

LOVE AND DEATH IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

By RAYMOND A. SCHROTH

I SIT AT MY ASSISTANT DEAN'S DESK and look out from my third-floor office in Keating Hall, the Gothic-towered centrepiece of the Fordham, Rose Hill, Bronx, New York, campus, over the lush, green, fenced quadrangle called Edwards' Parade. Below, on warm days youths play soccer in bright maroon and white jerseys, or stretch out shirtless in the sun, or fling frisbees in high arcs and leap like ballet stars to snatch them down in mid-flight.

Outside the gates, cars and buses cough and groan and rumble past the Bronx Botanical Gardens on one side and the Bronx Zoo on the other, up Fordham Road. It is a bustling, graffiti-splattered Spanish neighbourhood of 150,000 people, where one of us could climb the hill on a Saturday afternoon through the chattering crowds to the subway station and never hear the English language once. A few blocks to the south, a tight, colourful enclave surrounded by Spanish and blacks is called Little Italy – a remnant of thirty years ago when it seemed the whole world, including the Irish and Yugoslavians, made the Bronx its home.

On the far side of the Parade, partly obscured by trees ablaze in fall's vermillion and gold, sit two grey, five-storey, nineteenth-century buildings, one where I lived as a freshman and served the morning mass of my mentor, Fr Joe Frese SJ, in 1951–52: the other where, as a faculty resident counsellor, I live now. Barely noticed in the bushes: a green, bronze bust of Cornelius J. Murphy, the football player who suffered a blow to the head in a 1931 game and died three days later. A few yards beyond, the 1838 manor house, now the administration building, where in 1969 student protesters swept across the Parade, crashed through the doors and into the president's office to protest Fordham's participation in ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps).

The floor below my office, the office of the dean. There, in the 1950s, the priest who established the Honors Program and Junior Year Abroad and actually made students read books. Thurston Noble Davis SJ, with his Rooseveltian jaw and honeyed baritone, would call us in, sit us around him, puff on the cigarette held delicately in his finger tips, and ask, 'Well, boys, what's on your minds?'

His successor, Leo McLaughlin SJ, a brilliant, loving man, became president in 1965 and shattered some traditions and some egos to transform Fordham into its modern – and nonsectarian – self. Removed from office he went south to teach at a black college, but soon left the Jesuits to marry a younger woman.

To the south of the Parade, Walsh Hall, a twelve-storey apartment dormitory, where, a few years ago, a bullet fired randomly from a Bronx rooftop strayed in through a window and took out a girl's eye. To the north, the old gym, and next to the gym, the football field. There, in October 1996, a 20-year-old junior, William Tierney, warming up for the Homecoming game, with his parents in the stands and his 15-year-old sister waiting to sing the national anthem, toppled over and died.

Crisis in the university?

We are told that the American university, particularly the Catholic university, is in a state of crisis. Huston Smith, America's most popular historian of religion, has underlined Robert Bellah's observation that the deepest indictment of today's university is that it erodes not just religious belief but belief in general.¹ To the secular mind, which sets the tone of both the media and general intellectual discourse, religion means either the so-called Christian Right's intrusion into politics or the irrelevant piety of an otherwise educated person who, had he or she gone to a better university, would know better than to believe in transubstantiation, Jesus' resurrection, or the human value of a foetus whose mother finds him inconvenient. Yale Law School professor Stephen Carter, in *The culture of disbelief*, tells of meeting Notre Dame law students whose fellows mocked them for allowing their religious belief to influence them on abortion.

This is, we are told, a crisis brought on by three forces: firstly, *the inexorable onslaught of a contemporary popular culture*, by 'grunge', barbarians who have smashed down the cloister gates and stabled their horses in the library and chapel. The student products of this force, says pseudonymous Peter Sacks in *Generation X goes to college* (Open Court, 1996), are the spawn of postmodernism, a variously defined movement characterized by the rejection of rationality, the scientific method and belief in progress, and by the substitution of pop culture and hyperconsumerism for democratic institutions. The slogan of the age: 'Trust no one'.

The typical Generation X student – at least amongst those Sacks meets teaching at an unnamed California community college – slumps

sullenly in the back of the room in baggy shorts, an oversized T-shirt, and backwards baseball cap; he studies less than two hours a day. All American readers recognize this kid – the tattoos, the several rings dangling from his ears, lips and nose; the beeper, the cellular phone. The boy takes a long sip from his plastic water bottle, plunks it down on his desk, and looks up as if to snarl: 'Amuse me, I dare you'. Up to this point, the boy's education has conditioned him to avoid 'stress' – as if any kind of pressure to produce was an invasion of his autonomy; his high school teachers have overlooked his inability to spell or write a coherent grammatical sentence rather than ruffle his 'self-esteem'. They have given him Bs, and passed him along illiterate to college teachers like me who want the high school teacher to burn in hell.

Secondly, *by the dominance of left-wing professors* – wearing nametags that read 'deconstructionist', or 'politically correct multiculturalist' – who came of age during the radical sixties and have now, armed with PhD theses with titles like 'West Virginia Black lesbian Marxist coal miners' Poetry, 1890–1891', teach nothing but their speciality, and undermine devotion to the broader western tradition which, up till recently, was the bedrock of our value system.

Thirdly, *careless stewards*, twenty-six Catholic university presidents and religious superiors, who, in their 1967 statement drawn up at Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin, in their desire to move Catholic universities into the mainstream of American higher education, committed their institutions to academic excellence and academic freedom, in the full, modern sense of the word.

As a result, in their drive both to match secular standards and qualify for government aid for which sectarian schools would be ineligible, Catholic administrators, mostly religious order priests, forfeited power, particularly the ability to place priests and religious on the faculty without the approval of lay colleagues. Consequently, while Catholic institutions now attract top scholars, some 'top scholars' are more loyal to their professions – e.g. to the American Political Science Association – than to their university or its students. Their schedules drag them to campus at most once or twice a week; students who leave messages on their absent professors' voice mail sometimes get silence as their ultimate answer.

Three steps we could take

How much of this descriptive critique is true? And if it is largely true, how relevant is it to the argument that, in adapting to modernity, Catholic universities have suffered the loss of their souls? Or, to use the

word which is now the key word in marketing an institution – and thus basic to its survival – their *identity*.

Some Catholic schools plug in a buzz word – like ‘caring’ or ‘diversity’ – where ‘identity’ should be. Others adopt the castle-under-siege mentality, as if a time machine could zap the campus back to the 1950s. Others draw lines against pro-abortion or homosexual clubs or speakers, without thinking through the full costs of limiting free expression.

In ‘Bland secularism’,² I argued that despite the perceived losses in Catholic identity – losses which, for the most part, were the inescapable price of raising our academic reputations – Catholic universities could still reclaim their special identity in three ways. They could choose as leaders presidents with the intellectual depth and skill to articulate the school’s Christian vision, particularly in applying that moral vision, in practical ways, to issues of social justice. They could impose a common curriculum – even something as minimal as ten books which all students must read – which clearly embodies the values the institution holds dear. Thirdly, the lay faculty, by disposition and contract, could help define and commit themselves to the university’s mission statement and, in the hiring process, seek out men and women who share that vision – not merely on the basis of a narrow specialization which plugs a departmental hole.

Presidents. In the hottest campus moment of the Vietnam war, I remember that a group of Jesuit presidents issued a statement protesting our invasion of Cambodia. Since then, except for a delegation of Jesuit university presidents investigating the mass murder of Jesuit professors in El Salvador, there has been mostly silence. Both secular and religious university administrators, perhaps wary of alienating rich benefactors, have shrunk from public controversy. Yet, the university president must be, above all, a teacher – a man or woman with enough wits to study a public problem and help lead others toward its resolution. Those who argue that a president is not a teacher but a fund-raiser and pick their leaders by that law alone will inevitably get both: a fund-raiser who teaches by his or her behaviour that amassing wealth is a greater value than the intellectual or moral life – something students can learn from the popular culture without coming to college.

Student idealists, particularly editorial writers and columnists for the campus press, can be a pain. They throw our stated ideals in our faces in matters great and trivial. Yet, on more momentous issues, when the real moral high ground is unoccupied, critical staff and students who have absorbed the institution’s ideals will seize it and ask embarrassing

questions. In recent years, for example, many universities like Loyola University, New Orleans, where I taught for ten years, have accepted large donations for 'environmental' projects and chairs from the Freeport McMoRan, a New Orleans-based international mining conglomerate notorious for polluting the environment. They have soiled the lower Mississippi River, known as 'cancer alley', and ravaged the rivers and rain forests of Irian Jaya, in partnership with the oppressive Indonesian government, to level a mountain and dig the world's largest gold mine. Meanwhile, Freeport lobbies to weaken environmental laws and uses the university's name in its public relations campaign to burnish their image as 'giving something back'.

One of the strongest elements in Loyola's identity has been its commitment to social justice. But in spite of student and faculty protest, Loyola trustees unapologetically accepted the money as if there were no moral ambiguity involved. My own opinion was that one can make a case for accepting 'tainted' money under certain conditions, but we fail as teachers when we cannot explain why.

On other issues, when the president can lead both the academic and the liturgical communities, and thus witness simultaneously to faith, reason and the gospel message, the image of president-priest is all the more impressive. As I write this I realize that until we have women priests, this favours male presidents and I can hear the groans of faculty who have endured windy, tedious homilies from president-priests who are clearly less competent than their vice-presidents, less charismatic than religious women in campus ministry, and less scholarly than the Protestants and former priests in the religious studies department. But if the symbol of scholar-president-priest can be made to work, we would be foolish to discard it.

Curriculum. The arguments in favour of a core curriculum, a common learning experience that attempts to stamp the community's identity on the student's soul, are both logically overwhelming and overwhelmingly disputed.

Pro: some works and artists are so fundamental to our culture – Genesis, Luke, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Dickens, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, de Tocqueville, Thoreau – that to enter the world without them is to play football on crutches, to sail the Titanic without a lifeboat, to attend a reception at the White House or Buckingham Palace not wearing a coat and tie. The phenomenon of everyone reading the same writers, if the writers are good enough, stimulates an intellectual community. In recent years, I read *Les misérables* and *Anna Karenina* for the first time and was so excited that I ran around telling my friends

the stories: 'Do you know what she's doing now? She's blown off her husband, who is basically a good – but dull – man, abandoned her son, and taken off with a cavalry officer!!!' As if Anna was a living human being who lives across the street. As, of course, she is.

Con: required courses are the worst taught. Teachers like to teach their speciality; students resist requirements, resist anything they do not already like with the vehemence of a 3-year-old who won't eat his spinach. 'I don't like poetry, I never did, and I'll never use it in business,' a freshman business major informed me, in a moment of angry defiance. Faced with 'I-dare-you-to-show-me-anything' gum-chewing kids, their heads down on their desks as if by not looking at the professor they render themselves invisible, mediocre faculty back off, make few demands, give soft As and Bs for mediocre work. After all, they do not want to be there either.

It really matters what we read

Furthermore, platoons of the multiculturalism army deny both the centrality of western civilization to American culture and the value of reading 'dead, white males'. The fight over the canon of literature is not merely a creative discussion over which good books have had the greatest impact, or which we have loved most and thus want most to share, or whether Plato or Aristotle speaks best to the twenty-first century. It is a battle in the race and sex wars, which asks only whether the authors have the 'correct' sex (called gender), sexual orientation, skin colour and ethnic heritage.

Faculty taught to develop narrow specialities have not read the basic masterpieces of western literature and are not interested in going back and reading them now. In religious studies departments, for example – except for some of the priests, former priests and religious in their fifties – few have the broad classical and humanistic education of an earlier generation. I once met a religious studies professor who was surprised to hear that there were two versions of the Lord's Prayer in the New Testament. This, of course, is not a flaw in the professor's character, but in the PhD programme geared not toward producing a college teacher who could get young people to love the Scripture, but rather one more narrowly trained PhD.

In *Great books*³ David Denby, film critic for *New York* magazine, returns to Columbia University and retakes the year-long required Literature Humanities/Contemporary Civilization course he first took as an undergraduate in 1961. He knows these courses have become the battlefields of the culture wars, that some minority students allegedly

feel hurt and alienated because they are not 'represented' on the list of 'greats' from Homer to Freud (though an instructor may choose, at the end, between Simone de Beauvoir and Malcolm X).

Yet he finds in time that the students transcend the politics of diversity and argue with and against the 'western' texts – especially Dante – in purely western intellectual categories, like justice, tolerance and equality – the fundamental principles of the civilization which had allegedly turned its subjects into slaves. A secular Jew reading the New Testament, Denby finds that in previous readings he has missed what was so extraordinarily powerful about Jesus, 'an intellectual vigor that was without parallel in literature'; and he rereads *King Lear* in the wake of his own mother's death – she had been his Lear. Most important, Denby concludes that the classics, which are more like a kingdom of untameable animals than a conquering army because of their enduring power to challenge and shock, provide an 'ethically strenuous' education by forcing their readers into a posture of scepticism and self-criticism.

Thus, all the students of the super-secular Columbia University have read good chunks of the Old and New Testaments, whereas, I am willing to bet, the vast majority of students at Catholic universities have never read the four Gospels in full. Religious studies faculty would not want to teach that many introductory courses and would not trust ordinary humanists to teach on religious studies turf, even if the whole faculty could agree that Gospels were a good required read. Furthermore, a good number of college faculty maintain that if morals and values can be taught, only parents can do so, and then only in the first few years of life; that college courses may teach principles of ethical analysis, but are helpless in an attempt to make students better people.

That attitude indicates, I suggest, a very narrow understanding of how communities teach. They teach precisely by *being* communities. Which is all the more reason why faculty, administrators and trustees must come to some agreement about maintaining the university's identity, or soul.

Reconstructing the community's identity

Identity. In truth, there is no 'Fordham' or 'Oxford' or 'Holy Cross' or 'Notre Dame' as an independent reality, each with its genetic traits that can be passed on from one generation to the next, any more than there is an ideal Platonic horse in heaven on which all mortal horses are, to some degree, modelled. The university's name is a concept

embodied from moment to moment in the flesh, brains and desires of those who live and work there, only some of whom know its history and not all of whom love it.

The Land O'Lakes decision, damned by its critics as the first step down the slippery slope, has come to mean that, as in a marriage, those who want it to last must work at it creatively every day. Here the marriage contract should be between the faculty, lay and religious, and the trustees and/or religious custodians of the institution. The Land O'Lakes declaration of independence, from episcopal supervision and church law, has come to mean an endless process in which the university community must reaffirm – *reidentify* – itself continually by mission statements, faculty retreats, summer institutes, liturgy, democratic wrangling, curriculum revision, tedious committee work, hospitality, and above all careful faculty hiring, so that the new members will share the community's goals from the start.

Gonzaga University's Robert John Araujo SJ, in "‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few’": hiring practices and religiously affiliated universities',⁴ demonstrates convincingly that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits hiring or firing on the basis of race, religion, sex, colour or national origin, does not prohibit religious institutions, like universities, from giving preference to new faculty who share their religious goals. Araujo argues forcefully that Catholic universities should include the mission statement in every stage of the hiring process. In the interview, without appearing to test the applicant's orthodoxy, the committee should not merely ask softball questions about whether the applicant would 'feel comfortable' in a religious setting, but pointedly get to the heart of the applicant's genuine beliefs about the school's religious mission.

Next, the 'great books' concept, for numerous reasons, lends itself to better teaching – i.e. the kind of teaching that heightens moral awareness. Reading at least a book a week for one course instills discipline, absorbs the student's time and energy. Group discussion, especially of authors who make moral demands – like Tolstoy and Thoreau – prepared for by writing a paper, forces the student to re-evaluate his or her beliefs and offer them for the scrutiny of the group. To read Augustine, Machiavelli and Marx is to enter a dialogue that has been going on for centuries, to deal with issues so intimate and yet universal that, properly taught, it should be difficult to discuss them without glimpsing our own and our neighbour's soul in a way we have never seen it before. Can a serial killer read Milton's 'When I consider how my life is spent' and murder a seventh time? Of course. But a number

of uncontrollable forces greater than poetry may be at work in his life. And if he is reading Milton in the context of a Catholic community which knows him intimately we might discover his rage in time.

Finally, a university community can revive the old concept of *in loco parentis* in a way that meets the cultural crises of our day. In the 1950s, the university saw itself *in loco parentis* as an extension of the family's authority and guided student behaviour with curfews and mandatory mass. In the late 1960s – post-Land O'Lakes – these restrictions were perceived as unfair limits on a student's freedom. Today, after almost thirty years as a teacher and administrator at five universities, what strikes me most is the disintegration of our students' families. Sometimes, half come from broken homes. Some have, sequentially, four 'mothers' or 'fathers'. Fathers abandon their sons and daughters, take off with other women, and refuse to pay their children's tuition. A son drops out of school to work to support his abandoned mother on dialysis. Student essays excoriate fathers who have battered their spouses, abused their daughters, and left their families to scrape for survival. They 'hate' the parents who have dumped them on the roadside, but struggle morally to love them, fearing perhaps that one who cannot love his or her parents simply cannot love – or be loved. A student whose parents are dead or gone makes the university his only home: all he owns in the world fits into an already overtight dormitory cell.

In a world like this, the distinguishing mark of Catholic universities must be that the teachers love their students, love them with back-breaking reading lists, with returned papers bleeding red on every line, with scowls and grunts as well as praise and smiles, with Cs and Ds and Fs, with phone calls to their biological parents as a last resort, with a refusal to accept less than the best from people who can do better. In this way, being *in loco parentis* can become a collaboration where the student's two families might succeed where the autonomous student might fail.

A preparation for death?

I look out from the fourth-floor windows of Hughes Hall, where I live with students and, at nights and on weekends, prepare classes and write. Across Edwards' Parade, Keating Hall. Sunday night, on the steps where forty years ago in May the Sodality formed a 'Living Rosary', and each boy played the part of a 'Hail Mary' or an 'Our Father' or 'Glory Be', this generation, with lighted candles, holds an AIDS vigil and goes over to the ten o'clock mass. Their generation has

moved from a simple pious devotion to the Blessed Virgin to an awful realization that the activity they hold most dear, sex, which is so central to their relationships and hopes for the future, can kill them. Having no words for this, they hold a vigil – which is one of the things liturgy is for.

On the lawn of Loyola Hall, the home of the retired Jesuits, my mentor, Joe Frese SJ, now in his eighties, tosses a softball with a nine-year-old boy.

To our left, the University Church, where, in October 1996, we buried Leo McLaughlin. He had suffered some strokes and his wife had died, leaving him with no one to care for him. So the Fordham Jesuits brought him back to their infirmary and buried him like a brother, almost as if he had never left. In the homily, Rev. Vincent O'Keefe SJ, once assistant general of the Jesuits, recalled that Leo loved to have dinner with his friends, that he loved being dean and developing the potential he saw in each student. His last meal with friends was the eucharist.

The day Bill Tierney died, the stunned crowds from the stands streamed into an impromptu memorial mass celebrated by the president, Joe O'Hare SJ, former philosophy teacher in the Philippines and former editor of *America* magazine. Later that week he preached the homily at Bill's funeral in New Jersey, and told a church full of 1,300 sobbing young people the last thing they might be expected to welcome at the moment – that for a Christian death is a friend. 'Death is not something that happens to us. Death is what we do. Death is the signature of life, because how we die defines who we are.'

There is no good or proper time to die, I thought. But it is better to die in some places than in others. I have buried five Fordham friends – faculty, students and alumni – and each time I have felt that my whole life as a priest was a preparation for that moment. In this sense, Catholic education is a preparation for a good death at any age. The scandal of secular death is that in secular terms, evaluated as an interrupting blip in the rat race for status and money, death makes no sense. A sudden collapse on the football field brought on by a long dormant heart ailment does not 'make sense' either: but a life, no matter how short, measured in terms of what a Catholic university can teach, can be very full indeed.

My typing is interrupted this evening by loud music from the student's room beneath. I go downstairs and knock. She is a Taiwanese young woman glad to be alone tonight to do her homework and, for a while, crank up the stereo. I tell her what I am writing about. Oh, yes,

she says, her fellow students like to party a lot, but it's not too late in life to learn some morality. She shows me her favourite book. Everybody should read this, she says. It is Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*.

NOTES

¹ Huston Smith, *The Christian Century* (September 11–18 1996).

² Raymond A. Schroth, 'Bland secularism', *Commonweal* (June 1 1991).

³ David Denby, *Great books* (Simon and Schuster, 1996).

⁴ Robert John Araujo, "'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few': hiring practices and religiously affiliated universities", *University of Richmond Law Review* (May 1996).