

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 18

Article 4

9-1-2000

A Midrash of (and for) Hope

Merold Westphal

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Westphal, Merold (2000) "A Midrash of (and for) Hope," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 18, Article 4.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol18/iss1/4>

A Midrash of (and for) Hope

Presented to the faculty of Hope College, October 1, 1998

MEROLD WESTPHAL



I come to you today as a rabbi rather than as a poet. Those of you who remember how totally prosaic is my mind would be relieved to hear this were it not for the fact that whatever your hopes or fears regarding this talk, neither Midrash nor minstrel-sy were among them.

It is Jacques Derrida who distinguishes the rabbi from the poet. The latter writes “between the fragments of the broken Tables.” In other words, the time of the poet is Exodus 33, after the breaking of the stone tablets (Ex. 32:19) on which the covenant had been “written with the finger of God” (Ex. 31:18) and before the time they were replaced. The poet represents human speech responding and responsible to no divine speech.

By contrast, rabbinic writing involves a “*sacred text surrounded by commentaries*.” In other words, the time of the rabbi is Exodus 34, when Yahweh gave to Israel, through Moses, a second written version of the covenant. Rabbinic speech always comes after, responding to what Another has said and responsible to a law it does not promulgate.

But, Derrida insists, both the rabbi and the poet live in exile from the garden, in a desert east of Eden where the real is no longer directly and unambiguously present to

Merold Westphal teaches in the philosophy department at Fordham University.

minds that simply mirror it. For both, all our knowledge, all our discourse, have the form of construal, of interpretation, of seeing something as something when we might well have seen it as something else. Thus they represent two interpretations of interpretations, or, more precisely, of human discourse as interpretation. The rabbi has a sacred text, to be sure, but when asked what it means can only point to its human construal in commentaries.

Years ago I played Sigmund Freud here in one of those Meeting of the Minds conversations across historical barriers. But the Jewish side of me has got religion at the Catholic university where I now teach, so I come to you now as a rabbi. The sacred text on which I propose to comment is the "Vision of Hope" statement adopted last March by the Board of Trustees, according to which Hope is to be a "Christian College, ecumenical in character while rooted in the Reformed tradition." I have no desire to attribute apostolic authority to the trustees, as distinguished and honorable as they may be. In referring to their statement as a sacred text I only mean to remind us that it is the trustees of a college or university, not its students, its faculty, or its administration, who have the final responsibility for defining the school's mission. Their official statements have a normative authority for the academic community analogous to that which the Bible has for the Church.

But even if one takes the metaphor of sacred text very strongly here, the need for commentary is not thereby eliminated but only emphasized. The church reads its Bible, to be sure, but its liturgies and its prayers, its hymns and its homilies are all interpretations. When the minister introduces the Scripture reading with the words, "Listen to the Word of God," (s)he reminds us of the normative status of the book. But when (s)he says, "Listen for the word of God," (s)he reminds us that our listening will inevitably be an event of interpretation.

I do not wish, however, to base the need for commentary solely on the analogy of the sacred text. There seem to me to be two ways in which our text cries out

for interpretation that are enhanced in their importance by its normative significance, but only require that for whatever reasons we are willing to concern ourselves with it.

The first of these is the inherent indeterminacy of this or any text. A divine author might well know completely and exactly what (s)he means by a given statement. But human authors are finite and do not share this power with God. They often say more or less or differently than what they intend or are aware of saying. This is why Gadamer can say, "Not occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well . . . It is enough to say that we understand in a *different* way, if we understand at all."

This is not an open invitation to read into a text anything we like. Gadamer gives two helpful models: performance art and translation. Musical scores and scripts of plays are indeterminate in the sense that they become actual only in performances (interpretations) that have these features. 1) The score or script is not able to determine or dictate precisely how it is to be performed. 2) No one interpretation will exclude all others. There will be a plurality of performances deserving high praise. 3) A performance by or directed by the composer or author may be first rate or mediocre. 4) Some performances will be worse than mediocre. The fact that no one interpretation is THE RIGHT ONE does not mean that there are not many ways to get it wrong and do it badly. This is why the good interpretations will, while being different from one another, be very similar to each other at the same time and will be recognizable as, e.g., Mahler's fifth or A *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

One can say the same kinds of things about translations (and every interpretation is a translation, even if it stays in a single language). There is no one "correct" translation of the *Iliad*. However brilliant, Fagles does not simply drive Lattimore and Pope from the field. But

II HERUSTIE
OF A H E F I R
UNIVERSITY NOT ITS
STUDENTS ITS FACULTY
OF ITS ADMINISTRATION
WHICH THE FINAL
RIGHT ONE
WORD IN THE
SCHOOL MISSION

there can be and no doubt are mediocre or bad translations, due not only to infelicity but also to flat-out error.

Now if the need for interpretation is evident in this way for texts with a single author, it would seem to be even stronger for texts issued by a committee. No single trustee knew or knows completely and exactly when our text means, and, *a fortiori*, the Board of Trustees collectively does not. This does not mean we can make of it whatever we please, but it does mean that interpretation is necessary.

We might acknowledge this reluctantly, wishing for a semantic security that is unfortunately unavailable. I think we should rather be glad that the inherent indeterminacy of our text (which does not exclude considerable determinacy—Hope, for example, is not to be a Buddhist institution or to be Reformed in a narrow and exclusive sense) makes conversations like the one we are having today necessary. This brings me to the second sense in which it seems to me that our text cries out for interpretation.

First a brief narrative. The Jesuit colleges and universities have in recent years been engaged at the national and regional levels in conversations very much like ours today. The shrinking numbers of Jesuits on their faculties have made it clear that Jesuit presence alone could not be the answer to the question of institutional identity and mission. After participating in a couple of regional conversations, I was asked by our Academic Vice President at Fordham to submit a proposal to the Deans' Council for addressing these issues with newly hired faculty. The brief document I submitted began by stating the assumptions on which the proposal rested, of which these are the first two:

1. That there is no single, simple, final answer to the question about what is or should be distinctive about Jesuit education.
2. That to be seriously engaged in pursuing those distinctives is in part to be regularly engaged in conversation about what they are and how they are best achieved.

In other words, our text cries out for interpretation in the sense that conversations about what it means and how it is to be implemented are integral parts of having a distinctive mission and identity. We are not an aspirin factory that seeks to mass produce pills according to a scientifically determinate formula and a technologically determined procedure. Conversation is the life of the mind. To be seriously Christian, and ecumenical, and Reformed requires ongoing reflection and discussion

WHILE THE DISTINCTIVE
RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF
AN INSTITUTION MIGHT
WE REFLECT UPON
CHAPEL SERVICES AND
THE VARIOUS SERVICES
OF THE CHAPLAIN'S
OFFICE IT CANNOT BE
RESTRICTED TO THESE

about what it means, both in theory and in practice, for an institution of higher education to be so designated.

A final point before offering my own interpretation of our text. It involves the scope of the conversation. Part of what I'd like to say is expressed in the third of the assumptions with which I began the proposal just mentioned.

3. That this [Jesuit] mission is best carried out when it is not left to the Jesuits or to those with a spontaneous interest in it but through a deliberate process of formation becomes the self-conscious, shared mission of all or most of the faculty.

I take it to be self-evident that in addition to full faculty involvement, administration and trustee participation in the conversation is essential. But I think the same goes for students. Several years ago I was asked to be the external evaluator of the philosophy program at an outstanding midwestern, church-related liberal arts college. Among faculty and administration I found a high level of reflection about how the religious identity of the college should show up not just in chapel services but also in the classroom. But when I asked the students about this, they responded as if I had just landed from Mars. They had no idea what I was talking about. Can an institution have a distinctive religious identity while its students are in the dark about it?

I have just expressed another assumption on which I am working, namely that while the distinctive religious identity of an institution might well reflect itself in chapel services and the various services of the Chaplain's office, it cannot be restricted to these. Many thoroughly secular institutions provide such services in one way or another. So I am assuming, as I suspect the trustees are as well, that if Hope is to be distinctively Christian, ecumenical, and Reformed, this will need to be reflected in its academic programs. That is the aspect on which I shall focus, though ultimately the whole of campus life is involved. Thus, for example, it might be argued that to be faithful to its distinctive religious identity, Hope needs to be environmentally responsible in terms of recycling its waste paper, cans, and bottles.

My midrash on our text begins with the thesis that Hope's academic programs can be "Christian . . . ecumenical in character while rooted in the Reformed tradition" only if they are sharply distinguished from vocational education. I will define vocational education with help from Aristotle. He distinguishes intellectual virtues from moral virtues. The latter are the habits in which we bring our actions and our passions into conformity with right reason. They make us good, not by causing our goodness

but by constituting it. The intellectual virtues are the habits by which our knowings are genuinely rational. They make us good thinkers, which is not the same as being good persons, but may contribute to the latter.

Aristotle distinguishes three broad categories of intellectual virtue. Two of these are so closely related to doing that we cannot help but speak of know-how. Both are necessary but not sufficient conditions for acting well. Aristotle sharply distinguishes moral know-how (*phronesis*, skill at *praxis*) from technical know-how (*techne*, skill at *poiesis*). Technical know-how tells us what means will enable us to achieve our ends, whatever they might happen to be, effectively and efficiently. Moral know-how tell us what ends are worth pursuing, what their relative importance is, and what means are permissible in their pursuit.

We might call the third kind of intellectual excellence pure theory, for it is concerned with understanding for its own sake and not for the action it enables and guides. Why do you want to understand that? Because it is there and because I can! But since this understanding occurs in reading a novel, watching a play, or listening to a string quartet as well as in developing a scientific or philosophical theory, I hesitate to call it theory. I use the term "contemplation" to designate the knowing that seeks insight for its intrinsic value, whether it occurs in the natural or social sciences, the arts or the humanities.

It is in terms of contemplation, moral know-how, and technical know-how that we can define vocational education. The overriding goal of such education is the acquisition of marketable skills. In our society being able to do a triple axel is a highly marketable skill, as is the ability to throw a baseball at ninety plus miles per hour around the periphery of the strike zone. But increasingly as the industrial economy is replaced by the information economy, marketable skills are more mental than physical. Many of the basic ones can be taught in college classrooms. Of course, I am not speaking here of contemplation or moral know-how, which are not highly marketable, but of technical know-how, many forms of which are. The organizing principle of vocational education is the production and propagation of those forms of technical know-how that are the most highly marketable skills in a given economic climate. Learning that falls into the categories of contemplation or moral know-how becomes secondary, peripheral, ancillary.

Vocational education rests on a materialist, consumerist philosophy of life. To the political adage, "It's the economy, stupid," it adds the educational maxim,

"It's your share in the economic pie, stupid. The reason to study is to get a bigger piece." In the movie *Wall Street*, Gordon Gecko says that greed is good. Jesus says, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). Vocational education sides with Gecko.

Liberal education sides with Jesus. This does not mean that it repudiates or abandons all concern for the acquisition of marketable skills. Nor does it mean that liberal education is inherently Christian. Let us consider these two points in order. First the question of marketable skills. With help from Aristotle we can define liberal education both negatively and positively. Negatively, and in contrast with vocational education, it refuses to make the acquisition of marketable skills and thus of technical know-how the tail that wags the educational dog, treating everything else as ancillary at best, optional and thus dispensable at worst.

Positively, liberal education affirms the importance of all three types of intellectual excellence. It recognizes the importance of work and of acquiring marketable skills. But it recontextualizes this dimension of the educational task by making it part of a whole of which it is not the organizing principle and primary goal. The goal is to become as fully human as possible and the organizing principle is a normative vision of what it is to be human. Such a vision is a humanism of one variety or other, and as a kind of knowing it belongs to moral know-how rather than to contemplation or technical know-how. Thus the organizing principle of genuinely liberal education, in contrast to vocational education, is moral know-how at its deepest level.

We have already seen that this does not mean the elimination of the vocational component from the curriculum. Now we can add that it does not mean that the premed program, for example, will consist of more courses in medical ethics than in biochemistry. What it rather means is that the vocational component, whether it be pre-med, or pre-law, or pre-sem, or nursing, or engineering, or business administration, or education, or communication, or social work, or even philosophy (for the lucky few who get to go on to be philosophy teachers), will be differently understood than when it is, to repeat, the tail that wags the dog. For they will occur in a different context.

It should also be clear that liberal education is not inherently Christian (though I am arguing, conversely, that to be genuinely Christian, Hope must offer genuinely liberal education). For there are many human-

isms which can be the basis of genuinely liberal education, many normative visions of what it is to be human that agree with Jesus that our life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions. But not necessarily because Jesus said it. Some might be closer to the romantic humanism of Wordsworth who thinks that when we give primacy to "getting and spending, we lay waste our powers," that is, become less fully human. Then there is the classical humanism of Plato and Aristotle, which argues vigorously that the pursuit of wealth is not the true path to happiness, and the socialist humanism of Marx, which argues that preoccupation with having is dehumanizing. And so on.

I believe we can now address two important questions:

- 1) What would it mean for Hope to offer an undergraduate education that could meaningfully be called Christian?
- 2) What would it mean for that Christian character to be at once Reformed and ecumenical?

My answer to the first question is this: Hope can claim to be a Christian liberal arts college just to the degree that it offers genuinely liberal education (as previously defined) grounded in a Christian humanism. Without pretending to be complete I want to operationalize "grounded in" three ways.

First, a liberal education is grounded in a Christian humanism if the latter effectively shapes **the official philosophy of education** of the institution. The most important part of what I mean by "effectively shaping" is the conversation mentioned earlier. Not only do the faculty, administration, and trustees need to articulate this Christian humanism in conversation with one another and whomever they can learn from, including students; they also need to present this vision to their constituency: prospective and present students, parents, donors, etc. It is very difficult to provide a liberal education, much less a Christian liberal education, while pandering to public taste and selling the product as if it were vocational education.

Second, at a wide variety of appropriate places in **the curriculum**, and not just in one or two departments, the long and rich traditions of Christian humanism need to be included both in the core curriculum and in the electives available to the students. J. B. Phillips once wrote a book entitled *Your God Is Too Small*. Students who enter adulthood with a college-level understanding of markets and metastasis but only a confirmation-class understanding of Christianity will find the Christian God to be too small indeed. Neither their belief nor their

THE SHRINKING NUMBERS
OF JESUITS ON THE
FACULTIES OF JESUIT
SCHOOLS HAVE MADE
IT CLEAR THAT JESUIT
PRESENCE ALONE CAN NOT
BE THE ANSWER TO THE
QUESTION OF INSTITUTIONAL
IDENTITY AND MISSION

unbelief will have the intellectual rigor and vigor that their knowledge of capitalism and cancer enjoys.

N.B. I am not saying that genuine faith requires higher education. I don't believe that for a minute. But I am saying that those who go to college (and perhaps to graduate or professional school as well) while leaving their faith at a high-school or junior-high level will be in a situation of serious cognitive dissonance. The result will be a faith that is either deserted, or diminished, or distorted.

Third, to a significant degree that I shall not try to quantify, **the faculty** need to have Christian humanism as their personal philosophy of life. This is not only to assure that the teaching of the traditions of Christian humanism will come from those sympathetic enough to understand them from the inside, which is by no means to be equated with rote and uncritical repetition (which is not to understand at all), but also to provide role models for the students of what it means to live the life of the mind in a Christian way.

This means, of course, that what the Jesuits delicately call "hiring for mission" is utterly indispensable to a college or university wishing to have a distinctive religious identity. Precisely **what** the goal of such hiring should be and **how** it is best to be achieved seem to me to be essential parts of the conversation to which I keep alluding. The one thing that is clear to me on this issue is that there is no single right answer to the question. As either a regular faculty member or as a visitor, I have taught at a variety of institutions, Protestant and Catholic, which spread themselves across the spectrum from fairly strict and narrow self-definition to broader and more ecumenical practice. There are tradeoffs, advantages and disadvantages to various strategies. There is a vitality that comes from being a community of a fairly specific shared faith. But there is also a vitality that arises from diversity, cross-fertilization, and even cross-examination. And there are corresponding disadvantages as well. So each institution will have to find its own path in an ongoing process of self-definition. But, and this is the crucial point here, unless inspiring mission statements promulgated by the trustees and printed in the college catalogue are seriously and substantially shared by the faculty, those statements will be a pious fraud.

What, then, would it mean to be Christian in a Reformed and ecumenical way? At times I may have sounded as if I think Christian humanism is a single thing. But I know it is not and twice I have spoken of the "traditions" of Christian humanism. Not even

IT WILL BE THE TASK OF
EACH INSTITUTION IN A
WIDE RANGING AND
ONGOING CONVERSATION
TO DEFINE ITSELF
IN TERMS OF HOW FAR IT
WILL RANGE FROM ITS
CENTER AND HOW IT WILL
SEEK TO ESTABLISH AND
MAINTAIN A FACULTY SUITED
TO ITS CHOSEN MISSION

the term “Reformed” signifies anything monolithic or monochromatic. On the basis of what I have already said, I think it is clear what it would mean for Hope to be a “Christian College . . . in the Reformed tradition.” It would mean 1) that Reformed versions of Christian humanism are readily available to students at appropriate places in the curriculum, and 2) that a significant portion of the faculty, that again I will not try to quantify, belong to some Reformed tradition and know something of its strengths and weaknesses from living inside it.

What it would mean to be “ecumenical in character” while “rooted in the Reformed tradition” is simply that Reformed traditions, while they might have a certain privilege (just as, conversely, you can get more Aquinas than Calvin at Fordham, and appropriately so), would not have monopoly status. An ecumenical curriculum would include the rich variety of Christian humanisms, noting both points of fundamental disagreement and ways in which the various traditions converge and can learn from one another even when they diverge.

I would want to say the same thing about Plato and Aristotle, Wordsworth and Marx. The non-Christian humanisms, both religious and secular, need to be presented both as resources for and challenges to the Christian traditions that underlie the overall institutional project. If you will permit me to mix metaphors, I think of a spectrum defined by concentric circles. Moving from the center outward we find Reformed traditions; other Christian traditions, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox; then other monotheistic traditions, especially Jewish and Islamic; then other religious traditions; and finally the secular humanisms ancient and modern. No curriculum can introduce every student to the entirety of this rich heritage of humanistic culture, but a good one will make possible wide-ranging ecumenical exploration.

And what about ecumenism in “hiring for mission”? In my capacity as rabbi, offering an interpretation in the hope of stimulating further conversation, I make only three suggestions here. First, to repeat, it will be the task of each institution in a wide-ranging and ongoing conversation, to define itself in terms of **how far** it will range from its center and **how** it will seek to establish and maintain a faculty suited to its chosen mission.

Second, an institution might extend the ecumenism of its hiring across the entire (circular) spectrum I’ve described. Thus, for example, Father O’Hare, the distinguished President of Fordham University, has described it as a place for people of Catholic faith, for people of other faiths, and for people of no faith; and this is

applied in practice to faculty hiring. Other institutions might choose to seek a faculty all or most of whom are Christian, or perhaps monotheistic. Institutional identity is as “personal” a matter as individual identity. Hence the need for the conversation which some of you are by now willing to join if only I’ll stop talking about it. My point here is this: I think only one group can be excluded **a priori** at an institution that wants to be ecumenically Christian, namely those whose approach to education is vocational rather than liberal.

Third, Hope has long since made it clear that it is and wishes to be ecumenical, that it does not define itself narrowly or polemically in terms of the Reformed tradition. The faculty of any such school will include members from that innermost circle as well as those from one or more circles farther out. That innermost circle, whether Reformed or Jesuit or whatever, must not become an inner circle in the sociological sense of the term, a group that divides the faculty into insiders and outsiders, first-class citizens and second-class citizens. All are hired because they are judged to be in harmony with the institutional mission and able, on the basis of the humanism that defines them as persons and as scholars, to contribute importantly to the institutional mission precisely by being themselves.

I believe the constraints on administrators can be narrower than those on the faculty without compromising this principle. For example, at Fordham it is important that the President and the Dean of Fordham College be Jesuits. Apart from the fact that I have neither the talent nor the aspiration for either role, I am simply ineligible for both (though I am eligible in principle for other administrative positions for which also I lack both the talent and the aspiration). But I have never felt like a second-class citizen because some of my colleagues, but not I, might eventually be Dean or President. I was hired, as a Protestant, because it was thought I could contribute to the institutional mission, and I have never been treated as anything but a first class member of the faculty.

I have been commenting on the trustees’ directive that Hope’s academic programs be “Christian . . . ecumenical in character while rooted in the Reformed tradition.” My first thesis, you may recall, is that they can be so only if they are sharply distinguished from vocational education. My second thesis, which I promise to develop more briefly, is that Hope’s academic programs can have the desired character only if they are vigorously vocational.

Vocational education as previously described is all but exclusively occupied with the acquisition of marketable skills. Its educational philosophy is simply expressed: it’s about jobs, stupid. For yuppies of all sorts, the question of jobs rises to a higher level. It’s about careers. But ironically, vocational education never rises above jobs and careers to think about vocations. Vocations are callings. In language not explicitly theological, my calling is where the world’s needs and my gifts intersect, not necessarily where I can maximize fame and fortune. Already that means that insofar as education prepares me for the world of work, questions of financial security lose their position of primacy. More important than my claim on the world is the world’s claim on me. What does it need that I am best equipped to give? This change of perspective corresponds to the primacy of moral know-how over technical know-how.

But of course this notion of vocation (as distinct from career) is theological in origin and my calling is what God calls me to. Thus Paul reminds the Corinthians, “. . . you are not your own . . . for you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). God is the coach or general who deploys human forces in the light of divine wisdom and for divine purposes. Whereas for secular humanism (notice that is not a nasty term here) the question of my vocation concerns the world’s claim on me, for Christian humanism that claim derives its urgency and its wisdom from its higher source, a loving God. Discernment about my vocation unavoidably involves seeking to hear what God is calling me to do and to be. That is the context in which I pursue technical know-how as part of my college education.

This is a point on which the Reformed traditions, in the broad sense that includes both Lutheran and Calvinistic traditions, have a special contribution to make. In contrast to the popular Catholic sense according to which vocation was restricted to those taking holy orders or living the life of a religious (a sense ironically echoed among those Protestants who speak of “full time Christian service” — as if those who are not ministers or missionaries are to serve God only part time), the reformers insisted that all believers are called by God to serve God’s kingdom in the world, not just on Sunday morning but during the rest of the week as well. For the believer, “secular” work was to be understood as a sacred duty. Corresponding to the priesthood of all believers is the vocation of all believers. Whatever truth there is in

Weber's thesis about the so-called Protestant work ethic has its foundation in this notion of vocation.

One feature of this Christian humanism of the reformers is of special importance for us today. Vocation is extended to cover all legitimate work, even secular work. But it is extended beyond this. Some Reformed Christians speak of the "cultural mandate" to signify the totality of ways in which we are called to serve God in the world. For purposes of illustration, I will borrow from Emil Brunner's *The Divine Imperative*, that speaks of the divine orders of society to signify the various communities in which individuals are called to serve God and neighbor:

The Community of Life: Marriage and the Family
 The Community of Labor: the Economic Order
 The Community of the People and of Law: the State
 The Community of Culture: Science, Art, Education
 The Community of Faith: the Church.

On this scheme it is primarily in the Community of Labor and the Community of Culture that people earn their livings. Christian humanism, especially Reformed humanism, places the acquisition of the skills necessary to participate in these cooperative endeavors, not in the context of personal aggrandizement but of divine calling. But beyond that, it reminds us that we are called to do more than make a living. We are called to participate in family life, remembering that even those who remain single belong to families. We are called to citizenship, to participate in the political life of our people. And we are called to participate in the community of faith, known theologically and sociologically as the church.

This means that liberal education grounded in Christian humanism will seek to prepare its students, not just for making a living, but for the responsibilities and opportunities of family life, political life, and church life. This means that an institution grounded in Christian humanism cannot measure its excellence simply or even primarily by noting how many of its graduates are hired by prospering companies or go on to prestigious graduate or professional schools. Perhaps this way of putting it helps us to see just to what degree the acquisition of marketable skills has become the tail that wags the dog.

I want to conclude by considering a serious objection to what I have been saying. It is the charge that the ideal of liberal education grounded in Christian humanism reduces education to ideological indoctrination. There are actually two charges here. Indoctrination is a

question of style or process. Ideology is a question of substance or content.

Indoctrination is a bit like obscenity. It is easier to recognize than to define. At Fordham the theology and philosophy departments are in the same building. As you enter, a right turn takes you to one, a left to the other. There used to be two signs (removed, no doubt, by someone totally lacking a sense of humor). The one that pointed toward philosophy said, Unanswered Questions. The one that pointed toward theology said, Unquestioned Answers. That, I suppose is what indoctrination is all about — the assumption that a fixed and final set of answers is to be passed on dogmatically and authoritatively from teacher to pupil, whose job is simply to accept the answer so quickly that the force of the question is never felt. Thus, when Camus defined the world of myth as a world of all answers and no questions, he was also talking about indoctrination.

I see nothing in the ideal of Christian liberal arts education as I have described it that requires the form of its presentation to students to be indoctrination. Questioning, critical reflection, cross-examination, and debate (both actual and staged) can and should be integral to the process. Commitment can be conversational and need not be defensive, dogmatic, and doctrinaire.

On the charge of ideological non-neutrality I plead guilty. An institution that defines itself as Christian, Reformed, and ecumenical has given up all pretense of being Pure Reason. Here the emphasis falls on pretense. For it is an illusion to think that our thought, whether as individuals or as institutions, can be so neutered as to be neutral, free of all commitments, pure of any presuppositions. If that ideal made sense to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and to the positivisms of the nineteenth and twentieth, those last two centuries have for the most part been the repeated discovery in a wide variety of traditions and vocabularies that we always stand somewhere and never nowhere. And in our finitude, that somewhere is always a particular point of view. Even the vocational education that sells its soul to acquiring marketable skills is a commitment to a particular philosophy of education. If Gordon Gecko states it shamelessly, for the most part it is that ideology that dare not say its name. For as deeply implicated as we are in the consumerist self-understanding that capitalism seems to require these days, even more deeply, in our hearts, we know that Jesus was right.