

Thomas A. Michaud, PhD

Professor of Philosophy

BA Fairfield University (CT)

MA and Ph.D. Marquette University



Postmodern Challenges to Catholic Higher Education

In the Fall of 1997, I received an invitation to attend a major conference on “After Postmodernism” at the University of Chicago. While citing postmodernism’s so-called “achievements,” such as exposing the hegemonic tendencies in Western “objectivity,” the provocative notice delivered a somber eulogy for postmodernism. It’s postmortem bemoaned postmodernism’s relativistic historicism which resulted in “arbitrariness, stoppage, and an inability to think further,” and then in apparent desperation, questioned, “What comes after postmodernism?” The notice, not surprisingly, offered no clear direction for philosophy after POMO, though frustration and a passionate uncertainty seemed to cry out from the notice’s confusing, and lengthy conference agenda.

After more or less twenty-five years of rule in higher education, the postmodern movement, if it ever really was a philosophical “movement,” was O.P.D. (Officially Pronounced Dead) in the late 1990’s. However, is it really finished? The simple answer is, “No!” Aspects of POMO have not merely insinuated themselves into the academic mind-set, but they have actually become institutionalized with professors, administrators, curricula, academic disciplines, and university policies and governance. What POMO spawned is alive and thriving in higher education, including Catholic universities. The challenges it poses to Catholic higher education are nothing but daunting.

This exposition of POMO's challenges will develop in a two-fold manner. First of all, the philosophical roots and character of POMO will be described in light of their differences with the "perennial philosophy." Secondly, a number of specific concrete ways in which the effects of POMO remain and even dominate in Catholic higher education will be cited and critiqued.

POMO vs. the Perennial Philosophy

In his *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, The Holy Father John Paul II distinguishes between the philosophy of existence and the philosophy of consciousness. He argues that Descartes' dictum which began the Modern era, *Cogito ergo sum*, inaugurated a great "anthropocentric shift" (51) wherein philosophical emphasis changed from being on the external world, the world of really existing things, to the internal data of consciousness. Subjective consciousness took center stage, and the reality of extramental existence was relegated to the role of an ignored understudy confined to the wings.¹

With this Modern shift, subjective consciousness became absolutized as *the* autonomous origin of all meaning and truth, and the perennial philosophy was subverted. Succinctly stated, the perennial philosophy is a comprehensive realism in the metaphysical, epistemological and moral senses. It affirms the reality and intelligibility of extramental existence as God-designed ordered being and accepts truth as the correspondence between what is and what is known. Moreover, with such true knowledge, one can comprehend universal scientific laws, philosophical principles and moral norms.²

With the shift, however, Modern thought grew a Janus-like physiognomy. On one side, with the Rationalists and Positivists, autonomous rationality was proclaimed as the self-sufficient means for solving any and all philosophical, scientific and even social/ethical problems. Indubitable, apodictic epistemological foundations supported this rationality and made possible its veritable omnipotence at problem-solving and system-building.³ Nevertheless, on the other

side, looking away from and perhaps askance at such zealous rationalism, some post-Enlightenment moderns of a Humean or Nietzschean countenance proclaimed a wholesale antinomianism, which rejected all types universal laws, philosophical principles and moral norms. Their reactionary ardor insisted that because the quest for absolute foundations is doomed to failure, all rational knowledge is perforce impossible. Accordingly, they elevated feeling above rationality so that rationality became a mere epiphenomenon of feelings. Rationality was considered as an unreal faculty, and was ineffective at articulating any objective truth since it was determined by the entirely subjective caprice of feelings.

It is this antinomian face of Modernity that postmoderns like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish and various others, radicalized and then donned. They were not, therefore, truly *POST*-modern but merely more philosophically extreme descendents of their post-Enlightenment ancestors. They absolutized their skeptical heritage to ensure that no vestige of Modern rationalism would survive their deconstruction. They expanded the Baconian axiom, “Knowledge is power ...” with the conjunct “... and power is truth,” so that any moral values, scientific laws and philosophical principles have “truth” only insofar as they are fabricated and enforced by the most willful. An anarchic voluntarism appeared as the only outcome of their rebellion. They offered no positive alternative to Modern rationalism except to champion their favored political ideologies. But since “power is truth,” and power is the achievement of a personal will exerting itself over others in society, the “personal is political.” Consequently, ideologies devolved into demagoguery where personal politics became the origin and end of all intellectual inquiry.⁴

Postmodernism was, quite simply, a politic and its wake washed-up a mass of political ideologues and demagogues in higher education. Whether as a professor or administrator, an ideologue is one who absolutizes THE position, THE agenda, so he has all of the answers even

before the questions arise. Ideologues are intolerant of broad-minded, truth-loving philosophical inquiry which authentically seeks an answer, but does not know what that answer is except that it must correspond to the truth. Ideologues cannot think or do political inquiry without promoting politicized causes, and in the extreme, a politicized regime. Ideologues are supremely confident that their agenda captures and invincibly holds the high moral ground, and as such, they believe their agenda is self-justifying and can accomplish “enlightened” social engineering. As a servant of THE position, ideologues ignore fruitful community-building to aver that solidarity is really nothing but ideological conformism.

Ideologues can devolve into demagogues who become THE position or agenda. Demagogues are “political cult gurus” as their very personalities are politicized and they style themselves as avatars of political truth. They claim to be embodiments of THE position because of their politicized creeds, gender, sexual lifestyle, ethnicity, race, class or whatever. They demand, “Believe and follow me because *I am* the truth.” For demagogues, any philosophical challenge to their beliefs is construed as an *ad hominem* assault. So for them, philosophical debates necessarily degenerate into clashes of Nietzschean “wills to power” wherein they try to overpower their opponent by insisting on something like, “My self is more politically meaningful, true or moral than yours!”

All of higher education, but particularly the humanities and social/behavioral sciences, is rife with POMO-spawned ideologues and demagogues. Academic disciplines, pedagogy and governance are becoming mere means for politicized indoctrination and activism. Marxists, Marxist feminists, post-colonial globalists and cultural materialists are just some of POMO’s progeny. In Catholic institutions, the realism of the perennial philosophy, especially its moral realism, is being assailed as an illusory God-infested meta-narrative which for centuries has oppressed multicultural diversity, women and the behaviors of those with alternative sexual

lifestyles. The POMO-born zealots' scorn for the perennial philosophy is eroding the very foundations of Catholic higher education. Whether the perennial philosophy and Catholic higher education will survive depends, at least in part, on exposing the POMO-politicos as being in-power but not in-truth.

The Impact of POMO Politics on Catholic Higher Education

Among the numerous ways in which Catholic higher education is being accosted by POMO-offspring are three serious and concrete threats, namely absolute tolerance, power-based social justice and politicized literature. Each of these challenges cuts to the very core of the perennial philosophy.

The ideologues' pretension that their position holds the "high moral ground," and the demagogues' insistence that their politicized identities ought to be affirmed regardless of differing beliefs both stem in part from their invocation of "tolerance." With egalitarian fervor they demand that epistemological and moral pluralism morally mandate that all truth-claims are equal. Therefore, to claim a universal truth or universal moral norm is for them an act of vicious intolerance since such a claim discriminates against others' competing claims.

In *Fides et Ratio*, The Holy Father teaches that, "To believe it is possible to know a universally valid truth is in no way to encourage intolerance; on the contrary, it is the essential condition for a sincere and authentic dialogue between persons" (#92). In commenting on this passage, Fr. James Schall, S.J., exposes the deficiencies in the principle of absolute tolerance. Schall recognizes that such tolerance is not and should not be the first principle of an epistemology, of an ethic or of a political philosophy. If tolerance is so construed, it must brand the claim of "universally valid truth" as fanatic and not worthy of consideration, although "it is itself intolerant to refuse to examine a philosophy that claims to be true" (10). Following The Holy Father's teaching, Schall prescribes that genuine tolerance is a practical principle of virtue

which allows the “highest things” to be examined in “sincere and authentic dialogue between persons” (11).

Because of their “absolute tolerance,” the ideologues and demagogues who populate Catholic institutions all too frequently refuse to enter into sincere and authentic dialogue with “fanatics” who espouse the perennial philosophy. However, without curricula, pedagogies and governance, which engage the higher things in dialogue, can Catholic education long endure?

The missions of many, if not most, Catholic institutions are framed with an emphatic social justice purpose. As Michael Novak observes, however, with social justice the main focus is usually not on virtue but on power (11). Novak, through referencing Friedrich Hayek, points out that most who use the term “social justice” designate it as a moral virtue. Nevertheless, they ascribe it not to the reflective and deliberate acts of individual persons, but to impersonal social systems and states of affairs, such as inequality of incomes (11). If social justice is not ascribed to persons, then it is not really a virtue but merely a regulative principle of social order. It is not something that “emerges organically and spontaneously from the rule-abiding behavior of free individuals, but rather from an abstract ideal” (12) imposed by the coercive power of the ideological and demagogical elites.

A virtue is a practical moral *habitus* which in the perennial philosophy has soteriological import for individual persons. Persons acting together with the *habitus* of social justice develop solidarity, which the perennial philosophy would describe as an authentic community formed for the greater glory of God. Catholic institutions which define social justice merely as power, view it as a utopian goal toward which all social systems and structures should be made to conform by political coercion. With this orientation, Catholic institutions lose any higher, transcendent, *consummatory* purpose in their missions because they are not ultimately concerned with educating souls toward the Truth, but with the instantiation of their ideological version of a

utopian “heaven on earth.” The wicked irony here is that their secular, power-driven social justice missions will inevitably undermine the sacred, transcendent purposes to which Catholic higher education ought to be dedicated. And, without such sacred purposes, can Catholic higher education be truly Catholic?

In the *Poetics* Aristotle maintains that literature is one of the primary media through which one can become educated in the universally valid moral virtues. The characters, stories and themes in literature can help us understand how we can and should avoid evil and vice, and dispose ourselves to develop habits of virtue.⁵ Aristotle’s realization of this role of literature has been a vital part of the perennial philosophy and a pedagogical norm within the tradition of Catholic liberal arts education. Now, however, POMO-produced poetics are de-constructing this tradition.

A typical example of the means for this de-construction is the widely influential and academically bestselling book by Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*. This text is presently almost standard issue in literature graduate programs and is virtually a staple for reading in undergraduate courses in literary criticism. In the work, Eagleton proclaims the end of literary theory because literature itself is dead (171-2, 189). By his extreme claims, Eagleton, a nominalist and self-professed Marxist, means that literature is not and never was a medium for transmitting universal values (or virtues), since such values are non-existent. For Eagleton, “literature is an ideology” and has intimate relations to questions of social power because all of our values are ideological and reflect the social power conditions of our times (19-23). Great works of literature are not great because their stories have some intrinsic universal value which they communicate, but because historical conditions of power cause various critics, readers and authors to extol them as great. As ideology, literature is merely a political instrument for such

purposes as indoctrination, oppression, inciting rebellion, fomenting class struggles, liberating victims of social marginalization, or even maintaining the status quo.

The extent to which Eagleton-like ideologues and demagogues control literature departments, curricula and pedagogy is the extent to which literature is indeed dead at Catholic institutions. Students of such academic politicians are not taught to appreciate literature *qua* literature, but are instructed only to articulate and evaluate its political platforms. Consequently, their literary studies and criticism are bereft of any analogical level of meaning. There is no way that literature can inspire understanding of the “higher things” such as universal values, metaphysical truths and the Divine *Logos*. Such a loss of literature deforms literature curricula and departments in Catholic liberal arts institutions into illiberal training camps for the politicians’ favorite ideologies. Illiberal education in literature is the demise of what was in the tradition of the perennial philosophy a profound medium for Catholic institutions to strive to fulfill their true missions.

Final Remarks

The after-effects of POMO have tilted Catholic higher education into a most precarious position. The current conditions are truly bleak, but need the forecast be as foreboding? Are there good reasons for hope?

The virtue of hope is not optimism and it is certainly not pessimism. The pessimist whines, “Woe is me, my situation is not what I will it to be.” The optimist, on the other hand, self-assuredly asserts, “My situation will be what I will.” In both cases, it is what “I will” that is primarily operative, positively with optimism and negatively with pessimism. Hence, both pessimism and optimism are egological. Hope, however, is not egological but ego-effacing. Hope is the humble deference to an order, a design, a Truth that transcends and is far greater than

the ego. With hope comes the faith that Truth will prevail, and it does not depend entirely on what “I will be done,” but mainly on “Thy will be done.”

The Truth is not power, but the Truth is powerful. Hoping with and having faith in the power of the Truth are why Catholic higher education and the perennial philosophy will survive to bury their undertakers.

Notes

¹ For a fuller account of the impact of the “anthropocentric shift” see: Thomas A. Michaud, “Gabriel Marcel’s Catholic Dramaturgy,” *Renascence*, 55.3 (Spring 2003) 229-240.

² The term “perennial philosophy” has been and is used with a wide range of meanings. From Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) to Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) the term has been used to indicate a wholistic integration of various philosophical and spiritual beliefs. In the context of Catholic tradition, the term is used to denote an Aristotelian-based philosophical realism which supports and complements the doctrines of the Faith. A recent discussion of the perennial philosophy as foundational to the Catholic tradition is offered by Curtis Hancock, “Faith, Reason and the Perennial Philosophy,” in *Faith and the Life of the Intellect*, eds. Curtis Hancock and Brendan Sweetman (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003) 40-63. Hancock indicates (43-4) that Pope John Paul II aptly describes the universal, timeless and inclusive qualities of the perennial philosophy in *Fides et Ratio*, Sections 4-5:

Although times change and knowledge increases, it is possible to discern a core of philosophical insight within the history of thought as a whole. Consider, for example, the principles of non-contradiction, finality, and causality, as well as the concept of the person as a free and intelligent subject with the capacity to know God, truth and goodness. Consider as well certain fundamental moral norms which are shared by all. These are among the indications that beyond different schools of thought there exists a body of knowledge which may be judged a kind of spiritual heritage of humanity. It is as if we had come upon an implicit philosophy, as a result of which all feel that they possess these principles, albeit in a general and unreflective way. Precisely because it is shared in some measure by all, this knowledge should serve as a kind of reference point for the different philosophical schools...On her part, the Church cannot but set great value upon reason’s drive to attain goals which render people’s lives ever more worthy. She sees in philosophy the way to come to know fundamental truths about human life. At the same time, the Church considers philosophy an indispensable help for a deeper understanding of faith and for communicating the truth of the Gospel to those who do not yet know it.

³ This rendition of the Modern philosophical roots of postmodernism is more completely developed in: Thomas A. Michaud, "Introduction," in *Gabriel Marcel and the Postmodern World*, ed. Thomas A. Michaud, *Bulletin de la Société de Philosophie de Langue Française*, Vol. VII, No. 1-2 (Spring 1995) 5-29.

⁴ This description of postmodernism summarizes Michel Foucault's views on power, truth and politics as articulated in: Michel Foucault, "The Political Function of the Intellectual," trans. Colin Gordon, in *Philosophy: Contemporary Perspectives on Perennial Issues*, ed. E.D. Klemke, et al. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 4th ed., 1994) 601-606.

⁵ This point expresses Aristotle's views in a number of places in the *Poetics*, but especially sections 2.1 and 3.1. Richard Janko's masterful "Introduction" to his translation of the *Poetics* clearly explains how and why Aristotle believed that literature can teach virtue. The key concepts in this explanation are Aristotle's notions of *mimesis* and *catharsis*. The above-cited article, "Gabriel Marcel's Catholic Dramaturgy," offers a concise summary of these concepts and examples from the dramas of Marcel of how they can educate in virtue.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated and Introduction by Richard Janko. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory*. 2nd Edition. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*. 1998.
- John Paul II. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. Translated by Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee. New York: Knopf, 1994.
- Novak, Michael. "Defining Social Justice." *First Things*. December 2000. 11-13.
- Schall, S.J., Fr. James. "Fides et Ratio: Approaches to a Roman Catholic Political Philosophy." *The Review of Politics*. 62 (Winter 2000). On-line at <http://www.morec.com/schall/revpol62.htm>. 1-12.