

Between Opinions and a Reasoned Faith

The Bible and Academic Freedom

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In Whit Stillman's film *Metropolitan* (1991) one of the characters defends his obtuseness by saying: "Just because you haven't read a book, doesn't mean you can't have an opinion on it. I haven't read the Bible, and I have an opinion on it." Now to be opinionated without respect to knowledge may be merely a condition of urbanity. Yet as one committed to two cities, so to speak, I am concerned that not only the wider culture, but increasingly the subculture we call the evangelical church, has opinions on a book which, for practical intellectual purposes, it hasn't really read.

The question which may be taken to lie behind my remarks is thus more universal than specific to my discipline alone: are there Biblical resources for dealing with general problems of academic community, in particular current debates over the meaning and application of the principle of academic freedom in the context of Christian colleges and universities? My answer to this question will be "yes." A second question also prompts my excursus; do we make adequate use of these resources? Here my answer will be, "Not often enough, or well enough." To the first question I will come last, offering less an argument than a report on a current challenge. Regarding the second question I will argue here that we make poor use of our Biblical resources to the degree that neither in our church-related institutions of higher learning nor in many of our churches themselves are we now teaching the Scriptures sufficiently well that the Bible arises to the level of becoming a true intellectual resource.

Diminishment of Biblical exposition in our churches augurs poorly, in my view, for the stability and distinctive identity of Christian higher education, especially in the nominally evangelical tradition. After all, for us Biblical literacy rather than liturgy, creed or catechism has been the principal foundation for theological and spiritual identity.

ECLIPSE OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

The general loss of textual familiarity with the Bible in American religious culture is unavoidably contextual for the conversation proposed to us by the organizers of this conference: our "progress in bringing the Biblical witness to bear, appropriately and fruitfully, on the academic disciplines." George Barna has recently concluded that only 9 percent of the self-described "born again" in this country and only half of all Protestant pastors have anything which could be accountably described as a 'Biblical world view.' Barna's surveys reckon with an embarrassing reality, namely, that the Bible has lost authority in those churches ostensibly most identified with the Bible. His research shows that even in churches where the pastor has a Biblical world view, most of the congregation do not. More than six out of every seven congregants in the typical church do not share the Biblical world view of their pastor even when he or she has one.¹

We need not merely to understand why the evangelical community in America has apparently lost its appetite for coherent Biblical teaching.

We who work in Christian higher education need most urgently to discover a remedy, for the decline has gone on for long enough that Biblical literacy can on occasion seem to be scarcely better among evangelical college students than it is among the general populace.

In noticing this phenomenon I do not mean to suggest that evangelicals are uniquely apostate in this respect. Apostasy in America is remarkably ecumenical. According to a recent issue of the journal *Current Issues in Catholic higher Education* (summer 2003),

Thirty-two percent of lay presidents and 40 percent of religious [i.e., ordained] presidents [in Catholic colleges and universities in the USA] report contending with faculty and staff who are tradition illiterate, hostile toward, or simply disinterested in the Catholic mission and identity of the institutions in which they serve.

At my own university, where academic culture has for some time been guarded or chary of open expressions of concern for the development of an articulate faith, much the same sort of thing has on occasion been observed. But even among more explicitly faithful faculty, Biblical literacy and theological competence is probably at a far lower ebb than I suspect might have been found a generation ago amongst rural Baptists and other evangelicals who never saw the inside of a college classroom. What they knew, and knew by heart, their college educated children and grandchildren seem largely to have forgotten. When Bruce Cole, Director of the NEH speaks about “American Amnesia,” he describes a cultural disorder which has apparently infected churchgoing pseudonymous “People of the Book” just about as thoroughly as it has the great unwashed.

Cole and I team-taught a course in medieval and Renaissance art history three decades ago at the

University of Rochester. As a Jewish professor in a university with a large cohort of Jewish students, Cole once remarked to me on his disappointment at their typical lack of textual knowledge of their religious tradition. Biblical iconography in Renaissance painting, which he believed should have been more or less obvious to reasonably taught Jewish students, proved almost as opaque to them as to the majority of our shared students who were cheerful pagans. I rejoined that in teaching Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*, which depends for much of its humor on ironic misunderstanding of the Noah narrative in Genesis, I was getting just about as many blank stares from non-Jewish students at the mention of Noah. Only three of more than thirty students could say for sure they knew about the flood story and none in that class could remember that “God promised to Noah never to flood the earth again” – something Chaucer depends on for his laugh at the ignorance of the old carpenter who, you may remember, builds local churches but has no knowledge of the foundation upon which the Church universal is built.

That was more than thirty years ago, and our faculty club grouching about Biblical illiteracy in our students, at least to some of our peers, may well have seemed quaintly antiquarian. But, for teaching Western art and literature in the secular university, the deficit in pre-requisite knowledge has only grown more acute. Cole’s concern is now more explicitly directed to political competence: he believes that amnesia (how we lost our story) is evidently culture wide and a threat to American democracy.²

I do not propose to reflect on such matters – they lie well outside my competence, and they are not the focus of this paper. I restrict myself to the universities where, meanwhile, the evolution of humanities and social science disciplines over the last three or four generations has been determined both by general cultural trends and

ideological fashions (which are, of course, to some degree connected to these general concerns). In my own discipline, the loss of ‘cultural memory’ (specifically, of textual literacy in respect to a wider curriculum) coupled with an elite diversion toward ideological fashions (sometimes clumped for curricular purposes as “cultural studies”) has amounted by now to a striking transformation of literary studies that many have characterized as intellectual decadence.³ In a *New York Times* book review of seven monographs on the subject “The Decline and Fall of English Literature,”⁴ Andrew Delbanco explains our loss of academic prestige as the corruption of a discipline that in its heyday had been an intellectual flagship for modernity, able to pride itself on replacing the narrowness of Christian preaching by the broad liberality of inspired, Emersonian principles as discovered in secular literature. Matthew Arnold likewise, as the discipline’s first academic officer, was foundationally associated with the displacement of God and the Bible by modern literary criticism, consistently with the curricular exchange of “dogma,” as he called it, for secular literature. Several recent jeremiads (including those Delbanco reviews) lament the loss of these exemplars and the absence of sufficiently powerful successors. Much like other notable Arnoldians, Northrop Frye included, and more recently the new-light Arnoldian Jonathan Culler,⁵ many of these critics – ironically enough – are now worried about a tragic fall they themselves have helped to inspire, a flight away from literary works themselves toward newer theoretical dogmas so sectarian as to have marginalized literature as a discipline in many an academy. Delbanco is himself among those who would cling to that perdurable Arnoldian apologetic by which the place of English literature has often been justified, to wit, that without it the university would be “left without a moral centre” (35). But to read this cliché now is

to realize just how outworn the notion has become.

The idea that secular English literature can replace central religious texts as a moral compass has been persistently employed in advertisements for the discipline for more than a century. The rhetoric, typically unexamined, has become reflexive. In a 2002 presidential address to the MLA, Stephen Greenblatt calls for literature to promulgate the anti-religion of naturalist materialism, and yet he displays, apparently unselfconsciously, a displaced religious fervour in almost every sentence of his address.⁶ However narcissistic it must sound to non-specialists, Greenblatt’s final call is for a revival of a Lucretian pagan doctrine of metempsychosis in which frustrated critics reassure each other that, the dismissal of their contemporaries notwithstanding, they are among the immortals, and get to live on as ghostly shades in the pages of their surviving work (425). This sort of rhetoric may not derive from traditional religion but it is surely religious apologetic.

Postmodern theorists, much like the shadowy ghosts of the ancient epic Hades, tend to speak more volubly in proportion to their being granted buckets of fresh blood. (Recent graduate students will not need a *recherché* footnote for this allusion.) But the survivor generation of younger college teachers has acquired at the hands of these theorists an even less coherent textual view of their discipline, in fact, than that possessed by post-Arnoldian, post-Emersonian gurus such as Culler, Eagleton, Greenblatt, et al. We now have new texts and liturgies of the profession, substituted *seriatum* according to the transient prominence of one group of theorists or another. As a result, the decline of literature within its own curriculum, of which aging rebels of my own generation are wont now so bitterly to complain, has only tightened its grim hold upon profession and practice in the academy. That one can satisfy

distribution requirements in literature by courses in the History of Comic Book Art (Indiana), Rock Music from 1970 to the Present (Minnesota) or Campus Culture and Drinking (Duke) gives some sense of where recent PhD topics in literature can lead the survivors of contemporary graduate programs.⁷ As George Steiner has suggested,⁸ in such academic contexts our reserves of cultural capital appear to be almost completely exhausted and to the attendant weary emptiness the unfocused teaching of some of our colleagues, I fear, too often bears witness.

What I am saying, in brief, may be captured by my adapting a familiar title: however ironically, it is perhaps not too much to say that English is a discipline that has lost its story. The apparent loss, as I have suggested elsewhere, was perhaps an inevitability following upon the choices made by my discipline's academic founders.⁹ What Matthew Arnold and others too faintly recognized in their gesture to acknowledge the Bible as background or foundation literature, even while shearing it of its supernatural or theological significance, is that coherence in the inherently incoherent realm of creative expression depends on the possibility of reference back to a normative, anchoring central story.

Allow me to put this point in the form of a strong if evidently debatable hypothesis: to anchor stories in the plural to civil discourse and ethical formation one needs STORY in the singular at the heart of a community. The same goes for a curriculum. Moreover, for such discourse to have abiding communal value the STORY must possess an authority and power proportional to some order of transcendence, as well as a certain intimate familiarity for those who read and write within its range. If I may be permitted a Tolkienesque metaphor, for real fruitfulness the common story must be as sturdy and new-life producing as the trunk of a tree from which springs, year after year, a surprising

variety of secondary growth. One might also think of a vine and its branches.

The problem of coherence in a nineteenth-century-originated university discipline such as English literature (and I would venture here that a re-establishment of coherence is necessary to our survival as a twenty-first century university discipline) is not merely that a student cannot adequately read the thicker branch texts of Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, or Eliot when he or she cannot recognize the literary DNA in their Biblical allusions. The problem is that readers so bereft of familiarity with foundational texts cannot relate any of these imaginative works to a coherent cultural conversation, or ongoing dialectic, in which all the major works play a reciprocal part. To put this in another way: such readers cannot 'see' the degree to which the greatest texts are already part of an historical conversation whose *bereshit, en arché, in principium* – In the beginning – was once received as a Word from God.

Let me soften the audacity of this remark by rephrasing it in a language which makes some folks less nervous: disciplinary incoherence in English literature may now result not merely from an absence of canonical authority but from an absence of any principle in terms of which either canon or authoritative judgement might be realized or recognized.

EGOTISM AND THE COMMON LOT

One might press this essentially pedagogical point still further by remarking upon the obvious as one encounters it in everyday academic venues: anarchic, postmodern self-promotion works to upstage the choir and, as it gains more air time, often "drowns all music but its own;" that is to say it can be tyrannical, inherently as opposed to the harmonic as to the heavenly. Sadly, the scholarly form of self-assertion suspects, indeed often scorns, any attempt at a self-transcending or

communal search for health and the holy. At its full reach, no text by another person is really necessary, even, as once we might have said, as a pretext for critical utterance. ‘Everybody’ – if you will forgive my resort to Celtic hyperbole – wants to write like Madonna sings, autobiographically and with self-adulating fervour. There are neutral, religiously prophylactic ways to think about this, and there are Biblical ways to think about it. Biblical ways are now considered, even by many Christians, inappropriate – or perhaps, we might better say, unsafe. This is too bad, for our evident fearfulness of plainer speech and stumbling circumlocution confuses the well-intended-even in our own communities.

If I were making these remarks five or ten years ago I might have been expected to say something like, “It is clear to all those of us who have given our lives to the study of literature that poetry in the postmodern world has largely ceased to be a communal art-form.” I would have added, of course, a caveat, “There are examples to the contrary.”

But since this literary point touches upon a point on which the North American churches are now revealed to be nearly as solecistic as the culture, we have a double reason to pause on it. In the postmodern world poetry has largely ceased to be a communal. A lot of the most popular compositions, it seems to me, have also pretty much ceased to be poetry. Yes, there is the mostly low poetry of pop music: “Big truck got my baby, / big truck got my baby, / big truck got my baby, / don’t got no baby no more.” This sort of thing alliterates, it scans, and it could even be said to rhyme. But Christians in America have their own baptized versions of such things. In the Church of the Blessed Overhead Projector they are sung regularly, let us hasten to admit it, as consolatory Sunday-morning echoes for many a Nashville Saturday-night lament. Not very many of these ditties constitute what might be called a poetry of

the common voice; few can lay claim to enduring literary status. In many contexts of worship not merely the modes but the voices of sung poetry mimic low ‘pop’; the language of private fantasy typically dominates and, along with it, there has grown up a critical and devotional literature which is self-indulgent, often itself fantastic.

To return from the sanctuary to the classroom is to be struck by analogue. If we were to reflect back over even the basic Western survey syllabus from which many of us have taught and all of us studied, we might – any of us – readily produce a treasury of examples of poetry whose only purpose is celebration of the common life. Most are from the first half of the anthologies. The opening lines of the *Odyssey* must here suffice to characterize the generality of literature surviving from the ancient world. Homer, as we call the narrator, begins:

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story
Of that man skilled in all ways of contending,
The wanderer, harried for years on end,
After he plundered the stronghold
On the proud height of Troy ...
.....
Of these adventures, Muse, daughter of Zeus,
Tell us in our time, lift the great song again.
(Trans. Robert Fitzgerald)

The great song which must again be lifted is here a song too grand for any particularity of voice; it is a common story, the common property of a people whose life it both characterizes and celebrates. The poet is not the singular maker of this poem; he does not pretend to original invention. He is, as well as poets at least until the time of Dante, a servant for his own time to a timeless tale, conferring cultural identity upon those who hear and retell it. He is a spokes-person.

The similarity between the Greek and Hebrew notions of common story is striking. That voice which we identify with Moses in Deuteronomy 6:5–9 commands story telling in the same breath as it commands obedience to the law of God: “*Shema Ysrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai echad*” –

And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. (Deut. 6:4–7, NKJV)

Persistence of the common story refurbishes and enhances the community memory even as it defines what is still most to be loved. Told and retold, the story shapes, molds community future. Communal celebration of what their God had wrought in Abraham, in Isaac, and in Jacob, how above all He had led them out of bondage into liberty, has been through long centuries of the Diaspora the very sustenance of Jewish life, the lifeline of an improbable survival. And if it has been able to overcome much more and form so many more memories than the song sung by Homer, is at least in part, literarily speaking, because every parent learned to tell it: their Homer was in every home.

Christians, grafted into the story, have sprouted their own fruitfulness. But in the early stages of our growth especially, it was more than the narrative sap of the root stock which gave rise to Christian poetry. It was, as well, the care to hold in check the individual exuberance of each varying branch, pruning quantity so as to enhance quality. An abundance of riches thus appeared in small space.

An apt literary example is afforded by the earliest Middle English lyric poem extant, a flyleaf poem from about 1120 AD, deep in the depths of Norman occupation and the official supremacy of another tribe and language. It has only four lines

– no epic to be sure. Yet in a way which confounds expectations tutored by the modern lyric, this poem parades no private fantasy, no aberrant or existential confession. It is rather, most deliberately, a public poem:

Myrie songen the monkes binne Ely
Whan Cnut Kyng rewe ther-by:
Roweth, knightes, neer the lond
And here we these monkes song.
(Anonymous, 12th century)¹⁰

King Canute, we may remember, had already learned what many of his modern counterparts could well afford to: time and tide are not subject to the vanities of self-fashioning. No amount of mere political power will hold back the sea, which, in its own thoroughly un-postmodern way, is as inexorable as the ordinance of God. But that part of reality is too obvious to be this poet’s subject; Canute’s name alone is sufficient to conjure the image of self-restrained and therefore exemplary regality the poet wants. The king and his knights – rough-hewn warriors that they were – are out doing precisely what (in not so merry old England) their duty obliges: they are patrolling the estuary, guarding against surprise attack by Viking marauders. Inside the abbey church at Ely, the monks are doing precisely what, given their vocation, they should be doing: praying the sung psalms and intercessions of the office on behalf of the whole community. This was their complimentary task, their *opus dei* – singing the new song, telling the old, old story. As Canute and his warriors head out upon the water, the king hears their sung prayers and has his craft brought in close to the abbey walls, so that his “knightes” and he can pause quietly, drawing strength from the wafting and melodic words. It is an image of ideal social order as the anonymous poet cherishes it: the City of the World here corrects its course as it hearkens to the music of the City of God.

It has been a long time since we had anonymous poets. One of the least anonymous, William Carlos Williams, illustrates in a famous little poem a characteristic departure of modern poetry from shared and community public vision:

So much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens.
("The Red Wheelbarrow")

So much depends. So much of what? The image is lovely, but what we draw from it is only what in the subjectivity of our own private imaginations it conjures up.¹¹ To say that this poem is impressionistic would be imprecise; it offers not an impression (for that you want Edna St. Vincent Millay) but a bare image. Or perhaps, I should say, an image "glazed" – it is not a form of realism exactly either. It is more like the vacancy of Dada, the glazed emptiness of nature in the painting, let us say, of a Franz Marc. Who can tell the meaning of it? Well, everyone, of course, and no one. The meaning for you, to paraphrase Humpty Dumpty, is up to you – from the perspective of a reader it is autonomous art; your private fantasy need not correspond to that of anyone else in the modern poem, as you reflect upon it, least of all the poet's. In respect of any wider world of thought you have almost perfect freedom – academic and otherwise – to think what you will and interpret as you wish.

At one level this sort of willed indeterminacy has usually seemed to practitioners of my discipline harmless enough. More recently it has been defended, on various postmodern theoretical grounds, as epistemologically inevitable. But one

may legitimately wonder if unconstrained, eisegetical interpretative freedom is invariably harmless.

THE BIBLE AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Radical freedom: it sounds so good. Who could object to it? Well, just possibly, anyone for whom religious liberty is held to be a communal good.

The familiar stance of postmodern literary criticism – over and against the canonical text – is to some appreciable degree analogous to the stance of the MLA (Modern Language Association, the professional organization of professors of literature and languages) and AAUP (American Association of University Professors) on academic freedom: the freedom sought is an individualistic and subjective order of freedom. To it, the idea of freedom for communities is sometimes seen as a threat. In their various attempts to elevate the individual over community, many postmodern educators (whether legal or literary) have resisted ever more strongly the privilege of counterbalance – of communal freedom to speak collectively – as, for example, when religious or dissenting communities seek to define a communal rather than merely individualistic right to First Amendment privilege.

Any such resistance to what might be construed as "group rights" or "institutional rights" has evident significance for Christian colleges and universities which need, for survival of their institutional missions, to be able to claim the right of a constituted community to "act as a speaker" under the provisions of the First Amendment. If they are to maintain religious exemption from too rigorous an extrapolation of individually focused rights in the secular sphere, Christian colleges and universities especially may soon need to defend their exemption as religious institutions with a much more coherently Biblical

reasoning than has typically been the case during the last century. In particular, if Christian institutions are to defend themselves against the increasingly shrill charge that in their protected hiring practice and conduct policies they repress both academic and sexual freedom, they will need to rise above a defense of freedom which is as narrowly subjectivist and individualistic as that of their postmodern antagonists.

The positive role of my discipline in promulgating the cause of academic freedom is fairly well known. It may also be worth noting how, historically, it connects to a pattern in which both writers and literary critics have tended to be rebels against the Biblical traditions in which they were raised. English literature as a university discipline began in the nineteenth century in this fashion explicitly: one might think here again of Matthew Arnold and Ralph Waldo Emerson. This essentially modernist development was coeval with the emergence of avant-garde novelists over and against Biblical ethical norms and taboos, as well as with learned subversions of the Bible's theological authority: one might think here of the explicit anti-evangelicalism of Samuel Butler, D.H. Lawrence, Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis, but also of Oscar Wilde and James Joyce in the Catholic context, as well, indeed, of a writer such as Philip Roth in the context of Judaism. Defense of the more sexually explicit works of such writers against censorship or religious scruple, especially as regards their use in the classroom (e.g., *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Lolita*), have been signal battles in the emergence of statutes and policies respecting academic freedom. Resisters of such edgy texts as material for the undergraduate classroom have almost invariably been cast as religious bigots and/or sanctimonious prudes by progressive elites and the public media.

But to return to an earlier point: the sublimated religious character of these debates is often less

than fully apparent. For example, outside the academy it is not well known that ranks of the professoriate in humanities and social science disciplines are more than proportionately filled with seminary dropouts and recanters of vows of ordination. Like Melville's Ahab or Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, such folk can continue to take their ongoing quarrels with God quite seriously. During the twentieth-century development of my own discipline some such members of the professoriate sought to elevate secular texts to higher levels of cultural authority than, say, foundational religious texts. Northrop Frye, once an ordained Methodist minister, has tellingly described the English curriculum as Secular Scripture. Post-Catholic theorist and one-time Vatican II delegate Terry Eagleton transposes the work of theology to the evangelical proclamation of cultural and political Marxism. Analogously in some respects, post-Jewish French literary theorists such as rabbinically trained Jacques Derrida have filled many influential volumes in an effort to show that no *écriture* is so authoritative as the opinions of a gifted reader, that, however ironically, preoccupation with the Word itself – or word – is with respect to authoritative meaning quite futile. Each such development may appear as a “secularization,” but in reality it is an impulse to revisionism within a specific religious context. To all this spindrift Jonathan Culler has famously added a summarizing codicil; namely, that postmodern literary theory is “an essentially anti-theological activity.”¹² It might be more accurate to think of the general animus as a counter-theology or theology substitute.

There is much more here that needs to be said to account for the way in which English as a discipline moved from an adjunct to the reading of foundational texts such as the Bible and, while continuing to be dependent upon the relation, grew impatient with its status as a secondary

order of authority. Modernism's achievement is in part to have largely usurped that authority; late modernism or postmodern development of this achievement has made possible a more public resistance to the religious authority of the Bible in the civic sphere.¹³ I insert this thumbnail sketch merely to indicate to non-specialists something of the genealogy of academic freedom as an issue in the university in which my discipline has, for good or ill, played a prominent and vicariously "religious" role. In its more colourful manifestations students of literature can readily observe that the sowing of wild oats by failed clergy has made literary study a kind of alternative catechism for many; it is this alternative catechism, however, by which secular higher education and the judicial system have increasingly charted our wider cultural course. As postmodern literary theories have spread to law and legal hermeneutics and thus to legal process, catechisms of the 'secular scripture' are now undergoing further doctrinal development, perhaps particularly in the sphere of legal hermeneutics and constitutional law, for which Christian colleges and universities are in my view not very well prepared. Notably, and this is not a small matter, it is now acceptable to some partisans of academic freedom that at least one Book should be censored.

The Battle of the Books which lies behind contemporary arguments to exclude communities of a common book from "privileging" their Book in either curriculum or law courts is a larger subject than we can satisfactorily consider in these pages. I must restrict myself here merely to suggesting avenues for further reflection.

Let me then draw on the first two parts of this essay for one suggestion. Christian academics should certainly be among those critics of postmodernist insistence on the primacy of radical subjectivism who draw attention to its own often paradoxical, even self-contradictory

character. For example, those who nowadays tend to advocate the most anarchic view of personal academic freedom (MLA, AAUP) are those most prone to deny it to others – most notably to groups whose ideas of freedom have historically focused on religious liberty within community as a preeminent freedom and looked to self-transcending narratives as its defining exemplars (e.g., conservative Catholics, Anabaptistic Christians, and Orthodox Jews).

Yet all the while, in most evangelical Christian churches, universities, and colleges, the anarchic, subjectivist notion of freedom has been essentially institutionalized as if it also was a Christian norm. I doubt that generally this has come about very self-consciously. More likely, it results from unreflective absorption of Western cultural preoccupation with self-fulfillment and self esteem. Certain academics have been able to rationalize the convergence as providing some sort of protective coloration. I doubt it; actually, in such wishful thinking we may have only postponed a less convenient, more exacting reflection, for when self-justifying and individualistic defenses of freedom are coupled with a counter-intuitive (and to our founders unimaginable) illiteracy in Scripture, the result will be necessarily fatal both to a coherent Biblical worldview and the case for religious liberty grounded in it. This incoherence produces other types of confessional confusion, and finally, I would venture, even to what once might have been thought of as heresy (another word we have been taught not to use, of course, because it audaciously suggests the possibility that there might be a common truth). But now, I suspect, our drift toward vacuity in respect to cogent answers for the faith that is within us also might well make it more difficult for us to make our case for preserving traditional religious exemption from certain federal laws concerning non-discrimination.

HOW DID WE GET TO THIS POINT?

Let me reprise with an example that, I confess, implicates my own denomination most particularly, but which may apply more broadly. I refer to that much celebrated “distinctive,” as Baptists like to say, of “Baptist freedom.” (It is not particular to Baptists.) There is a significant gap between what Baptists used to mean by this term (essentially a synonym for ‘religious liberty’ or, q.v. Luther, “the freedom of a Christian”) and what is generally implied now by many. “What Baptist freedom means to me,” said one of my university’s most prominent alumni in a major newspaper article, “is that as a Baptist I am free to interpret the Bible in any way I choose.” This kind of statement apparently thrills the soul of some Baptists in my part of the world; I think I am obliged to confess here that mine is not one of them. As a radical extension of the doctrines of “soul competency” and “priesthood of the believer” (not of “the believers”), this view of how one reads the Bible seems to me to risk becoming a kind of logical equivalent of the cliché postmodernist stance in literary and legal theory. I forbear to count it a generalization of my own generation in the university, but I am increasingly willing to suspect it of the generation of children and grandchildren who are now our students. What such a triumphant self-authorization can quite naturally lead to, in practice, is neglect of the Bible altogether – even among the charismatically pious. “Soul competency” readily degenerates to “sole competency.” At that point, how relevant is the text?

C.H. Spurgeon, the famous British Baptist preacher, said that “instructed Christians recognize the value of the Lord’s word, and warmly express it.”¹⁴ By this standard, I would suggest, we are not instructing our Christian undergraduates well enough before they come to college. In my literature classes even at Baylor I have found too few students who were not sadly

ignorant of the Bible, both narratively and conceptually. The problem is hardly unique.¹⁵ Though such students may still speak of themselves as ‘Biblical Christians’ they most evidently do not possess their Book in any convincing fashion.

In what, then, does teaching and preaching in the Baptist or other evangelical churches from which most of our students come consist? Often, it seems, in “relational,” “how to succeed without really trying” injunctions, spiced with humorous stories (often the only real ‘text’), references to movies and television shows, with perhaps a light scattering of verses from the more accessible Pauline epistles to show that the quasi funny talk was some kind of sermon after all.

Large numbers of Biblical books tend to be ignored in such preaching (the Gospels, universal letters, Acts, Romans, much of the Old Testament), perhaps because their content is unflattering or their thought too demanding. In many churches, Scripture is seldom read aloud in whole or discreet passages, perhaps partly because that would imply that the sermon which followed should in some measure be a “reading” in common of the common text, partly because it would reduce the time available for musical entertainment and theologically hollow but emotionally gratifying praise songs, but mostly, several pastors have told me, because it is felt that the congregation can’t “follow it.” Meanwhile, in the more popular musical praise celebrations (and it may be that for many, orgasmic music itself is, however unconsciously, their real object of worship), the subjective focus is often overwhelming, distorting in a manner like unto entertainment of a purely secular, commercial kind.

In such a shallow spiritual environment, as many of the praise songs themselves make plain enough, it can be a strange notion of Christian freedom that gets articulated. Essentially, I

conclude, it is “the freedom to be me.” But this is a neo-pagan, not a Biblical, Christian notion of freedom. It is essentially self-preoccupied, has no sustaining Biblical or theological warrant, and while it may appear in the short run to correspond quite nicely to pop cultural cliché, or even to the sort of academic freedom of the individual professor sometimes advocated by the AAUP, it is surely inadequate to justify the claim of Christian colleges and universities to religious liberty as institutional communities in the private sphere, and thus to exemption from federal/secular regulation concerning hiring, for example. Further, following upon the more recent attacks of cultural studies theorists and some spokespersons for the AAUP itself – namely, their antagonism to the right of supposedly “repressive” and “exclusivist” Christian colleges to exemption from laws governing hiring practice, there have been murmurings about the propriety of some curricular choices and course textual content in such institutions.

Vis-a-vis academic freedom, the urgent issue now, I suggest, is how we learn to articulate our identity as religious educational communities. On what basis should we defend the right – or not – of religious communities to hold to internal norms in terms of which some kinds of behaviour, some kinds of proselytizing, and even some kinds of research may be deemed inappropriate, deficient in terms of a community standard, or even perhaps a transgression of basic communally held notions of rectitude? At the risk of stating the obvious, let me observe that there is no ideal of communal freedom which does not entail some order of constraint upon individual freedom. And there’s the rub both for church discipline and religious exemption for colleges which wish to select and retain faculty in the light of essentially Biblical norms.

What are the criteria by which our community norms have been developed? The 2003 Rove

meetings at the White House (with some leading religious universities) on the question of continued religious exemption from federal legislation for faith-based institutions have suggested to some of us that those institutions which seek to maintain a religious exemption to all types of non-discrimination clauses ought to be able to point to a coherent doctrinal base as well as consistent and historical exposition of it to claim the status.

This is already clear where support for research from federal agencies is involved. Grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, for example, now grant exemption from laws against hiring based upon religious discrimination only if:

1. religious identity is clearly spelled out to students, faculty, and the wider community in cogent and consistent language;
2. the college or university is organized as a non-profit (501c3), and
3. it is affiliated with, owned, operated, or controlled, directly or indirectly, by a recognized religious entity, membership of which is determined by explicitated reference to religion and religious teaching.

This first order of requirement has not thus far proven much of a problem to, e.g., Notre Dame or Brigham Young, but for some of us, who pride ourselves on having neither creed nor catechism, it could become a bit more challenging. Claiming a general foundation in the Bible, given numerous judicial rulings, may not now be enough: for some panels of review one may be obliged to show that there is order and coherence in the way one’s denomination or religious community situates the text and grants it normative authority within the community – more simply, about the way the community normatively “reads” the Bible and expounds it as a body of teaching. In an increasingly post-denominational age, clearly reflected in the

student body on our campuses, it is all the more imperative that we reflect on how we articulate our institutional core beliefs and expectations of practice.

At Baylor, it fell to me, in the weeks before the 2003 White House meetings, quickly to synthesize and draft a retrospective Baylor-Baptist statement connecting our religious identity to our view of academic freedom. In various ways my colleagues helped gather together such formulations as were available. But what we soon realized was that to argue from current Baptist articulations about freedom – many of which we came to see as pretty much secularist in every presuppositional way – was to risk demonstrating that there was not so much distinctively religious coherence or commonality in the present edition of Baptist religious tradition as for any number of purposes we might prefer to think.

Accordingly, while one of my colleagues researched academic law and Supreme Court decisions, I revisited both Scripture and Baptist exposition of the past to dig out enough historic institutional consensus to warrant conviction that, as a voice for Baptist faith and practice, Baylor can still claim to act as a “speaker” under First Amendment rights and so lay claim to institutional academic freedom. We learned much in a few short weeks. Yet our case appears to me nonetheless more fragile than for the sake of the future I could wish, not least because our potential vulnerability is imperfectly understood. After all, we have always understood ourselves to be among the most vigorous and effective defenders of religious liberty, and have traditionally defended academic freedom as a subset, even when the concept was defined in purely secular terms. But the connection may now be obscured.

Our challenge in this particular and hastily obligated task may be instructive because it required of us an attempt to re-instaurate Biblical

norms in place of the general cultural reflexes by which they have, over time, been replaced. In part, our draft argument now goes like this:

In the Bible, which for Baptists provides the normative basis for both theological understanding and ethical practice, the Great Commandment is referred to also as “the perfect law of liberty.” Freedom is a communal virtue of a high order and, out of a prior respect for the Biblical commandment, we attach a higher order of respect to what is generally referred to as “academic freedom.”

We then go on to say:

As a religiously founded and administered institution of higher learning, Baylor has, since its inception in 1845, exercised its freedom to form a religiously distinctive intellectual community. It continues to be such, protected not only by the principle of religious freedom, but by long-established and widely-accepted principles of academic freedom.

“Institutional academic freedom is the freedom of a college or university to pursue its mission and the ‘freedom of the academic institution from outside control’.” The Supreme Court has repeatedly recognized this freedom, which is grounded in the Free Speech Clause of the First Amendment. “Universities are formed for the purpose of educating students and advancing and communicating knowledge, and therefore, the Free Speech Clause protects them from governmental interference in academic matters.” Because universities act as speakers when they employ faculty to convey their missions or course contents to students, “religious institutions have the freedom to speak in a manner consistent with [their] religious mission.”

Although we still have much to say in this new document about individual academic freedom, we emphasize strongly the Biblical and

theological basis for a governing context of communal purpose, and the consequent necessity of an overarching academic freedom for the institution to define and pursue its distinctive mission. Consequently we say:

For Baptists, “academic freedom is not an idol to be worshiped.” Because our freedom is experienced in community, there is continuous need for balancing the claims of institutional and individual freedom. As Baptists, we emphasize freedom, yet we expect a commitment to the common good. In community, none of us is absolutely autonomous, a “law unto himself.”

In our footnotes to this document, we are at pains to point out that when Jesus said “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32) he did not mean that the truth would make us autonomous. This becomes perfectly clear if we remember to read the first half of the sentence attributed to him in John’s gospel: “If you abide in my Word, then are you my disciples, and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” It is agreement to live within a common accountability to a common normative authority that creates the conditions in which freedom may be experienced.

When the AAUP in its own way defends academic freedom by arguing that it is essential to pursuit of the truth, it underscores the value of academic freedom as an instrumental good; the higher good and end it serves is evidently ‘truth.’ By comparison, in Jesus’ formulation the instrumental good is in fact a necessary condition—our abiding in the truth—and the end that serves is freedom. But the character of that difference, which presupposes the relationship of community to the possibility of true Christian liberty and personal freedom, has often been obscured in contemporary evangelical discourse precisely to the degree to which an individualistic

notion of freedom has usurped a Biblical scope for the term.

Here is an instance in which the literature of faith has to be resituated more fully in the articulation of our community identity in order that the law of the land might not reasonably conclude that we are no true community and hence unconvincing in our claim to communal religious identity and exemption from some general secular regulation. In our own case, the Biblical grand narrative has been invoked in this connection to show that from the Decalogue forward in Biblical tradition, law and liberty are closely linked (Exodus 20:1-2), and that the “perfect law of liberty” (James 1:25; 2:12) is a commandment to love the neighbour which itself grounded in a prior commandment to love God with heart, soul and mind – essentially our own educational mandate. That is, we have found it necessary to return to Biblical exposition and what we like to think of as orthodox Biblical theology to make our case against strident secular judgments against the Bible by those who haven’t read it but certainly have an opinion on it.

Anyone might object, of course, that for us to describe the relation of our thought and practice to the Bible in this way is little more than to make a virtue of necessity. Yet in my view the future of our religious coherence, and thus of the slim possibility of our political and legal defense as Christian institutions of higher education, depends far more than we may have realized on recovery of the Scriptures (both narratively and theologically) across all disciplines of our thought. We need, if we are not to ring hollow to our students and the world, an intellectual centering in our common story which is generous but also convincing, hence capacious enough to permit a diverse body to have conversation around it as a centering Word. Our command of Biblical resources needs to be deep enough that we cannot easily be confused about the meaning

of Scripture's central terms and concepts, and can thus articulate our distinctive shared worldview out of them readily. Freedom is surely a central Christian religious concept that, for the sake of the flourishing of independent institutions of Christian higher education needs to be supported in a more consistently Biblical way.

If we reacquire a more thoughtful relationship to the Bible in our churches, in our private and communal reading, teaching and exposition, then it will come naturally to us in the articulation of

our collegiate mission and the daily practice of our disciplines. Without that prior order of familiarity, I suspect, our connectedness to our Biblical foundation will continue to be artificial, awkward, too shallow and fraught with embarrassment. At worst risk, God forbid, we could be reduced to a defense for institutional religious liberty so unconvincing that legally speaking, with a stroke of some judicial pen, it could suddenly become little more than an artefact of our educational history.

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- 1 George Barna, Barna Research Online, January 12, 2004, 2-3.
 - 2 Bruce Cole, Keynote Address at the National Citizen Corps Conference, July 2003. I might add to his political alarm a footnote, namely, that cultural amnesia is spreading in proportion to the rise of technologies for the dissemination of information, in particular what is disingenuously called “infotainment,” and that the substitution – for plot, character, and thought – of “special effects,” especially in visual media, is just one aspect of that virus. One might almost go so far as to say that entertainment for the technologically adept yet otherwise adamantly ignorant bids to usurp every attempt at real education in America. Neil Postman was, alas, a prophet. “Amusing Ourselves to Death” has proven, moreover, as accurate a descriptor for the church as for the general culture, and Christian colleges and universities have not been found to be immune. See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985).
 - 3 I do not mean to suggest that such decadence is not practiced by remarkably intelligent people.
 - 4 Andrew Delbanco, “The Decline and Fall of Literature.” *The New York Review of Books* 46:17 (1999), 32-38.
 - 5 Jonathan Culler, “Imagining the Coherence of the English Major,” *Profession* (2003), 85-93.
 - 6 Stephen Greenblatt, “Presidential Address 2002: ‘Stay, Illusion’ – On Receiving Messages from the Dead,” *PMLA* 118:3 (2003), 417-26.
 - 7 American Council of Trustees and Alumni, “The Hollow Core – Failure of the General Education Curriculum: A Fifty College Study,” 24 May 2004. <http://www.goacta.org/publications/Reports/HollowCoreWeb.pdf>.
 - 8 George Steiner, “To Civilize Our Gentlemen” *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 55-67 and *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
 - 9 Christianity and Literature.
 - 10 *One Hundred Middle English Lyrics*, ed. Robert D. Stevick (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1994), 3.
 - 11 These two poems, among others, are forcibly juxtaposed by Russell A. Peck in “Public Dreams and Private Myths: Perspective in Middle English Literature,” *PMLA* 90:3 (1975), 461-68.
 - 12 Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1982), 86.
 - 13 The recent prominence of literary studies of the Bible does not substantially alter the trajectory of this development, though it does seek to return the Bible to the foundation while insisting that it have a status like that of any other text in the postmodern curriculum.
 - 14 C.H. Spurgeon, *The Golden Alphabet of the Praises of Holy Scripture, Setting Forth the Believer’s Delight in the Word of God, Being a Devotional Commentary upon the One Hundred and Nineteenth Psalm* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1907).
 - 15 See Andy Crouch, “Compliant but Confused,” *Christianity Today* 49:4 (April 2004), 98.