Ideological Entrenchment and the Academy: An Undergraduate’s Defense of Religious Belief in Public Universities

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The literary critic and rhetorician Wayne Booth has authored, at least in my view, one of the most intellectually satisfying and emotionally resonant memoirs of the life of a scholar: *My Many Selves: The Quest for a Plausible Harmony*. The book is an exploration in creative self-disclosure in which Booth tracks the distinct lives of his many different “Selves,” those familiar agents like Vanity, Charity, and Ambition that goad us, animate us, make us do things. Booth often presents these Selves in opposition so as to highlight the kind of drama they enact in life, hence chapter titles like “A Pious Moralist Confronts a Cheater,” “The Puritan Preaches at the Luster,” and “A Wandering Generalist Longs to Be a True Scholar.” Booth’s reason for arranging his autobiography in such an idiosyncratic way calls to mind the manner of perpetual self-questioning in which thinking people, especially scholars, ought to engage:

Instead of tracing my life chronologically from an undramatic birth in 1921 to my scores of undramatic experiences yesterday, I hope to engage you into thinking hard about how my conflict of “Selves,” of “Personae,” of “Voices”—my “Splits” both deep and shallow—create another kind of drama: the quest for a harmony, or chorus, among those splits. (xi-xii)

Booth’s attempt to achieve a kind of *discordia concors* of his many Selves resonates with academics because, like Booth, their lives are based explicitly on synthesis: synthesis of old and new studies, synthesis of the work of one thinker and another; or, perhaps
especially for scholars in the humanities and social sciences: synthesis of personal beliefs or intuitions with those accepted by a discipline, synthesis of academic views and political ones.

Such is the good life in academe: to be able to let one’s thoughts or views define the content and direction of one’s work; or, to live one’s vocation. In my time as an undergraduate at Grand Valley State University, it has appeared that this Boothian pursuit underlies the work of many of my most fulfilled professors. For instance, Professor Michael DeWilde of GVSU’s philosophy department leads a highly praised service-learning program that sends students and professors to teach the humanities in prisons and shelters; in this case, Scholar-DeWilde has harmonized with Egalitarian-DeWilde. Similarly, one of my mentors, Professor Gleaves Whitney, directs a highly influential center for presidential studies that promotes ethical leadership and provides mentorship to developing student-leaders; here, Patriot-Whitney meets Ethicist-Whitney meets Mentor-Whitney. In each of these cases, scholars have, in pursuit of a plausible harmony of their more virtuous Selves, done work that is at once innovative, successful, and fulfilling. What a beautiful thing.

In my experience, however, not all scholars enjoy the same freedom to pursue their vocation. I am thinking in particular of scholars who happen to be religious, or whose scholarly lives might benefit from or be enriched by a certain religious character. Inhibiting the pursuit of plausible harmony, the present nature of the academy renders impossible the synthesis of a Scholar-Self with, for instance, a Christian-Self. Of course, in lamenting this fact, I do not mean to suggest that scholars ought to push their religious views on students or members of their field, or that a professor of Chemistry ought to
speak on matters of theology and philosophy whenever she sees fit. Instead, the argument that I wish to put forward in this paper is that the present ideological climate of academe is not conducive to scholars at all making known, or at least entertaining as plausible or valid, the notion of religious belief.

The thinking that informs this dominant view is evident. To most academics, religious belief is an element only of private life, whereas the life of politics and, indeed, scholarship, is public. What is more, the incorporation of religious belief into scholarship at a public university would, in the view of much of the academy, constitute an indirect imposition on and limitation of the free thought of students; after all, religious thought is most commonly dogmatic and thus naturally inhibitive of the freeplay of ideas, or so the thinking goes. In my essay, I will assert, by contrast, that the dominating school of thought in the academy has established, in the place of genuinely free thought, a certain orthodoxy and dogma of its own—one that ostracizes scholars, and for that matter students, who are even privately religious. In sum, I mean to argue that the plausible harmony that all scholars and students are entitled to pursue—that in fact they must pursue in order to be fulfilled as thinkers and to allow for genuine freedom of thought and speech—is necessarily frustrated in the case of scholars and students who are religious, or who have religious ideas.

The Case of Catholicism in the Academy

The view I have thus far asserted requires a great deal of elaboration. So, for our present purposes, I will provide myself as an example. Although, of course, I am not a working
scholar, I qualify because I consider myself a product of my liberal education. I have received a variety of awards for literary criticism and rhetoric; I founded and am the editor-in-chief of my university’s cinema journal; I have given conference presentations on literature and writing at both the undergraduate and graduate level; and most importantly, I have developed what is commonly called a “thirst for knowledge,” but what I think of as a desire to encounter, interrogate, and internalize what Matthew Arnold calls “the best that is known and thought in the world” (428).

At the same time, I am a committed Catholic. I mean committed here in many ways: committed to trying (but, of course, inevitably failing) to live a virtuous life; committed to understanding the intellectual and spiritual tradition of my faith—in a sense, to understand the “best that is known and thought” by Catholics; and at the same time committed to the development and growth of my religion in dialog with culture, a preoccupation only deepened by my liberal education.

The predicament I find myself in, just before graduation from my university’s honors college with a 3.99 and plans for graduate school in English, is that I am forced to repress, if I want to be anywhere near the mainstream, the expression of “Catholic” thought in my work. Again, the expression of “Catholic” thought (I am convinced many academics do not know what this is) does not mean proselytizing—I, for one, lack both the sensibility and the character of an evangelist. Instead, I mean that, if I am associated with Catholicism in the minds of other academics, my work will likely be dismissed out of hand. This is the stifling of free thought that I will examine; as I have found, scholars with tenure and good reputations fear it.
Last year, I made plans with a fellow Catholic student, Elizabeth Balboa, to found a Catholic forum in which professors, administrators and students would convene to discuss the status of religion in the academy, the position of Catholicism in culture, and the practice of reconciling progress made in the academy with religious thought. Our belief was that, by establishing this group on a college campus, we would contribute to the growth of thoughtful, intellectual religion—a kind that would put to rest the ugly assumption that religion is nothing more than mindless superstition—and that also would satisfy a need in both Catholic professors and students to discuss and debate the nuances of their faith in open discourse. This kind of free debate, we believed, was the heart of university life.

At the start, we knew of some scholars on campus who were Catholic and who would be interested in joining: a few from English and philosophy, a couple from the hard sciences, and a Franciscan sister in the writing department. The rest, however, we had to find. So, Lizzy and I devised a plan: based on rumors and our own intuition, we would find professors who were suspected of being Catholic and politely confront them in their offices. This was of course an intimidating and risky task. From what we knew, many of the professors would be lapsed Catholics and would thus need a little wooing; still others would not be Catholic and would perhaps resent the accusation. Nevertheless, we chose to continue.

What we discovered, meeting after meeting, was not that there were simply no Catholic professors (far from it, actually), but that only a small minority of them felt at all secure in being open about their religion. The reason for this fear, we also found, was not a concern with the temptation to evangelize but instead was a feeling, deep in the guts of
these professors, that their own academic reputations were at stake. Even the tenured professors whose jobs were secure felt a pang of anxiety, the instinct that to be openly religious in the academy would invariably mean ignominy and obscurity. Still more perplexing was that, of the some thirty professors we found, almost all of them assumed they were one of perhaps a dozen Catholics on campus. The belief most of them had assumed, or that was inculcated into them, was that to be Catholic meant to be an outsider. Not a single professor, in fact, knew of the critical mass of Catholics on campus. The obvious truth to them was, instead, that their religious belief was an anomaly, a fluke; this, in all cases, was what kept them silent for so long.

I recall thinking that this profound miscalculation on the part of the professors was surely the result of some sort of ideological entrenchment of the academy, the root of which I did not yet know. This entrenchment, I have now discovered, was powerful enough to convince nearly thirty seasoned Catholic academics that they were, if anything, profoundly alone.

In this paper, I will hazard a modest examination of the academy’s ideological entrenchment by analyzing my own area of academic interest, the humanities. Thusly I will reveal why the academy is unjustly hostile to scholars who are religious. I will also briefly justify the existence of my Catholic group in a public, rather than private or religious, university, and will then guide the reader into the work of my partner, Lizzy Balboa, who will provide a more robust exploration of the necessity of the group and others like it. Admittedly, this is a large task, perhaps much too big for two undergraduates. So, I must take as axiomatic the words of my advisor, who said comfortingly to me when I proposed the project, “there are two times in an academic’s
life when he can ‘paint with a broad brush’: just before his commences his academic career, and just as his academic career ends.” In the comfort of that advice, here goes.

A Certain Crisis in the Humanities

The humanities, as traditionally conceived, are the study of human constructs and concerns; what defines their character, however, is their exalted status in the history of Western thought. Typically the humanities are described as essential to human life and, perhaps with the exception of Plato, are thought to guide the development of culture, the growth of society, and are a good in themselves. Indeed, we ought to revisit Matthew Arnold, who famously describes the function of criticism with respect to the humanities as “a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world” (428); similarly, T.S. Eliot somewhat mystically describes “tradition,” or what is otherwise called the Western canon, as forming an “ideal order” (538); Samuel Johnson, before Eliot, argues that this “tradition” is not constituted by arbitrary assessments of individual talent made by virtue of personal taste or trend, but instead is comprised of works that “please many, please long,” and do so because they are “just representations of general nature” (217). Notably, Johnson calls Shakespeare “the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life” (217). That is why, for proponents of the canon, Shakespeare is its center; he is to be revered because, according to one famous living critic, he “invented the human” (Bloom).
Contemporary discussions of the humanities, when conducted outside the university, usually take on this kind of rhetoric of appreciation. In a recent column for the *New York Times*, David Brooks describes the humanities very confidently as that which “cultivates the human core, the part of a person we might call the spirit, the soul.” Interestingly, Brooks also laments the current condition of the academy for, in his view, failing to affirm the profound human worth of a liberal education in general. In Brooks’ and many others’ view, an acknowledgment of the true worth of the humanities has, in the minds and work of current scholars, been supplanted by a decidedly misguided focus on esoteric theory and manifestly political concerns.

This anxiety about the politicization of the academy at the expense of what might be considered the “authentic” humanities is not unique to *New York Times* columnists, however. In fact, a variety of scholars point to the demise of the liberal arts as a result of recent movements in the academy toward critical theory, or what Harold Bloom pejoratively calls the “School of Resentment.” These theories, including post-structuralism and cultural studies, attack the Western Canon—that proud school of Shakespeare, Dante, Milton et al. which constitutes a traditional education in the humanities—for what they argue are its racist, sexist, altogether politically retrograde underpinnings. Not only that, but proponents of such theories eschew the worn-out rhetoric of the humanities that, in their view, deals in pseudo-profundities and platitudes—rhetoric, like Brooks’, that claims the humanities simply and profoundly are “the study of that which is most human” (qtd in Topf 231). To critical or postmodern theorists, such claims are not only the remnants of a once effete and now dead rhetoric, they are also the artifacts of an *ancien régime* that was naively convinced of the
universality of its own truth-claims. Indeed, to many new academics, the old humanities are not only dead—they are not worth resurrecting.

But, of course, the new schools have their own virtue. As a reaction against the parochialism of the old guard, critical theorists inaugurated their own brand of scholarship that largely had as its expressed mission political and social liberation. Much contemporary critical theory, in fact, was nascent in the political firmament of the 1960s and, as a result, sought justly to shed light on the woefully overlooked and ignored literary and artistic work of the traditionally disenfranchised: women, ethnic and racial minorities, the LGBTQ community. Consequently, some proponents of critical theory aimed to “open” the canon, so that Eliot’s “ideal order” would include minority thinkers; others, by contrast, simply attempted to dismiss the notion of the canon altogether because it was politically suspect—that is to say, it was the product and property of “dead white men.” Both of these views stem from a larger attack on the highly parochial thought of the old guard, an attack that usually succeeds in revealing the ways in which needlessly dogmatic and Eurocentric systems of thought have wrongly laid claim to universal Truth.

In these ways, the current academic paradigm rightly seeks liberation for the traditionally oppressed and, by extension, attempts to advocate for free thought in the academy. My argument is that this project has, ironically, stifled free thought in some cases. In the following sections, I will examine first the inaugurators of these new schools and reveal how their thought challenges many of the premises of the religious; second, I will expose how the rise to dominance of these views does not merely constitute
a healthy challenge to religious belief but, in the present state of the academy, unjustly ostracizes it.

**Foucault, Derrida, Nietzsche**

The theoretical underpinnings of the new academy are primarily anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist; importantly, they are interested foremost in challenging “truth-claims.” Take, again, the example of the 1960s political firmament, which for many can be encapsulated in the axiomatic expression “Question Authority.” Taking up this very political project—that is, the contestation of author-ity—Michel Foucault composed his seminal work in literary theory, the essay “What Is an Author.” In it, Foucault challenges the very notion of the author, replacing him or her with what Foucault calls an “author-function.” As justification, Foucault argues that the very notion of the author tyrannically limits the meanings readers can assign to a text. Foucault writes:

> The author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction…The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning. (913)

The resonances with the political movements of the ‘60s are obvious—Foucault’s spirited denial of authority, even over literary texts, is as strong as his use of a kind of rhetoric of liberation, one that champions “free manipulation…composition…decomposition” over
presumably the arbitrary and dictatorial limitations of meaning imposed by the presence of the “author.” The heart of this evidently political project is the emancipation of meaning from its historically accepted foundations—either, that is, the presumed intention of the author or the necessary limitations put in place by a given hermeneutics. So, the “proliferation of meaning” in the Foucauldian sense necessitates a kind of anti-foundationalism that not only questions intellectually, but also holds politically suspect, the notion of “authority” in a given text.

Foucault’s influence on the study of the humanities is undeniable, particularly with respect to cultural studies and the New Historicism, a system of thought dominant in literary theory. Because of such influence, Foucault’s anti-foundationalism seems to have been conflated with his manifestly political projects, so that to support liberation means, more often than not, to be anti-foundationalist. The way that such thinking undermines the canon is quite clear—the canon, after all, is the tradition of dominant authors, of “geniuses,” who guide interpretation and, in this sense, determine its limits. By the same token, the ways in which such thinking contradicts the claims of the religious is evident—as generally conceived, religious thought makes certain claims to foundational Truth: e.g. the existence of a Deity and the “author” of existence, an objective morality, etc. Alone, Foucault’s work constitutes a robust challenge of essentialist, canonical, and indeed religious thought.

A contemporary of Foucault, Jacques Derrida was a thinker of immense influence on postmodernism and critical theory, and is considered the prime mover of post-structuralism, a school of thought still en vogue in America. Derrida, like Foucault, sought to redefine the nature of meaning and, more specifically, to destabilize it in the
context of Western philosophy. In fact, much of Derrida’s work consisted of examining philosophical “structures” in the history of the *epistemé*, or western science and philosophy. Notably, his essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” undermined the school of thought known precisely for examining such “structures”—the aptly titled structuralism—that, up to 1966 when Derrida presented his paper at Johns Hopkins and thereby caused a major shift in Continental philosophy, dominated the academy. In “Structure, Sign, and Play,” Derrida critiques structuralism for failing to achieve what he believed its proper project: that is, to divorce meaning entirely from its historical foundations in “structures” of thought and discourse. In fact, Derrida critiques structuralism precisely because it limits and stabilizes its own structure by means of privileged concept, a “center,” that fixes all meaning in relation and prevents the free play of thought. Of such structures and centers Derrida writes:

…structure has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by process of giving it a center or referencing it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *freeplay* of the structure. (915)

Here, Derrida presents the concept of the “center” as that which limits (much like the “author” in Foucault) the proliferation of meaning in a structure. Such centers or points of origin exist precisely for such reduction or limitation, for by these means structures maintain a certain coherence and orientation. When major paradigm shifts occurred in the
history of Western philosophy, it was usually the substitution of center for center—for much of Western history the center was “God”; in structuralism, the center is “man.”

Derrida’s work is striking because of its capacity to destabilize knowledge and discourse; for that reason, he aligns himself with the “destructive” philosophers who preceded him: Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger. Derrida highlights these thinkers precisely because they undertake projects of “decentering”—Nietzsche attacked notions of truth and being in the *epistemé*; Freud undermined the common western notion of the self, or consciousness; Heidegger laid to waste metaphysics and the notion of “being as presence.” Of the three, however, Nietzsche seems closest to Derrida in project, for Derrida claims that Nietzsche led him to this conclusion about the proper interpretation of structure:

> [it], which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freestyle and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of the being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, through the history of all that is history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game. (925-926)

Here, Derrida champions an interpretation of structure that forever abandons the quest for the center, or for that which stabilizes, limits, and provides an origin or foundation for being and knowledge. For Derrida, discourse is not a method to approach “truth” but simply a forum for the freestyle of signifiers, for the proliferation of meaning. Derrida is thus anti-essentialist and, in a profound way, critical of the very foundation of western thought. The Western search for Truth, according to Derrida, is the search for a center. Derrida implores us to abandon the search.
Without hesitation Derrida undermines much of the “point” of the study of the humanities, the discipline that takes “humanity” as its center. Likewise, Derrida’s thought leaves no room for religious belief, for it too seeks a center in a deity, multiple deities, etc. Indeed, if universally accepted, the power and scope of Derrida’s thought would make religious belief untenable.

To finish, let us examine one last thinker: the inaugurator of the destructive discourses and Derrida’s supreme influence, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche is worth dwelling on, for his thought permeates each of the anti-essentialist projects of the current academy. Indeed, Nietzsche’s effect on Western thought was profound, as the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre writes:

…it was Nietzsche’s historic achievement to understand more clearly than any other philosopher – certainly more clearly than his counterparts in Anglo-Saxon emotivism and continental existentialism—not only that what purported to be appeals to objectivity were in fact expressions of subjective will, but also the nature of the problems that this posed for moral philosophy. (113)

Nietzsche’s project, indeed, was to challenge the very foundations of Western metaphysics in its presumed ability to reference the real, the truth, with its own symbol systems. Not only that, but Nietzsche, unlike other would-be “destroyers” of Western philosophy, saw the need to construct in the ruins of what he razed a new philosophy and moral system—one, of course, that would completely do without conventional “truth-claims” like standard religious belief. Nietzsche proved, for one, that the metaphors philosophers use to discuss and descant upon the real actually have no essential link to it. Especially the Kantian notion of the “thing-in-itself,” which is considered the truest form
of a “thing” and thus exists independent of human perception, is for Nietzsche not a “truth” at all. In his essay “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” Nietzsche writes:

The “thing-in-itself” (which is what pure truth, without its consequences, would be) is entirely incomprehensible to the creator of language and not at all desirable to him. He designates only the relations of things to man and seeks the aid of the boldest metaphors to express them. (454)

In particular, we here see that, contrary to much prior western philosophy, Nietzsche’s position is not only that the “thing-in-itself” cannot be known rationally, but that the very notion of “it” is merely a product of language. There are no “things-in-themselves,” for the notion of “thing” is the product and property of language. Thus, we also see very clearly Nietzsche’s influence on current strains of thought—for instance, Nietzsche points directly to the so-called “linguistic turn,” evident in postmodernism and post-structuralism, which privileges humankind’s acquisition of language as the contingent moment in the creation of the real. For Nietzsche, the “creator of language” has no business with truth.

Indeed, Nietzsche’s critique of standard notions of truth is undeniably related to, and of course the forebear of, Derridean thought and, by extension, the dominant thought of the academy. The premise of most post-structuralism, for instance, is that language is only a product of man and a system of difference—that is to say, it bears no actual relation to the real. This argument renders all “truth-claims,” at least in their standard form, indefensible. Nietzsche foreshadows this shift in the academy where he writes:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms; in short, a sum of human relations which have been
poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long use, seem fixed, canonical, and binding to a people. Truths are illusions that we have forgotten are just that; metaphors that have become worn out and sensuously powerless;…(455).

Nietzsche’s attack on “truth-claims,” or the notions that philosophers and theologians have generally accepted as encapsulating or at least pointing to truth or the real, is here at its most direct and most challenging. The philosopher’s stance, as we know, is that “truth” is nothing more than a product and tool of language—i.e. of “metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms”—but also that, having forgotten the role of language in bringing reality into being, man has allowed himself to become foolishly convinced of his own capacity to identify truth. To Nietzsche, the phenomenon of the human, and thus of language, is a remarkably inconsequential affair in the history of the cosmos and, in this light, has very little to do with universal truth. Nietzsche claims:

   In some remote corner of the universe, the glittering expanse of countless solar systems, there was once a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. It was the most arrogant and deceitful minute in the “history of the world”—and yet, no more than a minute. After nature had taken a few breaths, the star froze, and the clever animals had to die. (452)

It is clear, first, that in this passage Nietzsche is rather hostile to the notion of man’s primacy in the universe. What is more, the philosopher asserts that this false sense of primacy is a direct effect of the invention of language, and further implies that language—and thus, “knowledge”—constitutes humankind’s sense of history. For one, Nietzsche puts “history of the world” in quotations, thereby calling the concept into
question. To Nietzsche, it seems, the “history of the world” is a concept borne out of man’s acquisition of language and, thus, does not originate in the real. Of course, this is Nietzsche’s attitude toward truth-claims in general—after all, he commits the entire paragraph to the implicit argument that all of man’s knowledge constructions are miniscule, insignificant, and ultimately laughable when considered in the context of the cosmos. Finally, Nietzsche’s perspective on the dubious relation between man’s knowledge and reality—that is to say, the reality of the indifferent cosmos—first surfaces in the passage. So, Nietzsche’s ultimate point is clear: language constitutes thought, and, thus, is the basis even of the notion of the “real.” Humankind is then a slave to language, not just in its incapacity to reference the real, but indeed, in its very creation of “the real.”

Nietzsche’s arguments, if accepted, are then not just devastating to the whole of metaphysics but indeed to any systems of thought which make truth-claims. Of course, the belief that words in some sense have a capacity to reference the real is the heart of any common “truth-claim,” religious or not. Nietzsche’s, then, is the root challenge made against religious belief and moral rationality in the current paradigm; it is the heart of any solid attack on religion.

As I have claimed, Nietzsche’s influence on Derrida’s work was profound; given, in addition, the importance of Foucault to much contemporary thought, it makes sense that critical theory and those systems that dominate the academy would, in themselves, pose a massive challenge to the old notions of the humanities and, by the same token, religious belief in general. However, this challenge in itself would not constitute what I have claimed is the hegemonic and ideological dismissal of religious belief in the academy; indeed, honest and robust challenge is the essence of all principled debate and
this does not constitute tyranny. Instead, what some recalcitrant scholars have posited, and what I now accept, is that these systems now autocratically dominate, or for that matter *occupy* as a kind of colonizer, the academy.

**The Ideological Entrenchment of the Academy**

I will state the present situation as I see it. The problem faced by scholars who are religious, as well as by religious students who wish to engage wholeheartedly in their studies, is two-fold: first, the now orthodox systems of thought I have thus described, however subversive and “destructive” they once were, insist on masquerading as heterodoxy and thus, somewhat paradoxically, are able to maintain ideological control; second, this veiled orthodoxy gives rise to a kind of radical skepticism-cum-relativism that, likewise paradoxically, is in fact absolutist and tyrannical in its dominance of the academy and of the kind of thought acceptable at universities—it is, in fact, the only standard by which any thought now can be measured.

Both of these claims require substantiation. Two scholars, both of whom are as controversial as they are often cited, examine the academy as I have thus framed it; they are the two Blooms, Allan and Harold.

In his controversial book *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom posits that the current academy, by encouraging the inculcation of radical skepticism and nihilism in the form of post-structuralism and cultural studies, has in fact impoverished the character and moral intellect of students. The academy achieves this end primarily by failing to teach the Western canon and, further, by supplanting it with the currents of
philosophy and literary theory that have been dominant for the past thirty years. One of Bloom’s premises is that the supremacy of post-structuralism and cultural studies brings about the titular “closing of the American mind,” the result of which is not so much a dominant school of thought as it is a dominant ideology, a kind of dogmatism to which most scholars and students are blind. Explaining the means by which the academy has arrived at this point, particularly in the case of literary theory, Bloom writes of post-structuralism and cultural studies:

…it is the last, predictable, stage in the suppression of reason and the denial of the possibility of truth in the name of philosophy. The interpreter’s creative activity is more important than the text; there is no text, only interpretation. Thus, the one thing that is necessary for us, the knowledge of what these texts have to tell us, is turned over to the subjective, creative selves of these interpreters, who say that there is both no text and no reality to which the texts refer. A cheapened interpretation of Nietzsche liberates us from our increasingly low and narrow horizon. Everything has tended to soften the demands made on us by tradition; this simply dissolves it. (379)

Allan Bloom, perhaps more powerfully and confidently that any other critic, here attempts to lay waste to the recent trends in continental philosophy and literary theory; his rhetoric, indeed, is powerful and convincing in its swift dismissal of the dominant schools of thought. But this captivating rhetoric notwithstanding, Bloom’s most important insight seems to be into the recent ideological substitution of text for reader in literary theory—this careful substitution, in Bloom’s view, divorces human knowledge from its marriage to the belief in some form of objective, rather than purely subjective,
reality. This move, in addition, ushers in anti-foundationalism and anti-essentialism in their current form.

Specifically, this shift from text to reader provides ample room for the tyranny of the subjective will. As Bloom sees it, this tyranny in turn causes the ultimate dissolution of the Western tradition in the academy; by extension, we can infer the dissolution of the religious foundations of many students and professors. In Bloom’s view, we have thus taken the final step in a wholesale departure from Western thought and have arrived at a new form of intellectual autocracy in the academy.

Harold Bloom, perhaps the most famous contrarian in literary criticism and theory, takes up some of Allan Bloom’s project in his examination of the hegemony of post-structuralism and cultural studies. In his controversial book *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, Harold Bloom labels collectively each of the so-called critical theories the “School of Resentment” primarily because, in his view, they needlessly and venomously rail against the western canon. It is not so much that Bloom does not know why they do so—he often admits, in fact, that these projects of the “School of Resentment” are justified—but rather that he sees how their political projects undermine the superior aesthetics of the authors of the western canon. For instance, Bloom argues that the New Historicists (Foucauldians) improperly equate the work of Shakespeare with that of his contemporaries, merely because they share the same historical circumstances. Bloom cannot fathom such reductivism and blatant philistinism—Shakespeare is clearly the center of the canon and the aesthetic superior of his contemporaries.
Interestingly, Harold Bloom, though a seemingly prideful, apparently choleric, and shamelessly reactionary rhetorician, admits that his critical perspective is not only overshadowed but necessarily smothered by the School of Resentment. Bloom admits, first, that the political projects of the cultural theorists seduce many students who otherwise would grow to appreciate the aesthetic splendors of Shakespeare over all others. Readers get the sense, in fact, that it is difficult for Bloom to admit defeat; but admit he must, for the ideological climate of the academy makes positively evident the dominance of the School of Resentment. Entertaining the notion of resistance, Bloom writes:

   The unhappy truth is that we cannot help ourselves; we can resist, up to a point, but past that point even our own universities would feel compelled to indict us as racists and sexists. I recall one of us, doubtless with irony, telling a *New York Times* interviewer that “We are all feminist critics.” That is the rhetoric suitable for an occupied country, one that expects no liberation from liberation. (16)

Here, Bloom exposes what I have called the thinly veiled dogmatism of the academy. His primary and, I now think, most insightful point is that the compulsory and normative character of most theory—that is, the fact that scholars feel compelled to join new theory or perish—reveals that the academy, which is supposed to encourage free thought, instead is occupied by a kind of despot. Further, we can infer that this dogmatism, this rigid orthodoxy that Bloom has shown, both because it masquerades as rebellious heterodoxy and because it is the only system of thought proffered at universities, often blinds students and amenable scholars to other ways of seeing and thinking. Thus, to Bloom’s dismay, the School of Resentment saps the humanities of any claim to
transcendence, universality or primacy in human life; at the same time, to our dismay, it
denies any foreseeable means for escape from its domination, especially for those who,
God forbid, are religious.

Independent of the Blooms’ analyses, I think it worthwhile to offer other
testimony—my own. One experience stands out as exemplary of the kind of ideological
climate that I have thus far inferred as the basis for many of my observations. In the
summer of 2013, I attended a graduate conference on southern American literature at the
University of Mississippi in Oxford. I was to present a paper I wrote about the notions of
authenticity and truth in Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*. When I arrived, I
discovered that the hosts of the conference titled my panel: “Authenticity versus ‘truth.’”
The nuances of this title were striking: first, by using the curious preposition “versus,” the
hosts seemed intent on drawing out a contrast between authenticity and truth, as if
assuming one implied the denial of the other; second, the choice to put quotation marks
around “truth” seemed theoretically and politically charged, for it privileged the notion of
authenticity and implied that “truth” required a great deal of qualification and, indeed,
deconstruction.

My analysis of the title proved correct during the conference. At the panel, I
discovered that each presenter deconstructed the notion of “truth” in their essays,
somehow against the presumed authenticity of the characters in the stories they analyzed.
Perhaps because the hosts misread my abstract, I was the sole “true believer” on the panel
and thus became the *de facto* apologist of “truth” at the conference. Indeed, during the
Q/A session, I received by far the most questions, all of which had to do with my
thoughts on the character and nature of “truth.” I was, in fact, an exotic figure at the
conference precisely because I treated the notion of truth unironically; I did not, that is to say, hold it at a distance and do violence to it. The debate that ensued during and after the Q/A session revealed two things to me: first, how little some proponents of the current theoretical discourses know of the historical character of “truth-claims” in general; second, how little I could actually do to disabuse them of the assumption that truth is something that must always relentlessly, tirelessly, ruthlessly be deconstructed.

I was struck by another apparent truth during the debate: each of my critics thought, indeed insisted on believing, that theirs was the minority view. Again we find this belief, quite perplexing indeed, that the dominant strains of skepticism in the academy are somehow, perhaps by virtue of their ostensibly subversive political projects, heterodox. As I have come to conclude, the ideology of the academy maintains its dominance in a backwards manner: that is, by employing a kind of rhetoric of the oppressed, by means of which proponents of cultural studies can dominate academe while at the same time appear fresh, novel, and rebellious. This is the primary method by which, in my limited view, the current academic paradigm maintains its hegemony.

But how again does this hegemony stifle not just religious thought but the very openness of religious people in the academy? To summarize and conclude, I will posit three ways.

The first way, in my view, is that deconstruction is now a compulsory practice. By that I mean that when one looks at a term like “truth” or “beauty” on the page of an academic text, the instinct is to put quotations marks around it, to call it into question, and to assure one’s readers that one is not so naïve as to believe in such metaphysical spiritualism or Platonic delusion. The existence of this compulsion in not just the minds
but the guts of most scholars propagates the academic climate in which the honest and sincere proffering of truth-claims can only be done in religious universities, if at all. That is to suggest, by contrast, that if such claims were made in public universities, then religious professors and students would run the risk of appearing decidedly passé. Put otherwise, if scholars discuss religious ideas without the necessary dose of radical skepticism that is now a requisite for “intellectual” debate, they risk betraying, in the eyes of the masses, their clear lack of “enlightenment” and allegiance to the ancien régime.

Second, I posit the exaltation of political liberation as the subversion of, rather than product of, the study of the humanities. What I mean here is that, because of the conflation of anti-foundationalism with the political agendas of today’s dominant scholars, political liberalism and the pursuit of liberation is wedded to an anti-canonical, anti-essentialist approach to the study of the humanities. Thus, if one champions the canon, for instance, one must be a reactionary and therefore ought to be held politically suspect. The stance, by contrast, that the canon itself can achieve for the oppressed a kind of political liberation is untenable. A proponent of this impossible view, the social critic Earl Shorris, argues that the canon in fact opens up the poor to the political life of the Greeks: not, that is, the politics of casting ballots but, as Shorris explains, “in the way Thucydides used the word: to mean activity with other people at every level, from the family to the neighborhood to the broader community to the city-state” (“As A Weapon” 50). Shorris is a good example of a political liberal whose primary focus is, indeed, the liberation of the poor. However, because he advocates for the virtue of the canon as the means of liberation, his ideas currently bear little weight—hence the fact that, though he rails against Allan Bloom like any good liberal, Shorris’s ideas are only partially and for
that matter marginally accepted in the academy, merely for their import on certain
varieties of “service-learning.”

At the same time, as I have said, this conflation leads to the dismissal of all
religious thought not just as superstitious, but indeed as politically retrograde. That is to
say, just as to believe in the transformative power of the canon is now held politically
suspect, so too is the case for religious belief. What is most perplexing and frustrating is
that this position does not require any actual knowledge of the nuances of religion to
dismiss religious thought out of hand—one merely needs to know that religions make
truth-claims. For this reason, ideological critics and their students can become
increasingly ignorant of, and thus recklessly and oafishly hostile to, religious thought and
religious people.

Third and final, I would posit the axiom, recited as often by students as by
professors, that “everything is political.” This statement, in itself, is not false; the
problem is simply that it is reductive. Not only that, but the canonization of this axiom
allows ideological critics, again, to be wholly blind to the nuances of religious belief, the
particular ways in which it may animate the intellect, soul, and viscera. Indeed, if
everything is political, then one need only to examine religion as it relates to politics.
Further, since one need only to know that religions make truth-claims to know that they
are thus politically retrograde, one has further reason to categorically discard all religious
belief, regardless of its nuance and its basis in the intellect.

For the refutation of this axiom, I defer to one of my professors, Benjamin
Lockerd, who points out that the belief that “everything is political” is as reductive as
Freud’s notion that “everything is sex.” Certainly, Freud was not wrong that perhaps
everything has a sexual dimension, but as modern psychologists have shown, this is simply a partial truth. With a riff that I think puts the matter to rest, Lockerd simply prescribes, “Professors today should try to hold these two truths in their mind at the same time: everything is political, but politics isn’t everything” (46).

The Virtue of Religion in the Academy

I must now relate what I have thus far shown—namely, the ideological entrenchment of the academy—to the Catholic group that my partner Elizabeth Balboa and I co-founded. As I have implied, our organization would provide a means for the free discourse on religion, independent of the compulsory skepticism of the academy, to which all thinkers are entitled. But why, again, are they entitled to it? In my introduction, I discussed the importance of pursuing what Wayne Booth calls “a plausible harmony” of one’s many Selves, as if this was the supreme virtue of the intellectual life. Of course, it is not. I meant only to suggest, of course, that to pursue such a harmony would lead to fulfillment in the intellectual life, and that this was a good in itself. But again, there is another effect, albeit indirect, of the pursuit of this harmony: namely, the synthesis of the intellect, religious belief, which by extension would constitute the subversion of the hegemony of the academy.

As I reflect on the state of the academy as I have thus presented it, I now realize that our Catholic organization is, in fact, an image of the educational ideal that most liberal education purports to realize. Indeed, our group constitutes the coming together of engaged and inquisitive minds, separated not at all by hierarchy—students, professors,
and administrators come together, nearly in secret, to discuss with equal passion the intellectual issues that most dog them. For this reason, already our group has analyzed, for instance, the evolving role of science in conceptions of the self, the changing conception of religious freedom in the U.S. as well as its historical and philosophical roots, to name just a few topics. The primary virtue of this debate is that it is open and principled, passionate but not burdened by the small-minded dogmatism of some of the weaker adherents of the current critical paradigm. For these reasons, I believe the nature of our group constitutes a legitimate reaction against the current academic paradigm, and may very well succeed in superseding it where others have failed.

But protests to my argument have inevitably been made. So, before we convince ourselves of the virtue of instituting such religious organizations on the campuses of public universities, let us again reconsider the one of our premises: that our organization is necessary for honest intellectual growth, on the part of both students and professors, in the academy. For that, we must turn to the work and research of my partner, Elizabeth Balboa.
Works Cited


