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# TALKING BACK

## How We Might Move On From Here: A Hope

Response to “How We Got Here: A History” by  
Raymond A. Schroth, S.J. *Conversations* 41 [Spring 2012]

By Claude N. Pavur, S.J.

**T**he narrative of Jesuit higher education crisply detailed by Fr. Schroth in *Conversations* 41 is a pervasive one, but it is at least as worrisome as encouraging. In moderate caricature: the triumphal story-line has the old pious but academically underachieving and relatively unprofessional clerical lords of the manor dethroned for the sake of a more democratic brave new world of secular and universally recognized standards. And yet Schroth also realistically points to serious challenges, particularly those concerning the authentic embodiment, ownership, and guidance of “the mission.”

But let us press this narrative. Was it really crippled and benighted, that old Jesuit system of education? I mean the one that nurtured — even if it did not immediately appreciate — Gerard

Manley Hopkins and Karl Rahner and Henri de Lubac and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Michel de Certeau and John Courtney Murray and Walter Ong and Bernard Lonergan and countless others less celebrated. I find it hard to believe that the wide respect achieved by Jesuit educational institutions was largely baseless. Rather it is easier to think that the very idea of Jesuit education is already blurring into irrelevancy.

In an ethics textbook used by my mother, Gertrude Gentilich, at Loyola of New Orleans, I found some indications of what was being given in college classes. A mid-term exam of March 9, 1943, had twelve questions asking about the following: the nature of inspiration; the non-contradiction of the Bible and science; the canonicity of Biblical books; apocryphal books; the *Hexapla* of Origen; the Septuagint; the Vulgate; the meaning of “gospel” and “synoptic”; what gives a book genui-

ty, integrity, and historicity; how can gospels be proved genuine; and specific interpretations of particular gospel texts and phrases. And here are two test questions from Philosophy 311 and one from Theodicy: 1. Prove: The proximate constituent norm of morality is man’s rational nature. 2. Explain the definition of determinants of morality. Which are the three determinants? Explain each. 3. Explain the definition of simple, metaphysical and physical simplicity. Hardly the stuff of soft and fuzzy piety, this.

No doubt there was a range of quality in the schools and teachers and courses, but should we think that there was something terribly second-rate and unacceptable about the whole system? What if we should hold the secular

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standards and particulars to an equally hard review, especially now that we have a mountain of literature critiquing them? They are often not without the need for drastic improvements. (See my “Re-Envisioning Classics as a Liberal Art,” available on the Web.) What are the judgments of the secular authorities themselves? Harry Lewis, former dean of Harvard College, published in 2007 an indictment of his home institution (*Excellence Without Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education*). In 2008, former dean of Yale’s law school Anthony Kronman gave us *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, pleading that the ethical-spiritual content of education not be sold out to specialization and socio-political activism. Well, there you have it: Yale and Harvard saying that they have been missing the boat in a big way. Should we really rejoice over being remade in their images?

No, we have to move on, to come up with a better reformulation and synthesis. I am as sure of this as I am of the truth that is refracted in Schroth’s presentation, that is, the

fact that much of the old system needed revision and improvement. But *semper reformanda* goes for everyone. And yes, secular norms have been a help. But they were an undeniably *partial* kind of help. They cannot be the touchstone. Here is my thumbnail sketch of what an authentic Jesuit education demands:

**1. Leaders who “get it.”** We need the right kind of moral, administrative, and executive oversight by the right kind of people (i.e., prudent, well-informed, intelligent, and committed people who deeply understand the documents, the traditions, the ideas, the goals, the situations, the needs of Jesuit education). They have to be able to be both faithful and creative, and they themselves must be subject to some competent superior oversight.

**2. Teachers who “get it.”** We need teachers aware of the larger purposes and vision of the education — particularly the formational purposes — teachers who are committed to comply intelligently with authentic leadership, fully cognizant of their own particular roles in the education, and skilled at the methods for achieving those goals.

**3. *Ratio studiorum*.** We need

a standing order or plan of studies that cultivates in a living, disciplined, yet not straight-jacketed way, proven, definite high-quality content, at least for a substantial core. Organization and appropriation, of well-chosen material is paramount. Rampant choice and diversity are decidedly *not* the leading values. The building of an intellectual-spiritual community requires shared academic focal points. I am thinking of (a) the *sine qua non* works of Scripture, particularly the gospels; (b) classic works, especially those created or adopted by the Judaeo-Christian intellectual tradition; and (c) recent works of rich, wide-ranging, integrative synthesis, like Eagleton’s *Literary Theory*, Fukuyama’s *The End of History*, McCloskey’s *Bourgeois Dignity*, D’Souza’s *What’s So Great About Christianity*, Beckwith’s *Defending Life*, and Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*.

Without the cultivation of definite content, Jesuit and Catholic identity will remain forever elusive. Such a list as the one just proposed does not mean that the curriculum is restricted to those titles in a new air-tight orthodoxy. It means only that certain high-quality materials have been responsibly selected as promising points of departure for deeper and broader understanding. So then, we have a work of renaissance and reformation ahead of us. We can make friends with the past, and we can use it in new ways to support that Christian humanism that is “the greatest service to development” (*Caritas in Veritate*). Agreeing on these things, then, let us begin our discussion. ■