

Religion, Morality, and the University

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On a conceptual level, religion refers to Man's spiritual dimension and the ways He maintains contact with the beyond (belief, aspirations, service etc.), while morality pertains to Man's social dimension and interaction with His environment. In the real world the two usually intertwine beyond recognition, religion often regulating everyday life (from diet to interracial relations) and morality questioning religious authority.

A human being is subject to morality to the extent he practices free choice. By defining a field of imperatives, morality helps shape (though not necessarily dictate) human action. A morally informed act is by definition transcendental, as it requires the overcoming of personal interest. Consequently, social cohesion precedes an overrated individual freedom that rarely escapes self-indulgence and often expedites destructiveness.

The attack on religion and morality by the forces of modernity suffers from crucial misunderstandings. First and foremost, religion, a man-made and -sustained institution, is confused with spirituality, a human universal whose intensity depends on one's evolution of consciousness (distinct from biological evolution) to the effect that organized religion is taken de facto as an expression of spirituality, while a "freelance" moral behavior is deprived of spiritual weight.

Organized religions have long used their moral immunity to instigate doctrines and policies that belie any sense of spirituality: suspension of reasoning and common sense for the glamour of belief, systematic cultivation of fear and penitence for the putative sin of human nature, intolerance and unacceptable hatred against other beliefs, committing or tolerating crimes in the name of "their" God, systematic intrusion in private life and violation of individual rights, penalization of sex as dirty and sinful, acceptance of symbolic events as indisputable facts, military obedience to an often corrupt cleric bureaucracy. (Eager to protect its interests in Chile, Vatican has recently intervened for former dictator Pinochet's release from non-Catholic England.) If spirituality is the highest form of human transcendence, it is safe to claim that most religions have failed in their mission. Their spiritual totalitarianism is a contradiction in terms.

As a constituent part of private life, religion has no place at a university (religious studies though help syncretism to expose the religion-spirituality distinction). On the other hand, there are several intersections between morality and the academy. Some of them entail long-term dangers, like:

1) Sectarianism. The university's

traditional image as a secular monastery, where dedicated scholars and scientists study and experiment unobstructed by the turbulence of everyday life, has created an aura of sacredness much craved by various groups in search of social legitimacy. (Had astrology been taught at universities, we would have changed our attitude to it.) As a prestigious institution, the university is in constant pressure from societal forces, which collectively demand its defense of high research standards yet as sectarian groups press for endorsement of their interests. Because of this dynamic, academic independence turns into a moral obligation to protect the university from powerful and sectarian non-academic interests.

In the last decades however, academic independence has been alarmingly threatened. Under the ideological banner of a society-open university, big business and leftist movements have appropriated enough academic space to legitimize their interests, even to assault their "enemies" (e.g. the blanket attack on European civilization whose invention the University is). The close rapport between the scientific community and corporations (already causing public concern) may compromise research standards and lure scientists into the toxic waters of commercially-motivated study. In addition, the long presence of vocational schools sustains the dependence of universities on elite professional classes like doctors, lawyers and entrepreneurs (the traditional hostility of Medical Schools to alternative medicine may have impeded the advancement of this science). Finally, the endowment race makes universities even more vulnerable to external pressure (remember how Yale lost a \$20M donation a few years ago). Once university administrators realized that advanced research consumes piles of money, the road to the fund-raising craze was open. University presidents have today more in common with panhandlers than with fellow academics.

Is the university turning from a custodian of free research and scholarship into a mere purveyor of prestige, and a lab and a recruit pool for corporations? Even if academic independence is partly a fiction, naturalizing a default support to traditional institutions, still the university has long defected from the unified worldview of old Europe. And even if a society-open university is desirable, the question is whether sectarian interests can stand for the whole community. Or has the idea of a homogeneous society already collapsed under the pressure of fiercely competitive forces?

2) Fragmentation. Despite recent interdisciplinary efforts, the university still resembles a feudal state with autonomous departments loosely connected through a central administration. The plurals "humanities" and "sciences" denote aggregates of separate worlds rather than a subject-differentiated common enterprise. Modern science's mind-boggling achievements gave unlimited credit to compartmentalization. Time-honored liberal education crumbled before the effectiveness of expertise. But it was the same science that wounded our century with the atomic terror and the gas chambers.

While compartmentalization generates sophisticated products that transform our lives, it does so by loosening the vital lore between a discourse and its social context. Self-contained disciplines may connect with the community objectively, through their discoveries, but not subjectively, by sharing common principles and fundamental assumptions. Once that lore is severed, knowledge for knowledge's sake arises. An overrated discourse dispenses with morality altogether and decries any accountability to society as censorship. Academic discourse is more immoral than amoral inasmuch as it subjugates human experience in its abstract mechanisms and the drug of esoteric jargon. Unchecked compartmentalization leads to academic self-indulgence and nurtures immorality. As long as knowledge yields power, it is subject to morality.

3) Overcriticism. The university does not simply produce knowledge but it does so on the basis of a rigorous rational procedure. While the sciences can nearly always afford the final arbiter of experimental verification, the humanities are left with the

safety net of critical thinking: if the procedure is properly followed, the conclusion is valid regardless of its truth content. But when the means becomes an end, and procedure surpasses the findings in significance, then we move to overcriticism. At that stage, the discipline and its mechanisms gradually suppress its original aims. The critical enterprise does not cease upon reaching a conclusion but continues ad infinitum, generating scholarly derivatives. Secondary literature now overthrows primary sources as the top priority. The discourse is internalized, operating for its own sake.

It is my, albeit highly speculative, contention that the infection of overcriticism in the venerable humanities has somewhat fertilized social intolerance in recent years (this is probably the case with political correctness). Being overcritical about everything and elevating cruel faultfinding into an imperative of sophistication tends to eclipse understanding and practical tolerance. The moral consequences of that is difficult to estimate though not impossible to imagine.

Today's university stands before crucial, though not always visible, moral questions. If everything is charged with commercial than intrinsic value, if everything is subject to overcriticism than to understanding, it means we are floating in a stormy ocean of hostile forces in constant fight with each other. Who is left then to defend the vision of the one humanity and protect knowledge as a universal good and right?