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An ideal worth striving for

Observer Viewpoint

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One part of University President John Jenkins' address on academic freedom and Catholic character that has largely been overlooked is also one of the most challenging and consequential. Jenkins lauded the "scholarly temperament" as one of the highest ideals of the University of Notre Dame, a quality which he described as "a Socratic conviction about one's ignorance, and a corresponding willingness to entertain questions and various answers to them." He went on to note that such a temperament "demands an appreciation of the complexities in any area of reality, high standards of inquiry and inference, a reluctance to settle for the current synthesis, and a resistance to a premature closure of questions."

This should be a serious provocation to each member of our community, as it poses a far greater challenge to the character of this university than does his proposal to adopt more carefully defined limits on the sponsorship of certain events. Taken as seriously as it deserves, and as seriously as I believe it was intended, it is an invitation for us to strive to be a great university, a Catholic university and a much freer community than many of us have imagined to be possible or worth striving for.

Jenkins' words indicate a university which is intensely concerned with a thirst for a true understanding of reality in all of its dimensions and thus, one not settling for half-truths, one continually searching and questioning, one not content with any reduction of our desire to understand things and to grasp their meaning and their interrelation. To this end, Jenkins correctly insisted that, "It is the nurturing of this scholarly temperament that deserves, and indeed demands, academic freedom." That is a much firmer foundation for academic freedom than any based only on thin notions of unrestrained individual interests, because it demands of us that academic freedom be engaged in a deep, uncompromising and inexhaustible quest to comprehend the nature, significance and interconnectedness of all things.

From this perspective, merely the tolerance of diverse views on campus without any authentic engagement of our humanity in its capacity for criticism and judgment is virtually irrelevant to the mission and identity of a great university. If that is what is meant by academic freedom, it is almost trivial and much too uninteresting to the serious questions of our lives to warrant a deep commitment. In fact, an uncritical free-for-all can be worse than insignificant, because it encourages the opposite of freedom: the subjection of our reason to the whims of intellectual fashion; sentimentalism and moralism (whether of the right or of the left); or mere inculcation upon our students of the opinions of others (and the power, money and self-interest behind them). That is why Jenkins was right to affirm that, "Our greatest contribution as intellectuals and scholars . . . consists rather in the cultivation in ourselves and in our students of this scholarly temperament in a world that is often uncomfortable with uncertainties, questions and new perspectives."

But then what is the place of Notre Dame's Catholic identity in this insistence on the freedom of our reason to reach always onward? The intellectual and moral tradition in which we are situated provides a sustained, complex and deep grappling with the mystery of human life and the universe around us, but one that is mostly ignored, and sometimes systematically excluded, from the intellectual life of most elite universities today. Notre Dame can't be a great and Catholic university without a pervasive and serious attempt to propose this tradition as an explanatory hypothesis for understanding the things that we study and teach and for ordering the way we ought to live as a community. To be very clear: in the context of study, teaching and research the Christian tradition is a proposal, not a shield from inquiry or an obstacle to knowledge, but an invitation to verify something, to test it through sincere criticism (in the original, literal sense of "separating" or "evaluating") and thus to arrive at a more mature appropriation of its value. It is an understanding of Catholic character reflective of a dynamic life, not of formal and sterile doctrine. The scholarly temperament in its encounter with tradition is an opening up of reason, not a closure of discussion. This is what I understand to be the real weight - and the attractiveness - of Jenkins' appeal.

Only against the background of those broad premises can we reasonably consider the relationship between academic freedom at Notre Dame and a controversial campus event such as "The Vagina Monologues." Its sponsors' goal of raising

awareness of violence against women is necessary and urgent - as Jenkins himself acknowledged. The play purports to serve this laudable end by presenting monologues of women talking about their sexual experiences, which aim to provoke us with their explicit images and language.

The issue isn't - or really shouldn't be - only that some might be shocked by the assertive use of the word "vagina" or that others find the behavior described offensive to their moral sensibilities. The more fundamental problems are, first, that the aggressively ideological manner in which it is pushed as a piece of advocacy, including its ritualistic regularity every year, does not remotely foster the ideal of deep inquiry and critical reflection characteristic of the scholarly temperament, but rather blatantly undermines it. And second, in substance the play seems to reduce the meaning and value of women's lives to their sexual experiences and organs, reinforcing a perspective on the human person that is itself fundamentally a form of violence. In its radically reduced understanding of and love for human dignity in all its richness, the play thus shares the same root as every violation of human rights, including in particular the many grave violations of the human rights of women throughout the world today.

The problem of academic freedom in this case therefore has to do not simply with the presence of the play on campus, but more with the failure to take it up and understand it in any seriously critical way, especially in a manner that might expose and question its violent reduction of the person through a vigorous, genuine engagement of the Christian intellectual and moral tradition. That tradition proposes to us instead that the immeasurable worth of the human person is rooted in our direct and total dependence on God, evident to us through the mystery of the Word made flesh. Only in this relationship of my "I" with that infinite "You" can my freedom be assured in every circumstance and from every injustice, power or ideology. The event of that encounter is what gave birth to this University, named after the woman who lived her freedom and dignity more fully than anyone else in all of history. This is the history that Jenkins is asking us to remember and to make a vital part of Notre Dame's character today, so that we might seek a true education of our hearts and minds in the fullest possible freedom.

Which is the more ambitious, more demanding and more exalted view of academic freedom, education and research: one that is satisfied with a complacent welcoming of every diminished or demeaning view of our rationality and our humanity that may be given by the prevailing conventions of the world; or one that insists uncompromisingly on the scholarly temperament and urges us not to settle for anything that fails to correspond adequately to the ultimate value and meaning of our lives?

The greatness and promise of the University of Notre Dame consists in striving toward the latter as its goal. It pushes our research to be both broader and deeper. It impels our teaching to be more dedicated to the good of our students in friendship rather than giving in to boredom or the temptation to indoctrination. It urges students always to look for reasons and to remain open to those answers that can more fully satisfy their deepest yearnings for truth, justice, beauty and happiness.

Because so much more is at stake here than in many conventional platitudes about academic freedom, the core of Jenkins' vision proposes a heightening of the dramatic meaning of freedom for this community and for higher education in general, not a restriction of it. Of course, resolution of the practical implications of this vision will certainly not be without some missteps or controversy, because the risks of human judgment and thus the limitations of human frailty are necessarily in play.

But this vision does provide a tension toward (as in "tending to" or "reaching out to") an ideal that makes it possible to start again every day, despite every mistake or disagreement. It is a challenge to us as scholars, teachers and students - a challenge that can make Notre Dame truly worth dedicating ourselves to with passion and expectation.

Paolo Carroza
associate professor of law
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