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Strings to the bow

Catholic Universities Outdated?



By Frank Morriss

Dr. Rosemary Lauer, a strike leader at St. John's University, Brooklyn, gained headlines when she said she doubted if there should be Church-run universities. No one seemed to point out the incongruity in a lady with such opinion striking in order to promote rehiring of teachers at a Church-related university. Perhaps many placed her remark in the category of the action of a youngster put out of a game who picks up the ball to make sure there is no game at all.

But since Dr. Lauer's statement there has sprung up serious consideration of her view, and surprisingly on such Catholic campuses as that of Notre Dame. So, along with ideas that grow weirder and weirder the farther we advance into the thicket of Existentialism, we must now face the fact that there are Catholic educators who maintain there should be no Catholic educators — or at least who think Catholicity must be completely ghettoed into realms other than the intellectual. The integral professor, they seem to say, must be integral in all things except doctrine — and if he has a doctrine he had best keep it to himself.

If I have misinterpreted the stand of these critics, I hasten to insist that secular conformity would be the almost inevitable outcome of their stand, whether they intend such outcome or not. Abuses of academic freedom and scholarly research done by zealous religious rectors do not approach the abuse inherent in the downgrading of theology and philosophy on state-controlled campuses and even some that are private but non-Church related.

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If the orientation, at the very least, of these campuses is toward a materialistic, non-theistic, non-objective-truth outlook, and such orientation does not merit censure, why, I ask, must a Catholic university be criticized because it is oriented otherwise? Would those critics be academically outraged if a state university fired, or even failed to promote, a professor of English who exposed his students at every opportunity to a deep conviction of the truth of Catholic doctrine?

In such event would the American Association of University Professors vote a spanking for that university? Of course not. And yet it was the national president of the AAUP who, speaking at Notre Dame, said there is some contradiction "between the search for academic freedom on the one hand, and, on the other, the assurance to all religious groups of their full right to maintain colleges and universities committed to their own moral and religious principles." He made no mention, I am sure, of any contradiction between academic freedom and a university that is in effect closed to any adequate presentation of natural law philosophy, Biblical history as the word of God, scholastic philosophy as viable and vital in today's world.

Add to this sad and narrow state of affairs another element and you have the making for a dreary and unexciting conformity in education. That element is the fact that, like it or not, governmental intrusion into education is bound to grow. This is an intrusion tied to the notion that not a penny of public money must advance the teaching of anything spiritual in nature. If there are no institutions that believe the teaching of things spiritual is every bit as important as other teachings, then we will have governmental aid thrown completely and totally behind academic secularism. Complete freedom of choice in higher education will have been forfeited merely to satisfy the exaggerated idea that true academic freedom demands complete lack of commitment to God's Revelation.

There is the heart of the objection of these newly arrived (some 1,200 years new) critics of education sponsored by the Church. They do not believe it is possible to be both open minded toward truth and committed to religious doctrine. For their criticism to be valid they must maintain that belief is an antithesis of truth — or that the scholarly mind remain completely unconvinced of truth as more important than the search for truth.

These new critics want to make life a perpetual journey, with no arrival; a search for Treasure Island with never a landfall. It is the Never-Never Land of never intellectually growing up.

That is not freedom. It is a perpetual escape from intellectual and spiritual responsibility.