THE DISAPPEARING MORAL CURRICULUM?

George Dennis O'Brien
President emeritus, University of Rochester
President emeritus, Bucknell University

The Fr. Gabriel Richard Lecture
Sponsored St. Mary Student Parish at the University of Michigan
Co-sponsored by
the President's Ethics in Public Life Initiative, University of Michigan
and *Commonweal Magazine*

Delivered at the Michigan League
University of Michigan
September 26, 2006

The title of this lecture is "The Disappearing Moral Curriculum?" When I suggested the title, I thought it would be an exercise in historical reminiscence. Lo and behold I discovered it is a hot issue at the University of Michigan unto this very day. In one of her first initiatives as President, Mary Sue Coleman created a Task Force on Ethics and Public Life to explore the ability of the University "to understand and provide leadership on the ethical crises, conundrums, and breakdowns of ...key institutions in our society..."[1] The Task Force made its final report in June 2005. My talk today is in three parts: (1) a look at ethics and education at the University of Michigan in the 19th century, (2) two questions for clarification in the Task Force report, and (3) some suggestion for extending the issue of ethics and education beyond the careful focus of the Task Force.

History first: the Task Force Report begins by noting that ethics as a task for higher education is a modern problem. "In the 19th century religious piety and moral character were central to the agendas of most American universities. By the turn of the century, this was no longer true, particularly at public universities."[2] The statement is certainly correct. What happened to that 19th century moral education?

The nineteenth century University of Michigan was rife if not over ripe with moral concerns. A distinguished international educator, Henry Tappan, was dismissed as president in 1863 for, among other things, serving wine with dinner at the president's house.[3] In 1871, James Burrill Angell began a long tenure of thirty six years as president. More than any single person he was responsible for the development of Michigan as a major institution of higher education. He was also an ardent champion of moral education. In his inaugural address he was explicit: "the Christian spirit, which pervades the law, the customs, and the life of the State shall shape and color the life of the University." He justified his position by quoting the Northwest

---

[1] "Final Report of the University of Michigan Presidential Task Force on Ethics and Public Life" June 2005

[2] Ibid. p.8

[3] Kent Sagendorf, *Michigan: The Story of the University* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1948) 92

Ordinance of 1787 which established the territory called "Michigan." "Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary for good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."[4] That statement is emblazoned on Angell Hall to this very day!

Twenty first century universities do not espouse the sort of up-front religion or morality favored by President Angell. This is not merely a statement of fact, it is a statement of principle. The issue of *principle* was raised in connection with Angell's explicit Christianity. In 1873, a man by the name of Stephen B. McCracken made a formal complaint to the Michigan legislature about Angell's inaugural address. McCracken held that implantation of Christianity in the University violated the state constitution by privileging one religious sect. The legislature rather surprisingly attended to McCracken's complaint in a series of hearing in 1873. The conclusion was that whatever Angell was up to it was not "sectarian." Quoting the report of the legislative committee: "The teachings of the university are those of a liberal and enlightened Christianity, in the general, highest and best use of the term. This is not in our opinion sectarian."[5]

The designation of Angell's views as "*liberal* and *enlightened* Christianity" was more significant than they probably knew. As George Marsden says in his study of the University of Michigan under Angell, "liberal Christianity" justified itself by "its moral teaching"[6] thereby avoiding the issue of the factual truth of Biblical stories about Creation in seven days, Jonah in the whale and all that. The issue about *liberal* Christianity is whether there is anything "religious" left or is it merely sensible morality with a theological glass. Thomas Jefferson in retirement completed his private version of the New Testament focusing on its moral teaching quite eliminating all supernatural trappings and occurrences. It was Jeffersonian *moral* Christianity that Angell and his colleagues advocated for the University. A statue of Jefferson stood at the corner of Mason Hall, one of the University's earliest buildings.

(Footnote: before consigning President James Burrill Angell to the archives, I want to point out that in my copy of the Task Force Report, he is referred to as "Robert" B. Angell.[7] *Sic transit gloria mundi*.)

So much for history, I turn to the present and the Task Force Report. Assuming that in some sense religion disappeared from the University through the medium of liberal Christianity to be replaced by humanistic morality, why has "morality" dimmed in the century since? Biblical miracles might not be defensible in the face of science, but for Pres. Angell Biblical morality could remain. But suppose one raises the scientific question about morality. Miracles may be scientifically doubtful but also how can morality be scientifically verified?

There are two features of the Final Report which, while they advocate ways to relocate morality in the university, also suggest why that task can be so difficult given the importance of the scientific question for the modern university.

Let me start with a prominent feature of the Report which clearly reflects the nature of the present-day University. The report suggests repeatedly that the University should undertake

---

[4] George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Non-Belief* (New York: Oxford, 1994) 167-8.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Task Force, 11

"research in ethics." That is hardly surprising considering that Michigan is one of the country's leading *research* universities. All well and good, but what exactly is "research" in ethics? Having described the prominent place of ethics at Michigan during the tenure of President Angell, it is worth noting that when Angell was inaugurated as president in 1871, the phrase "research in ethics" would have made no sense. The word "research" was only introduced into English five years later in 1876 in a British publication advocating reform at Oxford.[8]

There is more to the problem of "research in ethics" than developing nomenclature. What do we mean by "research"? *Scientific* research generally aims at "discovery." The University's Medical School in its research hopes to discover a cure for cancer. But if "discovery" is the aim of research, "research in ethics" may seem quite odd. After Immanuel Kant published in 1788 his great work on morality, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, he was criticized for not having *discovered* the moral law. The old philosopher was appalled at the thought that he had "discovered" the moral law. He noted in the second edition:

> A reviewer who wanted to find some fault with this work has hit the truth better, perhaps, than he thought, when he says that no new principle of morality is set forth in it, but only a *new formula*. But who would think of introducing a new principle of all morality, and making himself as it were the first discoverer of it, just as if all the world before him were ignorant what duty was or had been in thoroughgoing error?[9]

Kant's comment seems correct. Whatever the moral law may be it is not waiting to be *discovered*. Imagine a headline in the *Detroit Free Press* (September 26, 2008) "Philosophers at Michigan Discover the Moral Law. Pope resigns."

My fictional headline leads me to my second question about the Task Force Report. Not only does the report urge research in ethics, it notes that since Michigan has such a distinguished department of philosophy, work in *ethics* is part and parcel of the University mission. The report is correct in its evaluation of philosophy at Michigan. It has been a distinguished department from the days of John Dewey in the 1890's. For thirty years until his death in 1927, Prof. Robert Mark Wenley of the philosophy department was a master teacher of ethics, repeatedly voted by students as their favorite professor, and inducted into the Michigauma society as "Heap-Think Wenley." When I was in philosophy graduate school Michigan was still a "heap-think" place for ethical philosophy with faculty members like Charles Stevenson, Richard Brandt and William Frankena. A tradition of excellence in philosophy — particularly in ethics — continues to this day. It is a tradition to celebrate, but for all that, I think one should be clear exactly what questions should be addressed to the Michigan philosophers. I would not want my philosophical colleagues tasked with an impossible demand. They are *not* going to *discover* the moral law!

For those of you who haven't tuned into philosophical ethics since Ethics 101 in freshmen year, it is worth glancing at the some of the significant current work of the Michigan department. Take an impressive work by three Michigan faculty, *Moral Discourse and Practice* by Professors Darwall, Gibbard and Railton. (I note that Prof. Gibbard served on the

---

[8] As late as 1903, Daniel Coit Gilman, the founding president of *the* American "research university," Johns Hopkins, would say " 'Research' is not a felicitous term."

[9] Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, trans T.K. Abbott, sixth ed. (London: Longmans, 1909), 93

Task Force on Ethics.) The text is a collection of classic papers on ethics with an elegant and sophisticated 47 page introduction by the three authors.

I noted that 19th century liberal Christianity was troubled by the challenge of science to Biblical miracles; twentieth century philosophy has been troubled by the challenge of science to morality. In their essay the three Michigan authors place the problem of ethics squarely up against the understanding of natural science:

> Perhaps most contemporary philosophers would agree that our going view treats empirical science as the paradigm of synthetic knowledge, and that an acceptable account of ethics must "place" it with respect to this particular paradigm...[10]

If science becomes the model for truth, it is not only the truth of miracles that becomes problem, so does the "truth" of morality. It is a verifiable fact that some item is "red"; it does not seem to be a "fact" that something is morally "good." Ethics appears to fail the cognitive test of science, so what are people up to when they go about applying ethical predicates to actions and behavior? This has been a problem addressed by a succession of Michigan philosophers up to the present moment — and it is a profoundly important problem. If you don't get a satisfactory analysis of the relation of science and morality, morality may go the way of miracles into the bin of superstition. That would be too bad -- and I mean *morally* bad!

Critical as the relation of science and morality may be, it is not — as the Michigan authors would agree — the only issue for morality — and it may not be the problem which concerned the Task Force. There are other philosophical issues and methods than those represented in *Moral Discourse and Practice.* Perhaps I can explain my concerns about how philosophers may contribute to ethics in the curriculum by a piece of personal history. I was an undergraduate English major and switched to philosophy in graduate school.. My parents had moved to the Hyde Park area of Chicago, so I went to the local university which happened to be the University of Chicago. I learned a certain *method* of philosophy at Chicago. However, when I went to a first teaching assignment at Princeton, it seemed I had missed philosophy altogether. What it meant to *do* philosophy at Chicago and at Princeton appeared utterly different. Chicago was dedicated to philosophy derived from the history of philosophy. We followed the advice of the great expositor of medieval philosophy, Etienne Gilson, who averred that "history of philosophy is the experimental lab of philosophy." Philosophy at Chicago started with Aristotle and ended with Bertrand Russell. Princeton had a wholly different style. At Princeton philosophy *started* with Russell. The message seemed to be that finally, after three millennia, we had discovered how to do philosophy. You could quarrel about who finally discovered proper philosophy: Russell, Wittgenstein, or John Austin but it was clear that philosophy rather like modern science was at last on the right track.

I can illustrate the difference with an outrageous anecdote. I was teaching the traditional freshman philosophy course at Princeton which had been since the days of Walter Stace, Plato's *Republic.* I was having lunch one day with the noted Australian analytic philosopher, J.J.C. Smart. He asked me what I was teaching. "*The Republic*." "Oh, Plato!" says Smart. "Well, if

---

[10] *Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches*, ed. with and intro. by Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton (New York: Oxford, 1997), 7

there are any truths in Plato, which I very much doubt, I wish someone would write them down in a little black book, so that we could stop reading those dreadful dialogues."

I indulge in this piece of personal history to suggest that there is a certain method or style for ethical philosophy represented in the text of *Moral Discourse and Practice*. The book ends with 16 pages of bibliography in small print. As far as I could tell, all the authors cited were born after Bertrand Russell! I point out this approach to ethics not as a criticism or as a horrified reaction to my Chicago obsession with the history of philosophy. (I did, after all, write my PhD thesis on Wittgenstein!) My concern is to suggest that there are quite different ways of approaching and conceiving the problems of philosophical ethics.

The difference between Chicago and Princeton philosophy rested, I believe, in deep cultural assumptions that admit of no easy or obvious resolution. In this opinion I am relying on a wonderful book by John O'Malley, S.J., *Four Cultures of the West* recently issued in paperback by Harvard University Press.[11] O'Malley singles out four dominant cultures which have influenced Western civilization and — I would argue — the University as a primary institution of acculturation. He labels the four cultures: prophetic, academic, humanistic, and artistic. Each of these cultures expresses itself in a characteristic *style.* Differing styles of expression rest upon quite different assumptions about human life, the nature of truth, and — given the issue of this talk — the character of ethics. I will sketch in some salient characteristics of the four cultures and then examine to what extent they can be found — properly or improperly — within the life of the modern university.

O'Malley begins his analysis with a fundamental clash of cultures in the Western tradition. The early Christian apologist, Tertullian (c. 160 - c.225), although he had been schooled in Greek learning, when he converted to Christianity, rejected his classical heritage in a famous question: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" His answer was "Nothing." Greek learning and culture were a distraction from the clear demands of Christianity. Rather than the incessant wrangling of the philosophical schools, Tertullian chose the surety of revelation.

Tertullian exemplifies what O'Malley calls the *prophetic* style as a rejection of the philosophers. But there is more to "Athens" than philosophy. O'Malley suggests that we derive *three* cultures from Athens: an *academic* culture derived from the philosophers, a *humanistic* culture derived from political orators, and an *artistic* culture. The first three cultures are cultures of words, the last is often wordless in music and architecture. In the wordy cultures there are distinct styles of discourse. The prophetic culture expresses itself in the shout, the proclamation, the *cri de coeur*. The academic culture is "logical, rigorous, argumentative."[12] The humanistic culture favors poetry, story and elevated language. The last culture, the artistic, expresses itself in performance, ritual, and the material environment. Isolating these cultures is arbitrary since in history they have had a dizzying set of interactions. Nevertheless, each of the cultures makes a different claim on the good life. Each of the cultures has a characteristic approach to the problem of this talk: the nature of "ethics" and how it might be taught.

Of the three Athenian cultures the one most clearly related to the modern university is, obviously, the academic style as this has been derived, shaped, developed and modified from the style of the philosophers. Despite his absence from the bibliography of *Moral Discourse and*

---

[11] John W. O'Malley, S.J., *Four Cultures of the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
[12] O'Malley, 12

Practice, our modern Michigan philosophers are clearly writing in an Aristotelian style. Aristotle was the greatest scientist of his day. It is thoroughly Aristotelian, for the authors of *Moral Discourse and Practice* to explore the relation between scientific discourse and ethics and to write in Aristotle's careful argumentative style.

However dominant an academic "Aristotelian" style may be for the modern university, it is not the only culture on campus. We might like to think that philosophy and careful argument are the essential character of legitimate university study, but the fact is that the philosophic style did not win the educational battle in the ancient world and it may not prevail even today. The dominant mode of education in classical times was not "academic" in the *philosophic* sense discussed, but "humanistic." This alternate mode of education was derived from a younger contemporary of Plato, Isocrates who opened a school in Athens in 390 B.C.E. It was a school of rhetoric. Isocrates was concerned with persuasion and so, unlike Plato who threw the poets out of his ideal state run by philosophers, Isocrates welcomed poets because they told stories in language that stirred the emotions. The problem of education was how to display and praise ethical exemplars. Education through "poetry" and story became the dominant mode of ancient education.

Humanistic education was, as O'Malley suggests, "classical" in two sense: it depended on a classic literature which provided models of both conduct and speech and it was "classical" in a sense that is still with us: a sense of "balance, harmony, proportion, moderation, and rationality."[13] Plutarch's lives and Ciceronian rhetoric with its balanced cadences and moral passion fit the educational goals. The aim was the formation of character, a "classical" character which had the traits of the literature: "balance, harmony, proportion, moderation, and rationality." The "rationality" alluded to is not the insistent, probing, "rationality" of the philosophers, but the rationality of the statesman who knows the arts of balance and harmony which characterize the just society. As Cicero says, "The duties of justice must be given precedence over everything else, including the pursuit of knowledge..."[14]

The ideal of a "humanistic" education has a persistent history in the higher education. It is echoed in Emerson's famous Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard in which he upheld "character" as the true end of education. It was the very essence of Cardinal Newman's *The Idea of a University* in which the aim of such education is the production of "the gentleman."

Even from this brief characterization one can sense that the humanistic ideal differs from both the prophetic and the academic. As O'Malley suggests, the prophetic and the academic are "hard" styles when compared to the humanistic. The prophet is not at all interested in harmony and balance; he demands righteousness! The academic style can be equally unwilling to seek compromise in its search for hard truth. A prophetic Martin Luther says "Here I stand!" A scientific Galileo mutters, "But it still moves!" One would hardly characterize either Luther or Galileo as one of Cardinal Newman's "gentlemen." The truth is the truth is the truth and no social compromise, moral nicety or politeness is admitted. From the standpoint of prophecy and science, the humanistic way seems vague, imprecise, and "soft."

A few words, finally, about the fourth culture: the artistic culture. Unlike the first three cultures this culture educates beyond words in sound and shape. There is a message implied if

---

[13] O'Malley, 131
[14] Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.43.154. Quoted in O'Malley, 133.

not stated. O'Malley illustrates the power of the artistic culture through the story of the conversion of Russia to Christianity in 988. Prince Vladimir of Kiev sent emissaries to discover the true religion. They visited the great church of Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom, in Constantinople. That was enough. They came home and told the Prince: "that is where God dwells among men." [15] The "truth" of religion was "proved" by the splendor of art.

With that very brief sketch of O'Malley's four cultures, let me turn directly to the university and the issue of ethical education. The Task Force Report quite naturally and appropriately framed ethics within the assumptions and style of Culture Two: the academic culture. If there is a problem about ethics it is to be addressed in the manner of the modern university through research with the philosophy department as an obvious locus of such endeavor. But is philosophic ethics, academic discourse, the home ground of ethics? If there is a problem with academic discourse it was present from the beginning in the rise of Culture Three: the humanistic culture. Whatever the philosophers may be up to, the orators say that humans learn morality through *stories* not arguments however acute. We start with "the little engine that could" and progress to *The Brothers Karamazov*. From the standpoint of humanistic culture, the academic style fails to move the reader. Petrarch, the great spokesman for Renaissance humanism puts it clearly: "Aristotle teaches what virtue is, I do not deny that, but his lesson lacks the words that sting and set afire and urge toward love of virtue and hatred of vice..."[16] What Renaissance humanists could not find in Aristotle's diffident style, they found in the Latin orators. I quote Erasmus: "Speaking frankly among friends, I can't read Cicero...without sometimes kissing the book and blessing that pure heart...I would rather let all of Scotus and other [scholastic philosophers] perish than the books of a single Cicero or Plutarch."[17]

One of the great Renaissance exploiters of Plutarch was, of course, Shakespeare. When a modern critic like Harold Bloom, calls Shakespeare "the inventor of the human," he is reflecting the claims of humanistic culture. It is the poets who teaches us ethics, how to be human not Aristotle, Scotus and scholastic philosophy. One of the most persistent cries of woe in the modern higher education is "the plight of the humanities." Everyone is studying computers while the reading of Shakespeare languishes. Even departments of English may no longer require reading the Bard. There are no more "classics" from which we must learn — thus the endless wrangles about a "core curriculum." Harold Bloom has been so depressed by the abandonment of humanistic education in the modern university that he has bequeathed his extensive library to little St. Michael's College in Winooski, Vermont because he believes that Catholic *colleges* may be the last refuge of humanistic education.

If one had raised the problem of ethics at the University of Michigan in the days of President Angell, one would have been referred to the dominance of the rhetorical and humanistic tradition in the course of studies. There was plenty of Cicero and Plutarch and the Bible. Morality was whatever Shakespearean heroes and Christian saints were doing and the task of education was "epideictic" a fancy type of rhetoric which might be literally translated "talk it up" or as Petrarch says, find "words that sting."

---

[15] O"Malley, 179

[16] O'Malley, 150 Petrarch, "On His Own Ignorance and that of Many Others" in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer (Chicago, 1971).

[17] O'Malley, 161 from "The Godly Feast" in Thompson *Colloquies*, 1.192

When the Michigan legislature investigated President Angell's "Christian" commitment for the University they discovered — whether they recognized it or not — that the education was really "humanistic" with a religious patina. In Angell's liberal Christianity, Jesus was a moral teacher and exemplar, not "God with us" in some metaphysical sense. Angell's Michigan offers a clear example of how any one of the four cultures can be subtly reconstructed -- or utterly subverted -- by appropriating it's terms in a different style. The twentieth century theologian, Karl Barth, asserted a *prophetic* voice against the *humanistic* style when he rejected liberal Christianity on the grounds that "one cannot speak of God by speaking about man in a loud voice." Martin Luther asserted a *prophetic* voice in opposition to the *academic* style of the medieval scholastics: "I have the strongest doubts as to whether Thomas Aquinas is among the damned or the blessed...[He] is responsible for the reign of Aristotle, the destroyer of Godly doctrine."[18]

Barth's and Luther's comments illustrate the sort of fundamental clash of cultures that may be the unrecognized infrastructure of ethical conflicts. James Burrill Angell, Karl Barth, Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther all use Christian language but frame their discourse within strikingly different cultures. If you read any one of the cultures from the "obvious" assumptions of another, incomprehension, rejection and polemic emerge. I quote O'Malley on how the cultures degenerate. In cross-cultural polemic one naturally regards the other culture as a degenerate form of your superior methodology!

> Fanaticism is never far from [prophetic] culture. [Academic] culture must fight the tendency to feed upon itself and to slide into a sterile intellectualism, carping and corrosive in its analysis of everything that crosses its path. [Humanistic] culture ...harbors a weakness for platitudes and a tendency to mistake them for solutions. [Artistic] culture [slides] into kitsch, "entertainment", smoke and mirrors.[19]

To academics and humanists, prophets are "fanatics"; to prophets, academics are pedants and humanists are wishy washy. So it goes!

Not only do I think that the four of the cultural voices are present in contemporary higher education, I will make the outrageous suggestion that one can pretty well divide the university constituencies according to cultural style. The faculty are clearly in the academic style. The president is in the humanistic style being as she must be a "statesperson" seeking balance and harmony. (She runs the risk of being accused of uttering platitudes by those attuned to the hard styles. As a former president, I confess that uttering platitudes is part of the job description!) Finally, I give the prophetic voice to the students — a claim which I will expand on at the conclusion of this paper. The artistic style does not seem to belong to any constituent so let me attend to this benign presence before turning to the clash of cultures on campus. I concentrate on the art which is an obvious reality of the university: architecture.

It may be no accident that no university constituency pays attention to architecture. The original universities of the 12th and 13th centuries began with no apparent interest the art.. Architecture was not even a fact of university life. A prominent site of the University of Paris

---

[18] O'Malley, 106 (From Luther *Works,* 32:258 "Against Latomus")
[19] O'Malley. 235

was the *Rue de Fouarre*: the Street of Straw where students sat in rented rooms on bundles of hay. It is not until the fifteenth century that university seals feature a building.

Given a history of university inattention to architecture what lesson, of any, is carried in the architecture at the University of Michigan? At the risk of offending my generous hosts, I note that Thomas A. Gaines in his 1991 book, *The Campus as a Work of Art* characterizes the University of Michigan campus as "banal"— a "missed opportunity" for good campus planning.[20] I leave refutation of that dour claim to local experts. I turn to a safer area: the early architectural history of the university. The earliest architecture had a definite educational lesson.

The earliest campus plan for the University was drawn up in 1838 by Andrew Jackson Davis, the most outstanding college architect of the time. Davis was an eclectic and he submitted two plans: one in Greek revival style, the other in "Collegiate Gothic" — a term which he seems to have created.[21] Davis' Greek or Gothic styles came with what one commentator called "the tendrils of memory and affection"[22] Either style fit the humanistic ethics of the 19th century university which sought to convey the classical virtues through "memory and affection."

Now, as a matter of fact, Davis' plan was never actually implemented. The earliest buildings of the University carried yet another lesson — not Gothic or Greek, but distinctively American. A painting of the campus in 1856 by Jasper Francis Cropsey shows a straight row of very simple rectangular buildings. Placing the university buildings in the open, facing the street, symbolized for the builders the vital interaction between the university and the city. The architectural arrangement fit the character of a pragmatic public university.

Does present day Michigan send a message about education through architecture? Early Michigan did not get either Greek or Gothic but take the cover of the current University of Michigan undergraduate admissions brochure. One can assume that the well paid designers of this brochure intended to send some message about higher education at U Mich. What to we see? The stately columns of a Greek temple. Is the message classical character?

I cannot resist drawing a two continuing lessons from the fate of Davis' 1838 plan for the Michigan campus. First: it was never executed because funds were insufficient. That has a familiar ring! Second: students who complain about dorm rooms in Markley — it is described in "the College Prowler" as a "50's barrack"[23] — may think that the spirit of Andrew Jackson Davis survives. He classified his collegiate work in the same category as asylums and prisons!

Mentioning asylums and prisons offers me an unlikely segue to the place of the prophetic culture on the contemporary campus. "Prison" is a powerful breeding ground for the prophetic voice. Old Testament prophecy grew on the experience of Egyptian slavery and Babylonian exile. "Let my people go!" Are there prisons and prophets on today's campus? They may be as invisible to the academic eye as the architecture. I cite, however, a notable University of Michigan prophetic voice, a famous editor of the *Michigan Daily*, the first president of the Students for a Democratic Society, S.D.S, Tom Hayden. Did campus prisons create his prophetic ways? Not quite, but I quote Hayden's characterization of dorm life freshmen year,

---

[20] Thomas A. Gaines, *The Campus as a Work of Art* (New York, Praeger, 1991) p. 120.

[21] Paul Venable Turner, *Campus: An American Planning Tradition* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984) p.124.

[22] Ibid. 120

[23] *University of Michigan*, (Pittsburgh: College Prowler, 2005) 57

1957.

> Throngs of incoming freshmen like myself...were required to live in massive, unimaginative dormitories that reminded us of urban public housing projects. Making us feel like dots on a grid, the dorms...were divided into floors, corridors and numbered cell like rooms....[24]

Hayden goes on to criticize an indifferent and impersonal education with "distant professors" and badly paid and un-trained T.A.'s. "It soon became obvious to most freshmen that we were un-wanted orphans in the educational hierarchy, an amorphous mass of bodies..."[25] I am not vouching for the accuracy of Hayden's view of the University in 1957 and I am certain it is not true in 2006 (!) but it is certainly how he felt and it was a sentiment broadly expressed in the various student movements of the 1960's in which he was to play such a prominent part.

What is the connection between the prophetic style and a sense of educational orphanage? One of the characteristics of the prophet is that he speaks from a need to be recognized. Like the prisoner he protests he is a name not a number. Remember the slogan from the '60's borrowed from the statement on machine readable registration cards. "I am a student, do not punch, mutilate or staple."

The prophetic voice can go beyond griping about dorms and distant profs, to questioning the very process of education. Like Tertullian, if you have prophetic surety, what need you Athens and the academy! The prophet thinks that truth and morality are so clear that one does not need education, one needs action. Here is Hayden in full prophetic mode. It is the trial of the Black Panthers in New Haven in 1970. "Facts are irrelevant in this [trial]...as facts are irrelevant about Vietnam...A lot of educated people are going to have to be convinced that facts are irrelevant."[26] The prophet is against Athens in the academic, humanistic and even the artistic style. (It is no accident that a prophetic Ulrich Zwingli stripped the churches of Zurich and forbade music in sacred services.) [27]

You may relegate Hayden's proclamations to fanaticism, regarding him as a Michigan aberration. I have assigned the prophetic voice to students. Clearly our students are not all Tom Haydens shouting at the barricades. Given the limits of this talk, I can only suggest a continuing "prophetic" sub-text in contemporary student life. This evening I am giving a talk on the grunge rock band, *Nirvana*. Rock in various flavors and varieties is the music of students. Rock is cast in

---

[24] Tom Hayden *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1988) 26-7.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Yale Alumni Magazine, July/August 2006, p. 45. An article excerpted from *Murder in Model City* by Paul Bass and Doug Rae.

[27] In 1980, Pink Floyd hit the top of the world-wide singles charts with "Another Brick in the Wall":

> We don't need no education
> We don't need no thought control...
> Teachers leave the kids alone.

The Teacher's Association of Great Britain sued the Pinks for defamation.

the prophetic mode. Given its roots in black gospel and the blues, the prophetic strain is not surprising -- but if you want to hear that argument, you have to come to the next talk![28]

Let me conclude by considering one of the major ethical issues on the contemporary campus and how it might be addressed in the four cultures I have outlined. One of the ethical goals repeatedly emphasized in the Task Force report is "diversity." How would the four cultures understand that ethical issue?

The *academic* culture will be both welcoming and rejectionist. In so far as the university like its earliest architecture faces out to the community and the nation beyond, it will welcome diverse racial and ethnic diversity as an exercise in social democracy. All well and good, but the standard *academic* paradigm rejects "deep multi-culturalism." In so far as "science" is the paradigm of truth, in so far as the academic culture is a "hard" culture, it rejects the notion that truth is tied to gender, race, religion, social position and so on. There is no female or male physics. Science demands transcendence of the cultural diversity saluted at the admission's desk.

The direct counter to the academic view of diversity is the prophetic. The prophetic voice always echoes Luther, "Here I stand!" If you are not standing where I am standing as a female, black, gay and so on, you cannot understand me and my values. The academic culture may be happy to study diversity through the lens of, say, cultural anthropology but that is to hold culture at arm's length. There is a profound difference between being a great scholar of religion and being a saint. Prophetic culture is a "hard" culture and will demand that it be voiced by insiders, by true believers. Campus culture wars are usually waged in the accents of prophetism.

How about the humanistic culture on diversity? If I take Harold Bloom's suggestion that Shakespeare is the "inventor of the human" what might old Will say about the urges for diversity in the present day university? He would welcome diversity as he does in his dazzling display of characters in all sites and circumstance. Shakespeare is the inventor of the *human* in a manner which transcends the local — not by the austerities of scientific objectivity — but by deepening our understanding of the other's locale so that we recognize ourselves and our neighbors wherever and whenever. It is significant that it is a *playwright*, the Latin author Terrence who says: *Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto*, I am human, nothing human is alien to me.

The humanistic culture treats diversity differently than the academic and the prophetic. It rejects the incommensurable and incommunicable claim of the prophet. I can understand you "because nothing human is alien to me." Humanistic culture transcends radical "prophetic" particularity but not in the manner of transcending science. When it comes to morals as such, humanistic culture does not seek some moral law akin to the universality of scientific truth nor does it leave morality as a prophetic declaration. In the great "drama" of history, in the clash of characters, a fragile human wisdom emerges.

What about the artistic culture? The admissions brochure suggests that the University of Michigan is some sort of temple. Is it a temple of single god revealed, an austere room where we seek the unknown Truth, or a pantheon of human characters? Maybe it is just PR!

---

[28] One can dismiss it in the negative way that sober educators denounce prophetism: a temporary craze of youthful fans -- fanatic fans. Or as one denounces in the artistic culture: it is mere entertainment. I am not so certain. In the *Republic* Plato says that a change in musical style notes a significant change in culture -- that is why he forbids the Lydian mode in his educational system. (Plato's view on music should be one of the truths in Jack Smart's "little black book."!)

Last word: after all this talk about different cultures, I should state plainly that this talk was written as an exercise in humanistic culture. I recommend the humanistic culture as the most generous culture for dealing with the academy's competing voices. Besides, it is the natural language of college presidents!

Dennis O'Brien
153 Wildflower Lane
Middlebury, Vt. 05753 -8728
(802) 388-1376; 388- 6048 (FAX); gdob@middlebury.edu