

## *What Happened To The Catholic University?*

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In October of 1993 at the college where I teach, a Jesuit institution located in the Midwest, a day was selected to celebrate the importance of science in Catholic education. To honor such an occasion, the College invited a speaker, making sure that just the right person would be present to symbolize the Catholic University's commitment to science. Among the ranks of Catholic thinkers, of course, are several names from which one could readily select a celebratory speaker. William A. Wallace and Stanley L. Jaki come to mind. These names, however, were passed over. To honor these proceedings my college chose Stephen Jay Gould. You may or may not be surprised to learn that I was one of only two or three faculty members who seemed disturbed by this, and I was the only professor whose disturbance inspired a written protest sent to the administration. Mind you, I was not upset that Stephen Jay Gould came to our campus and spoke to our faculty and students. He is an innovative and important member of the scientific community and his voice should be heard. As an instructor, I have even used his book, *The Mismeasure of Man*. What I found objectionable was that he was put forward as a symbol of science for Catholic education: this notwithstanding the fact that during his talk he predictably mocked Christianity, dismissing it as one of the principal interferences of scientific inquiry. I found it also objectionable that he was given the last word, that the situation was set up in such a way that he would not have to reply to criticisms of his anti-Christian world view. I would certainly welcome him as a visiting scholar, for there he would have to answer questions addressing his philosophical views about science, some of which are antithetical to a Christian account of nature and of the human person and are objectionable on purely philosophical grounds to boot. As

it was, the situation, it seemed to me, was arranged in a way that was intellectually dishonest and an offense to the mission and identity of Catholic education.

Why were faculty and administrators so indifferent to these proceedings? Once I answered this question, I began to realize what exactly had happened to the Catholic university. The sad truth is that faculty and others were indifferent simply because they agreed with Stephen Jay Gould. Many of those in attendance may not have known the details about his scientific claims, and they may not have known what the terms of their agreement entailed, but they were sympathetic nonetheless with Gould's world view, and by "world view" I mean simply a philosophical perspective on the universe, a claim about the first principles explaining the way things are. To explain the current state of the Catholic university, many changes have to be identified, only a few of which I can analyze here. But it seems to me that one of the principal changes is the acceptance, at least tacitly, of the substance of the naturalistic philosophy of Gould and his colleagues (e.g., Carl Sagan and Richard Dawkins) in regard to the actual substance of classroom instruction and in the determination of what counts as respectable intellectual discourse. Christian education has been undermined by naturalism, the view that nature, defined empiriologically as only matter in motion, is sufficient to explain both the non-living and living orders of things, including the nature of the human existent. That naturalism is inconsistent with Christianity is made evident by its central credo, which has been outlined nicely by the biologist J. Baird Callicott:

What is now known about nature—from astronomy and astrophysics, geology, chemistry, and biochemistry—is not consistent with the hypothesis that the world was created out of nothing. . . . Indeed the evidence overwhelmingly supports the idea that the universe came gradually to be what we now find it to be—rather than coming into its present state all of a sudden—and that it is much larger, much older, and differently arranged than Genesis would lead one to suppose. Further, neither comparative anatomy and physiology nor the fossil evidence support the idea that human beings are a case apart from other creatures (which, of course, from a more informed point of view, are not "creatures" at all, in the literal sense of the term, but "evolvents"). . . . [T]he same natural processes which account for the physical structures and behaviors of other species account equally well for the physical structures and behaviors of human beings. . . . From the point of view of evolutionary theory as it has been extended in twentieth-century science, there is a historical continuity of human with animal life, and of animal with plant life, and of life *in toto* with nonliving chemi-

cal compounds, *and* so on right down to the most elementary physical constituents of nature.<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of Callicott, but they express exactly Gould's view, the position that he promotes in his books and that he advocated during his talk that October day at my college. As you can see from Callicott's words, this is a position holding that physics and chemistry are *sufficient*, not just *necessary*, conditions for the emergence of life and higher consciousness. Accordingly, neither life nor man requires God's special creative acts. The existence and the nature of the universe do not depend on God's creative activity. Nor does the universe rely on His providence. Of course, this inspires one to ask: What exactly is left of Christianity if one agrees with Callicott that it is not necessary to posit either creation or a Providential Creator? The obvious answer is "nothing," since these beliefs, along with a few others associated with them, are the non-negotiable core of Christian theism. Hence, those Christian educators who regard naturalism as an axiomatic component of sound education today have, in fact, nullified the role of Christian doctrine in actual instruction.

Still, Christians, even when thrown into the arena with the naturalist lions, are a resourceful lot, and have cleverly devised an escape route, an illusory one but desired by some nonetheless. This exit appears in the supposition that, while the substance of naturalism must be accepted, an area of religious discourse can nonetheless be staked where God and Christian doctrine still have at least emotional appeal. This has led to that particular sort of qualified naturalism which attempts to make God an object of speculation provided such speculation is regarded as extra-scientific. Phillip E. Johnson calls this type of naturalism "theistic naturalism," a perspective which gives to Callicott everything that belongs to the realm of knowledge and leaves to metaphysics and religion the realm of irreducible, groundless belief, where they can never be subjects of rational inquiry. This may seem to be an attractive compromise, but in fact it is a Faustian bargain, at least in terms of the educational mission and identity of a Catholic institution. And I never cease to be amazed at how zealously today Catholic intellectuals aim to strike this bargain, which concedes "to Darwinism the role of telling the true history of the development of life" and consigns God to a metaphysical realm which can only be spoken of poetically.<sup>2</sup> For those still

<sup>1</sup> J. Baird Callicott, "The Search for an Environmental Ethic," in Tom Regan, ed., *Matters of Life and Death*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1986), p. 387.

<sup>2</sup> See Phillip E. Johnson, "Creator or Blind Watchmaker?" *First Things* (January 1993): p. 9.

interested in such extra-scientific speculations, those incorrigibly religious souls who will not give up their childhood superstitions, such talk about God might be of interest. For example, one might still believe that God is *possibly* the originator of the universe, although it is assumed that this belief is *in principle* indemonstrable, since metaphysical and axiological claims are only so much poetry. Neither God nor the other *praeambula* of the faith—such as soul, immortality, freedom (issues which directly contradict naturalistic orthodoxy)—can be subjects of rational demonstration. Hence, when Catholic educators embrace theistic naturalism, they in effect reduce God to a philosophical irrelevancy. In terms of actual instruction, instead of being told that the universe is God's creation, and that man is God's special creation, and that science is possible because it recognizes the order of God's creation—just the kinds of truths you would expect to be advocated by Catholic intellectuals—students are led to believe that physics explains everything about which human beings can make genuine assertions, that is, statements that are not mere poetry but are really true or false.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, God, creation, and His providential activity fade ever more into the shadows when the content of curricula are discussed. Since it is politically incorrect to challenge naturalism publicly, there is little opportunity to bring these issues to the attention of the academic community. Hence, Catholic educators go about their business blissfully thinking that they can have Gould's naturalism and God too. But in fact, the best naturalism will allow one is to grant God in an irrelevant and marginalized sense. Such is God's fate on today's naturalized Catholic campus. It is true that there is some residual lip service to Christian orthodoxy, usually spoken about obliquely in the school bulletin, at commencement, and at other formal occasions, when a little poetry is called for, when a little symbolism fills an emotional void. But even these moments are becoming less frequent. Ideally, these awkward occasions and embarrassments are to be offset by having the likes of Stephen Jay Gould speak on campus once in a while to debrief us. This will assure again that in terms of identifying substantive intellectual allegiances, naturalism prevails.

As I have suggested, the University has not been altogether critically

<sup>3</sup> Theistic naturalism grants only poetic, not logical, truth to religious utterances. Poetic truth cannot be contradicted, and thus is compatible with contrary accounts of the same subject in different narratives. Logical truth can be contradicted, and thus is incompatible with opposite accounts of the same subject. On the distinction between poetic and logical truth, and on its application to religion, see Mortimer J. Adler, *Truth in Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1990).

aware of this change. Many faculty and other members of the Christian intellectual community have been duped, I fear, into thinking that they have no choice but to accept Stephen Jay Gould on his own terms. They surmise that at this stage in the twentieth century, an educated, rational mind simply cannot reject naturalism. Christianity, if it is to eke out any continued intellectual respectability, must simply embrace it. Herein lies the mistake. These educators mistake naturalism for science. The rhetoric of naturalism has been so successful that it has convinced academics that what is in fact a philosophy, or perhaps even more precisely, an ideology, is in fact a science. Specifically, they mistake the philosophical supposition that reality is merely physics for the demonstrated truths of science. It is understandable, of course, why many Christians might succumb to this rhetoric, given the esteem science has enjoyed over the past few centuries. And it is certainly the case that every rational mind must accept the truths of science. The problem, however, is that often doctrines pass for science that are really "scientific" in name only. While whatever is scientifically true is in harmony with Christian theological and philosophical understanding, it is also the case that a given age may accept a body of philosophical assumptions about science that are questionable and problematic, if not untenable. Naturalism seems to rest on a number of these assumptions. But many of our colleagues accept naturalism at face value, failing to realize that there is a non-negotiable core of Christian doctrine that could be compromised by the naturalist's world view.

This is very evident in the attitude many Catholic educators have toward Darwinian evolution, a point Alvin Plantinga has effectively made in some recent articles.<sup>4</sup> Had Gould quoted Richard Dawkins, who claims that "It is safe to say that if you meet someone who claims not to believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid or insane (or wicked, but I'd rather not consider that)," he would have elicited mainly nods from the audience.<sup>5</sup> Propaganda about "the fact" of evolution, which Gould announces repeatedly in his writings, is powerful rhetoric aiming to sideline, if not negate, metaphysics and religion once and for all. As Callicott's quotation makes clear, there is no room in Darwinian evolution for God, creation, human souls, or the working out of salvation. Hence, if Darwinism is science, Christianity

<sup>4</sup> See Plantinga's "On Christian Scholarship," presented at the University of Notre Dame, Spring, 1990; "The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship," the Stob Lectures of Calvin College, 1989; and "Christian Scholarship and Secularization," summarized in *The Christian Educator* (January 1992): pp. 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> Plantinga, *The Christian Educator*, p. 4.

is either nullified or reduced to irrational fideism. Catholic educators have failed to understand that, however much one must credit Darwin for advancing our knowledge of natural history in important respects, one must also guard against giving away too much to his legacy. Of course, I am not saying that evolution should not be part of the description of natural history and even of the biological history of the human species. But it seems to me incoherent to maintain that Christian doctrine and a sound Christian philosophy can make evolution, as understood by the Darwinists (such as Callicott), the official doctrine. As I said above, orthodox Christianity is committed to the view that man is specially created. And a sound philosophy must acknowledge that neither the human intellect nor the will is reducible to matter in motion. In other words, if humans differ in kind and not in degree from the other animals, the human person requires special creation because the human species is discontinuous, in key respects, with the rest of nature. Accordingly, evolutionary theory might be part of the story of natural history, but it is not the whole story. I find it interesting that many philosophers who have virtually a congenital disposition to be critical and to analyze positions until all of their weaknesses are exposed, become curiously docile, even servile, when evolutionary claims and other "received" doctrines of naturalism are supposed. The most enthusiastic advocates of Darwinism whom I know personally have read nothing of the work of Phillip E. Johnson, for example, who shows that their doctrine fails to measure up to standards of empirical falsifiability and that their view, rather than being factual, is really only a theoretical interpretation of nature which happens to have a certain explanatory power. Those few I have met who have some acquaintance with Johnson, dismiss his work *a priori*, declaring that it is another effort at "creationist science," whatever that is. And whatever it is, I assure you, Johnson has nothing to do with it.

This disposition toward naturalism is tantamount to a prejudice. As Plantinga has put it: "In contemporary academia, evolution has become an idol of the tribe; it serves as a shibboleth, a litmus test distinguishing the benighted fundamentalist goats from the enlightened and properly acculturated sheep."<sup>6</sup> Being lumped with the former provokes a horror compared with nothing else for the contemporary intellectual. This is also true of many Catholic intellectuals, who have endorsed the policy followed by Catholic administrators that Catholic schools should mirror the curricula of secular schools so as not to risk this benighted condition.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Whatever the faults (and I'm sure there were many) of the monopoly of Thomism on the philosophy curricula three or four decades ago, Thomistic philosophers were keenly aware of the hazards of getting in bed with the naturalists. However, after Vatican II, a spirit of openness may have inspired philosophers to think that Christianity could absorb any "-ism." To think otherwise was to be "divisive," a complaint I hear daily in some context on campus, a curious protest since history shows that almost all cultural achievements, especially those in philosophy and religion, have been divisive, pitting son against father, as the Gospel observes.

This condemnation of divisiveness brings to mind another "-ism" that many Christian academics imbibe today. I refer to relativism, which enjoys a symbiosis with naturalism, since the latter, so relativists maintain, spawns the fact/value distinction. According to this distinction, it is the proper purview of science to describe or report factually what is known about the world. That water is made of hydrogen and oxygen and that Red Square is in Moscow are examples of such facts. While statements of value, such as "democracy is the best form of government" and "it is wrong to lie," are subject to scientific inventory (that is to say, science can catalogue those who, as a matter of fact, report such prescriptive claims), there is nothing within the bounds of science to provide such remarks any kind of justification. Hence, they exist only as brute preferences. Accordingly, the term "value" has no cognitive content; if it had such content, it could be scientifically verified. This view, the offspring of positivism, has been debunked for some time by philosophers, but it is still surprisingly fashionable among the social scientists, even though they often contradict themselves in trying to abide by it, for every psychologist knows that mental health, freedom from cognitive distortions, and overcoming neuroses are better than suffering from them. But these incoherences have deterred few from accepting the relativizing effects of the fact/value distinction. It has become, I fear, a staple of the culture of college life. It even influences curricula. It begets the assumption that the content of the humanities is ultimately so much opinion, beyond even the possibility of justification, since it concerns values, and things not subject to scientific measurement and experimentation. The humanities, as a result, are merely the chaff winnowed away after the cognitive kernels of science have been harvested. Accordingly, the humanities devolve into free-for-alls in which people talk at each other about different points of view without really communicating, because, even if there is agreement, it cannot presumably be achieved based on any real demonstration. This leads to the dismal result that college disputes, even about curricula and academic matters that pertain directly to students, become

matters of politics only. Disagreements become clashes of Nietzschean wills, wherein that view is "best" which survives the political struggle. Rationality and knowledge are despaired of. All that remains is politics, which lately has become that curious academic variety of fascism, political correctness.

In order to cope with competing political views, academic leadership has let back in the door one value standard, political expediency, which has the unfortunate effect of nullifying the Catholic university's power to be counter-cultural. If one carefully reads speeches composed by Catholic university administrators today, they often subscribe to the safe course of letting prevailing political sentiments dictate mission and policy. This is an abdication of leadership, of course, based on the mistaken judgment that the role of the educator is to adopt and foster trends in academic pop-culture. The classic Socratic mission of education—to foster self-knowledge and critical awareness so as not to be popular culture's willing thrall—seems overlooked by these academic leaders.

The same fate that befalls the other humanities awaits theology and philosophy. All disciplines break apart in the vortex of relativism unless they can claim some association with naturalism. Hence theologians, after exiling religious doctrines to the outer reaches of fideism, are anxious to demonstrate that what is left of their discipline must enjoy respectability on naturalist terms. Theology in practice, then, becomes sociology of religion, the kind of study reflected today in the writings of Joseph Campbell, Harvey Cox, Hans Kung, and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty. Accordingly, religion can only meaningfully be talked about descriptively, complete with all the relativistic implications that follow from this sociological approach. One theologian told me that the philosophical demand to regard religious claims as assertions (as true or false) is an intellectual disease. This is an error, she asserted, because it assumes that religion is about beliefs. Philosophy of religion courses are especially pernicious because they subject religious doctrines to examination, fostering the mistaken supposition that religion consists of beliefs or assertions. Following Campbell, she stated that to assume religion is doctrinal ("credal") is to mistake religion for superstition. "Today," my colleague insisted, "we know that religion is really psychology, an orientation toward faith, not about propositions or credal statements." It apparently did not bother her that her own account of religion was expressed in propositional and credal terms or that her expression "orientation toward faith" could not mean much unless it involved specific commitments (beliefs). But her view generates more than just questions about coherency. How can one justify that theology be a part of an educa-



tional curriculum if her conception of religion is correct? By her own admission, theology seems to have become "religious studies," a part of sociology. If theological doctrines in and of themselves preclude rational examination, then theology disqualifies itself as an academic discipline. Education presupposes that students are being led (from the Latin *ducere*) to something true, not just to psychological dispositions or to sociological descriptions of religious cultures. I fear my colleague's view is a thinly veiled pretext for ideology, another version of deconstruction. If rational examination and argument are removed from theology, then students must become merely passive hearers of arbitrary interpretations of religion. Theology becomes a political instrument. At worst, this becomes manipulation to professors' agendas, which often reflect the latest political and theological fads.

The same tendency to reduce their discipline to relativistic, sociological descriptions appears not just among the theologians but among the philosophers as well. This has particularly dire consequences for the Catholic university. Once philosophy becomes reduced to merely a sociological, psychological, or historical phenomenon, it loses its ability to defend truth and to combat error, and thus it forfeits its rightful role as the integrating and regulating discipline in the curriculum. The philosopher becomes a prisoner of cultural and personal perspectives, and the best he or she can offer is interpretations. Reduced to mere words, philosophy becomes a battleground of baseless convictions. The nominalist legacy of modern philosophy begets only so much postmodernist gamesmanship.

To illustrate consider a recent article by Nicholas Lobkowitz entitled "What Happened to Thomism?"<sup>7</sup> The article argues that because Thomists naively clung to the view that philosophy involves the attainment of truth, the "advancements" of the discipline passed them by. Lobkowitz's preference for anti-realist philosophies that reject Thomistic realism speaks volumes about what happened to the Catholic university. Because his view of philosophy is so popular, it is no surprise that realism is ignored and that the Catholic university has paid a price for that ignorance. To elaborate, consider that in Lobkowitz's article philosophy is defined not as an awareness of things as they really are but as the interpretation of reality through conceptual categories. Thomism, he says, was eclipsed because it assumes that it can construct models that comprehensively explain experience. But

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Lobkowitz, "What Happened to Thomism?" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* LXIX (Summer 1995): pp. 397-423.

these models stand only so far as Thomistic language gives them authority. Other philosophical perspectives are equally satisfactory on their own terms, and Thomists cannot effectively criticize them without begging the question, without presupposing again their own language, models, and categories.

It requires only a moment's reflection to recognize the Enlightenment assumptions at work in this view of philosophy. Lobkowitz has assumed that philosophy is a construction by the human mind. On his view, Thomism happened to succeed ideologically for a while because it bullied many in the philosophical community into accepting its dictatorial constructions of "truth." Lobkowitz is now here to expose this tyranny for what it was. He is making explicit what many philosophers grasped implicitly, which caused them to ignore Thomism and hasten it into decline. These philosophers, like Lobkowitz, enjoy the *gnosis* that since all philosophical projects depend on distinct perspectives and chauvinistic lexical principles, there are as many philosophies as there are perspectives and lexicons. What right does Thomism have to argue that its perspective is special?

Because, Lobkowitz tells us, different philosophers work with different paradigms, they may disagree. But this disagreement is never absolute, nor resolvable in favor of any one position. A philosophical argument may be problematic for one philosopher's set of assumptions but quite acceptable from another point of view. It all depends on the context and categories which give rise to the argument. Consider, for example, the ontological argument. "It is not simply valid or invalid, but rather valid in some contexts and invalid in others. One may, of course, then discuss these contexts or assumptions, but after some time one reaches a point at which one is no longer discussing the truth or falsity of a conclusion, or for that matter the validity or invalidity of an argument, but rather the applicability of a conceptual framework, the ways of speaking about our common experience."<sup>8</sup>

Of course, if philosophy is not an inquiry into truth or falsity, why is Lobkowitz's appeal to common experience even relevant? Philosophy has become only so many anchorless, competing interpretations. This is the triumph of perspectivalism, with the presumption of course that Lobkowitz's perspective is somehow authoritative.

Lobkowitz's article is instructive in that it inadvertently identifies why the Catholic university has declined. The reason lies in the fact that it has

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 413.

become overrun by Lobkowiczeans. To discuss Lobkowicz is relevant because the fate of Thomism is tied to the fortunes of the Catholic university. When Thomists are replaced by Lobkowiczeans education pays dearly. Philosophy suffers because, once bankrupted by Enlightenment pathologies, it is distorted into a postmodernist, nominalist game. Philosophers become helpless to challenge their peers or to exercise philosophy's power to justify the mind's contact with reality and value. Moreover, and it is especially in this regard that the eclipse of Thomism and the rise of Lobkowiczean philosophy has undermined the Catholic university, philosophy has lost its power to address and challenge (and also defend) other disciplines. In fact, the other disciplines (especially the humanities) have become mired in the relativistic mud because the philosophers, having talked for years like Lobkowicz, have given them their relativistic rationale. The unforeseen result for the philosophers is that, once these other disciplines accept the skeptical, relativistic doctrines of Lobkowicz's perspectivalism, they no longer have any use for philosophy. Philosophy, then, has succeeded ironically in deforming and marginalizing itself, and is much beleaguered by its enemies on today's Catholic campus.

I am reminded of a recent experience. A friend of mine who teaches at a Catholic university told me that his department of philosophy was much under fire in the curriculum reform taking place at his school. He asked me why I thought faculty outside the department of philosophy could hold the discipline in such disdain. My answer was simple and direct. His colleagues do not appreciate philosophy, I said, because they took his courses. There they drank only Lobkowicz's brew, which drugged them into believing that philosophy is only so much interpretation—about what we're not sure. Hence, they went home and interpreted philosophy out of existence. Who is the Lobkowiczean philosopher to protest?

Philosophy has been undermined by the Enlightenment skepticism which despairs of any knowledge of reality. If the Catholic vision of education is to be renewed, philosophers must take the lead and courageously reassert the mind's adequacy to know God's creation. If this is not done, Catholic universities will go the way of so many Protestant schools, institutions like Harvard and Columbia, which originally were conceived as seminaries to inform the mind about the things of God. We can do our part to prevent this from happening, if we remain faithful to the realist vision of philosophy. That is what inspired Jacques Maritain. It is still the best hope for the Catholic university.