alike especially Buddhism.” Mr. Blanchford has really done nothing more than what every –ism does when it is confronted with an alternate system: he has appropriated what suits him and rejected the rest. He then describes himself as tolerant.

. . . Perhaps Implicitly

My point—that it is impossible not to have a view, a specific worldview—is worth reiterating, for even the most thoughtless pragmatist exhibits a pattern in his actions, on the basis of which an astute observer could formulate a philosophy of life. There is no action that does not illustrate a coherent, universal system, whether the perpetrator of the act recognizes it or not. Consider utilitarianism, in medicine, say, as it is found in the behaviour of doctors who nowadays are trained in their trade but are largely left to scramble into an ethics on their own. Human experimentation, in or out of the womb, implies an entire anthropology, which is not the less complete for being unarticulated. If a doctor harbours the old-fashioned idea that man is a sort of machine, this assumption will be discernible in his research, just as the more contemporary view—that man is a superior animal, one organism among many—will be obvious from what happens in another laboratory.

A similar analysis can be made of our educational system. We may take it as given that our public schools promote a secular ideology, espousing the specious objectivity of the agnostic in spiritual affairs. Suppose that a school denies religion a place on the curriculum. The implication of this decision may vary from one place to another, but each one of them will reveal a set of preconceptions. Where the curriculum is comprehensive, the absence of religion demonstrates its unimportance, while in another sort of school, one for cooks or beauticians, for instance, an absence of religions would say little about the views of the directors. The difference comes from what the schools are trying to accomplish. A trade school limits its concerns to imparting a skill, whereas the comprehensive school tries to equip a student for life. The absence of religion, therefore, means different things in these settings, but it means something in all of them, even, I may note, in trade schools. For in a thoroughly religious civilization beauticians would honour the feast of their patron saint—Mary Magdalen, I suppose,

judging from her portraits—with pageants and processions. Hence the narrow focus of the modern beauty parlour witnesses to a privatization of religion in society.

The Need for Special Schools

The effect of schooling on a student's point of view will depend on various factors: the student's age, numbers and variety of programmes in the school, the strength of family life in the student's home. Where the last of these is strong, the secularizing effect of the others will be much reduced, even if the youngster is active in many school clubs and teams. Where family life is weak, however, the student will supply his emotional needs from what the school offers, if not in its curriculum then certainly in its assumptions and those of his peers. Consequently, the secular character of the school will have free rein. It follows that, at the elementary level, there is a greater need than at higher levels for the school to second what the home represents. The growing interest in and adoption of home schooling show that many parents are aware of the danger of which I speak, and are acting to safeguard their children from it. The threat of indoctrination lessens in high school, although even there a charismatic teacher can have a profound effect on his charges. That effect was captured to a remarkable extent by Robin Williams's performance as the teacher John Keating in the film *Dead Poets Society*. At university the power of personal influence is, of course, much reduced, but, as it wanes, the importance of content waxes. The inquiring mind of the adolescent and the quasi-formed opinions of the young adult raise intellectual questions about every worldview, including Catholicism. Students need programmes that can equip them to analyze and evaluate the pluralistic elements of modern society, but also to make them aware that a choice has to be made, for even to deny meaning is to affirm a worldview.

Refuting Agnosticism

The real difference between the agnostic and the Christian is not tolerance and intolerance, for each is "intolerant" in its conviction that the other is in error. Nor does the difference between them lie in commitment to truth, for each believes that he knows what is true about man's condition. The difference lies in the range of the truth they will allow. One limits himself to the sureties, or the single surety, that the unaided intellect can achieve. It is no wonder that there develops a tendency to reduce this reality to the functioning of the human mind, and within that mind to language. An effective refutation of this approach cannot be accomplished by argumentation. The broad scope of human experience in its manifold wonder has to be called upon.

A foolish German had said that man thought in words. It was totally false; a pernicious doctrine; the thought flashed into being in a hundred simultaneous forms, with a thousand associations, and the speaking mind selected one, forming it grossly into the inadequate symbols of words, inadequate because common to disparate situations, admitted to be inadequate for vast regions of expression, since for them there were the parallel languages of music and painting. Words were not called for in many or indeed most forms of thought: Mozart certainly thought in terms of music.¹

¹ Patrick O'Brien, *Post Captain* (London, 1990), p. 470.

A Christian expands these “vast regions” to include things that go beyond what can be contained in the human brain. In doing so, he joins the majority of mankind through the centuries in accepting the “primordial tradition”—the phrase is Houston Smith’s²—the unbreakable conviction that the world of the spirit is not only more real than this world, but also that it can be experienced. In Christianity, this tradition leads a person to accept first the possibility and then the fact that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. And this it is that Christianity, too, is a worldview, capable as such of incorporating in its system all the phenomena the world presents to the inquiring mind, including agnosticism, for the sceptical conclusions of the agnostic demonstrate that unaided reason, except among the most brilliant and leisured, will not attain the philosophical truth that the world has a transcendent cause and that man’s vocation is to encounter, as far as is possible, that cause.

Given the unavoidability of having a view, it is important that the view one comes to adopt be true or, if that is deemed impossible, be comprehensive and humane. Some sort of witness to the view (evangelization) and study of the view (education), whatever it may be, is inevitable. It follows that the effective educator and the evangelizer should, and sometimes do, share one characteristic: a contagious enthusiasm. Pentecostal Christianity holds little attraction for me, but I found myself half responding to the fervour of Robert Duvall’s portrayal of a revivalist preacher in his film *The Apostle*. He conveys the exuberance and the conviction that give power to such men. A gifted teacher is cut from the same cloth. Like the wildest charismatic, a real teacher will be on fire with his subject, and so communicate to even the most indifferent of his students, that there is something crucially important about Shakespeare or Newton, Plato or Saint Matthew. The one possible source of such enthusiasm, religious or intellectual, is the truth. Only what is true can excite a commitment that nothing can shake or impede. Consider the exorbitant demands that Jesus made upon his disciples: “Whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”³ Yet his disciples continued to go with him. Why? Because they believed Jesus when he said, “I am the truth.”⁴

Catholicism and Schooling

I have tried to establish my conviction that evangelization and education are universal, in that everyone has a point of view which willy-nilly he proclaims and justifies. There is no superior level from which the “objective” observer can classify other systems, for his feigned objectivity is itself one more such system. Hence it is not true that Catholicism, by indoctrinating its members, narrows their vision by enforcing a system that eliminates other possibilities. *Every* view, simply by being a view, eliminates all the others. Furthermore, a pretentious claim to objectivity is actually impoverishing, in that it ignores the riches peculiar to any given tradition in a search for some elusive highest common factor. Catholicism is a large phenomenon, a religion which, by forming mediaeval Europe, stands at the origin of western society. As a wide-ranging cultural fact, Catholicism has a response to every situation; as a religion, Catholicism is a corrective to secularism; as a sector of a pluralistic society, Catholicism has the right and obligation to prepare its members of action in that society. For all of these reasons, Catholicism needs

² Houston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition* (New York, 1976).

³ Lk 14.25-27.

⁴ Jn 14.6.

schools and universities. Admittedly, for many a simple faith can safeguard their allegiance to the Church in a secularized society, but this faith depends to some extent on a conviction that someone, somewhere can reply to and refute the contemporary critique of the Church. That someone, that somewhere is found in Catholic high schools and universities.

In this discussion, it is imperative to recall the fundamental nature of a school as a place of learning in which the young are prepared for their role in society. A pluralistic society does not eliminate the need for denominational education; on the contrary, it becomes the more necessary. Pluralism means honouring the commitment of an individual to a particular group within a larger society in which there is, in theory, no overriding ideology. Hence, if a specific group is to survive, it must be able to prepare its members to act socially in a way that witnesses to its principles. Where these are secular, public schools will serve well, but where they are religious, special education is required. The Amish, for example, follow a way of life that is radically different from that of their fellow Canadians. A truly pluralistic society honours their culture, but it must also ensure its continuance by allowing the Amish to educate their children suitably.

Totally Catholic

As Catholicism is comprehensive, so its ideology should infuse all aspects of the Catholic university. Arts and science, economics and education alike can draw upon Catholic principles. It is not necessary that every faculty member be a Catholic for a Catholic college to function effectively. I met a Chinese economist once who had been hired to teach in a Catholic institution. Although she had no religion herself, she began her course with John Paul II's encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, pointing out the principles by which a Catholic assesses economics. I wish such instances were not as rare as they are. For more common, in my experience, is the Catholic professor who prides himself on teaching exactly what and how his secular counterpart does. The effect of this approach is doubly pernicious, in that a student who chooses his university because it is Catholic will be caught off guard. Secularism will be anticipated and so resisted in a secular institution, but when it is taught in a Catholic setting it assumes a certain authority and plausibility. The first prerequisite for a Catholic college or university, therefore, is a staff of committed Catholics, joined perhaps by sympathetic non-Catholics who must, however, be relatively few if the institution is to function as it should.

The Catholic institution first participates in Christ's commission to the Church by demonstrating the unified nature of truth. Such is its primary and most effective method of evangelization. It is the glory of Catholicism to have found an effective way of honouring the natural without denying the supernatural. Hence the proclamation of the worth of the human person is accomplished in political science and economics by a critique of regimes and economies that place the individual below the state (communism) or at the mercy of profit (capitalism). The Catholic university witnesses to the dignity of the human person in literature and the arts in their exploration of the moral nature of man. What is required is not a Pollyanna optimism, but a realistic, total vision of the human condition, marred by sin but also invited into the realm of grace. The awareness of beauty as a divine attribute is the special province of these components of the Catholic university. Philosophy and theology will have their central roles to play as well, philosophy by demonstrating the power of reason to know man and his world, and

theology by showing the comprehensive, the coherent, and the consistent character of Catholicism. All of these disciplines reveal an ideal form of evangelization which becomes so united with education as to be indistinguishable from it: the full statement proclaims and convinces at one and the same time.

Academic Freedom.

I close with a word about a current topic of discussion: academic freedom. Some Catholic institutions look upon Rome's insistence on oaths of loyalty as undue interference in their proper functioning. This attitude fails to honour the principle that the primary responsibility for safeguarding Catholic doctrine in a region rests with the bishop of the place; he must therefore have a say, more or less formal, in the affairs of a Catholic college in his diocese. The public profession of a Catholic belief that Rome wants the bishop to receive from theology professors is a minimal requirement. The fact is that all educational institutions have something equivalent. No one would tolerate, for instance, a racist or a sexist on the staff of a provincial university, or regard such "intolerance" as an illegitimate limitation of academic freedom. Similarly, when students are suffering harm from a professional neglect of duty—absenteeism or unprepared classes—there is a veritable breach of contract on the part of the professor that the institution corrects by firing him. These matters are treated in the near-universal mission statements that candidates have to endorse before assuming positions in university, Catholic or otherwise. Such agreed-upon statements enable the institution to meet its responsibilities to its clientele. A religious university makes an additional demand upon the appointee, by requiring that his service to his students, mainly in his lectures, be consonant with the nature of the institution. It is no infringement of rights to protect and assure the preservation of these goals by requiring their public endorsement.

While it is true that the confines of Catholics are broad, they are confines nevertheless. It is therefore possible for students or lecturers to come to question or even to transgress them. As educated persons, they should recognize that to reject any one principle in as tightly knit a structure as Catholicism is to bring the entire edifice crashing down. No one is required to be a member of a Catholic intellectual institution, but if he is then he must recognize when his principles or behaviour contradict what the institution stands for. Normally, such a person would withdraw voluntarily; integrity and simple, honest self-respect require as much. Sometimes, for a number of reasons—financial, cultural, administrative, political—a person on staff will reject Catholic principles without resigning. This real possibility shows, first, the importance of hiring candidates who honour the Catholic worldview. Second, the practical matter remains, and the specific nature of a religious institution requires an equally practical method of handling it.