Agricultural Ethics at State Universities: Why No Input from the Theologians?

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From its very beginnings, agriculture has been closely related to culture. Wendell Berry makes this point persuasively in his book *The Unsettling of America*—as do a host of other authors.[1] And, as virtually every anthropologist and historian knows, it is not possible to understand a particular culture adequately without dealing with its religious beliefs and practices.

A few hours spent in almost any basic history or anthropology text should dispell any doubts the reader might have about these assertions. In chapter seven of *The Unsettling of America*, which is entitled "The Body and the Earth" and which may well be the best chapter in the entire volume, Berry shows that it is quite impossible to separate the intertwined threads of culture, agriculture, and religion. All are part of a seamless tapestry, and Berry succeeds admirably in showing how they interrelate.

Few modern scholars would dispute Berry's thesis. And indeed, in attempting to relate agriculture and the humanities, not a few professors include a variety of readings from the field of religion. My major course at Cornell University, for instance, is called "Religion, Ethics, and the Environment," and approximately one third of the total assigned reading deals with religion and religious ideas. The very first assignment is Thomas Merton's splendid essay "Rain and the Rhinoceros,"[2] and I have also included material from the Bible, the poetry of Chuang Tzu, Reinhold Niebuhr, C.S. Lewis, Josef Pieper, and others.

Students have responded with enthusiasm to most of these readings, even though some were puzzled at first about how they could shed light on our attitudes towards agriculture and the environment. They had difficulty understanding the intimate connections between religious beliefs and food production and our treatment of nature.

Faculty in many universities, including some state universities, already are making use of religious ideas and texts as a means of furthering our historical understanding of agriculture in its relation to culture. However, in this paper I wish to carry the discussion further by examining how we in the modern university, particularly in state universities, wrestle with *current* policy questions in the area of agriculture and environment. How does religion function and how should it function in connection with seeking answers to questions which we face *today?*

To be very blunt, I think it is fair to say that

religion has been largely excluded from the modern university as a source of insight which might help us wrestle with current policy issues in agriculture and environment. It is now common to find philosophers in universities doing philosophical ethics in connection with the issues of responsibility to future generations, the humane treatment of animals, and the preservation of wilderness lands. Problems of distributive justice, food distribution, and world hunger are also being discussed by philosophical ethicists. Their involvement is gradually increasing our understanding of these issues.

But, apart from a number of Catholic and Evangelical Protestant colleges and universities, it is very uncommon to find theologians *doing* theological ethics in the typical modern university. Such an activity, insofar as it is being carried on at all, is almost always confined to theological seminaries. Religion departments—and, of course, many secular universities such as Cornell, my own institution, have refused to found religion departments—have by and large confined themselves to the descriptive and analytical study of religion and have rigorously avoided any appearance of recommending one set of religious beliefs or values over others. Ironically, when philosophers do philosophical ethics, they regularly recommend one set of beliefs or values over others.

How do we explain such a state of affairs? Is it because theologians have nothing substantive to contribute to the current discussion of agricultural and environmental ethics? I think not.

Because the theological ethicist has not been invited to be part of the mainstream of the intellectual life of most American universities, she cannot directly contribute to the university's debate over current agricultural and environmental policy questions. This is due to particular historical developments in America and to widespread prejudice in academic circles in this country towards religion and theology.

Thomas Jefferson's distinction between sectarian and nonsectarian religion helped set the stage for current attitudes towards religion in public life. Jefferson considered his own Enlightenment morality and religion to be based on science and reason, universally valid, and nonsectarian in nature. They alone deserved to inform the public life of the new nation. By contrast, the beliefs of Christians were sectarian. They were based on dogma, the Bible, and superstition. Jefferson argued for religious freedom—even though he hoped that sectarian religion gradually would give way to his own more enlightened views—but he believed that sectarians should practice their religion only in private, that is, at home or in church. The distinctive beliefs of Catholics and Protestants were not universal in scope and thus should not inform the public life of the nation. Jefferson was convinced that the public square should instead be influenced by rational nonsectarian morality and religion.[3]

Jefferson's position, of course, is theologically, philosophically, and politically far sooner self-serving than it is self-evident. He quite failed to realize that his own Enlightenment views just as clearly involved basic assumptions and faith commitments as did the beliefs of Christians. To hold that his views were based on reason is to misunderstand the nature of reason. They may have been reasonable, but then so were the views of theists of a traditional Christian sort. More than one hundred years ago, Nietzsche convincingly made the point that one cannot move from reason as such to valid moral imperatives.[4] In our own time, Alasdair MacIntyre argues the same point in his book *After Virtue*.[5] Philosophers of science no longer view science as clearly and unambiguously objective in nature. They realize that science involves normative elements (as do all academic disciplines), that all observation is theory-laden, and that natural science gives us one particular way of gaining knowledge about the world we live in. In some respects it is more universal than poetry, drama, or religion; in other respects, less so.

To permit, indeed to encourage, the theologian to do theological ethics in the modern university is, then, not to accord him special privilege. When the philosopher does philosophical ethics, he speaks from a particular point of view and makes certain initial assumptions in a way that is not fundamentally different from what the theologian does. If nothing else, the fact that almost no two philosophers agree on their basic ethical systems should make us suspicious of the claim that they are proceeding from reason but that theologians base their work on particular faith commitments.

Jefferson's distinction between sectarian and nonsectarian religion becomes in our own day roughly the distinction between the religious and the secular. And many Americans, whether inside or outside of academia, view the secular as religiously neutral. Secular philosophy is thought to be based on reason and is contrasted with sectarian religion, which is grounded in faith and therefore not universally valid.

In terms of my analysis, John Dewey is in some ways closer to Jefferson than to our own time. He understood his own materialistic, atheistic philosophy to constitute a new religious

faith. Indeed, he closes his little book *A Common Faith*, published in 1934, a book which outlines his own philosophy, with the words: "Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind [simply not true!]. It remains to make it explicit and militant."[6] Although Dewey was wrong in believing that his philosophy was based on reason while the theology of Christians was based on faith and dogma, he was correct in understanding that his philosophy could and did function as a *religious faith*. Indeed, many atheistic and humanistic thinkers described their philosophies as religious up until the period just after World War II. Perhaps it is more than coincidence that this abandoning of the term "religious" to describe these humanistic philosophies coincided with the increasing hostility of the U.S. Supreme Court towards religion in public education.

The conviction that their own position is based on reason and science and is religion-free leads many secular and humanistic thinkers to claim special privilege for their views. At the same time they seek to exclude theology from public life, insisting that it is based on dogma and revelation and is essentially parochial. Thus, in all seriousness, Sidney Hook can argue that humanistic ethics should be taught in public schools, whereas Christian ethics should be excluded.[7] This position is philosophically naive and politically unfair. It uncritically assumes the neutrality of secular humanism and the nonneutrality of Christianity. It is no more defensible than was Jefferson's original distinction between sectarian and nonsectarian religion and morality.

Many modern academics share Dewey's conviction that philosophical ethics can be based on reason but have abandoned his practice of describing their beliefs as "religious." Instead, they view their thinking as secular and mistakenly believe that the secular can be religiously neutral. As a result, they see no unjustifiable discrimination involved in sponsoring the study of philosophy and the practice of philosophical ethics in the modern state university, while at the same time opposing the hiring of theologians to do theology and theological ethics in these same institutions.

Sometimes this position will be justified by loose references to "the separation of church and state" (a phrase not found in the Constitution) and to the First Amendment. But the First Amendment historically meant that the federal government was prohibited from establishing any national church. It did not mean that the government should separate itself as far as possible from religion as such, and, indeed, some of the founding fathers argued that the very success of the republic depended on the continuing vitality of religion.[8] During his first year as Vice President under the new Constitution, John Adams said: "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other."[9]

In at least one recent decision, the Pawtucket, Rhode Island nativity scene case, the Supreme Court backed away somewhat from the extreme and, in my judgment, historically and legally indefensible position it has taken since World War II.[10]

If it be granted that one cannot move from technical reason as such to moral imperatives and that the philosophical ethicist begins her work with initial assumptions which formally are no different from those of the theologian, then it is a violation of genuine pluralism and of the rich diversity of American culture to refuse to allow Christian or Jewish theologians to do theological ethics in the modern state university. Both theological and philosophical ethics are based on fundamental assumptions which cannot be established by reason as such but rather function as basic faith commitments.

For the state to support the role of the philosopher but not that of the theologian is to give an indefensible state-sponsored advantage to secular thinking and to discriminate unfairly against religious thinking. As far as possible the state should remain neutral in such matters or else get out of the business of running colleges and universities altogether. European practice—for example, at Oxford, Tübingen, or Heidelberg—is in principle far more consistent with the Constitution of the United States than is our own exclusion of theology from the state university. In many European universities theologians work side by side with philosophers in their quest for truth and in their wrestling with current social problems.

Introducing the study of theology and of theological ethics into the modern state university would not only result in greater fairness and be more compatible with the Constitution; it would also provide powerful intellectual resources for thinking about particular policy questions in agriculture and in the natural environment. For instance, philosophers currently are struggling with the question of responsibility to future generations. This issue of intergenerational justice includes, among other things, the question of

how much prime agricultural land we should save for future generations. The writings of various philosophers make clear that this is an extremely difficult question to tackle from within a secular or atheistic framework.[11] On the basis of Enlightenment philosophy and the tradition of English Liberalism, for example, it is not easy to argue for substantial responsibilities to future generations. The social contract theory or the idea of the autonomous self do not obviously lead to a strong sense of intergenerational justice. After all, future people are not present to defend their own interests. Moreover, for philosophers who identify rational behavior with self-interested (perhaps even acquisitive) behavior, adequately to guarantee the interests of future generations is no simple task.[12]

This particular policy issue, however, *can* be dealt with easily and powerfully within a Christian theological framework. The argument is elegantly simple and can follow several different lines. One tack would be to point out that God has created the world, and he values what he has created (cf. Genesis 1:31). This being the case, then it is irreverent to ravage, destroy, and show lack of concern for God's creation. The creation has intrinsic value (or, more accurately, has value to God apart from its instrumental value to human beings) and is not to be dealt with only in utilitarian terms.

An even more powerful argument might be that God is Lord of the future as well as of the past and present. He is also the Father of those who will live in the future, and he loves them just as much as he loves those now living. In light of this, it would be difficult for Christians to say that they love God but have no interest in the well-being of God's children who will live in the future. That would be to claim that it is possible adequately to love God and at the same time to despise or maltreat his beloved children.[13]

A third argument for intergenerational responsibility would emphasize the meaning of the *soma tou Christou,* the body of Christ. Paul teaches that Christians are a part of the living, mystical body of Christ, and that it is through participation in this mystical community of the saints that they achieve their highest identity and fulfillment. But Christians who shall be born one hundred years from now will also be part of this same body. For Christians today to ignore the needs of future generations and to maltreat the land upon which they will depend is for one part of the body to harm another part, thus dishonoring Jesus Christ, who is the head of the body, and also dishonoring fellow Christians to whom they are bound together through mystical communion with Christ.

This very rich tradition of theological interpretation provides much support for the idea of responsibility to future generations. Indeed, the only difficult question for Christians is not whether they are responsible to God for the well-being of future generations but rather how this responsibility should manifest itself: how *much* agricultural land, how *much* of a given natural resource, should be saved for the future. Clearly this is not an easy question in itself, and the work of various secular philosophers such as John Passmore will be of great help in resolving this question. But, at least, Christians have little reason to doubt that they *are* responsible to or for future generations. It is hard to be consistent within the limits of their own professed beliefs and conclude otherwise.

One might object that this analysis provides a basis for how *Christians* should respond to the question of intergenerational justice, but that, since we are a pluralistic society with great divergence of belief, this result is not of general interest. But unless one can demonstrate that there is some universally valid way of doing ethics—a method that would be acceptable to all members of society—then this objection is not altogether relevant. Wherever possible, a pluralistic society should seek common ground for instituting policy. But it is also legitimate for different groups to argue for specific policies based on values which result from or are part of their particular world views. Otherwise, Christians, Jews, humanists, Marxists, atheists, and others would have to admit to some universally valid way of doing ethics (which most clearly do not) or else be excluded from trying to shape public policy in the political realm.[14]

Most universities in contemporary America are in fundamental ways sectarian institutions—both in the sense that they have established secularism as their official operative framework (a secularism which then functions as the established "religion" of the institution) and in the dictionary sense of being "narrowly confined or limited in interest, purpose, and scope" (*Random House Dictionary,* 1967 ed.). Many state universities simply downplay or ignore Christian beliefs and values and thus engage in massive censorship by omission. For instance, the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University offers a program in Human Development and Family Studies. Individual courses deal with such sensitive issues as human sexuality, marriage, and child development. But a cursory look at the curriculum suggests that by and large the College presents one point of view: a secular, humanistic, behavioral science perspective. These are issues about which Christians and Jews have written extensively and fre-

quently in a very sophisticated way. Yet most students are not exposed to these alternative perspectives, except in the most superficial and often distorted manner. The values which underlie the program and the beliefs about human nature which inform it are in many cases in conflict with and undermine basic Christian views. Moreover, the College of Human Ecology is supported by tax funds. The result is that many citizens are forced to support a program which includes strong value commitments opposed to their own and which in many cases assumes and teaches beliefs about human nature and the meaning and purpose of human existence which directly compete with their own deepest religious beliefs. For instance, it is generally simply assumed that the purpose of life is individual self-fulfillment rather than, say, learning how to love God and serve others. And, ironically, the program is carried out under the guise of a pervasive pseudo-scientific objectivity. Why does the state discriminate against Christian beliefs and values in this case and give its massive financial backing to such a competing world view?

Most American universities are sectarian in that they tend simply to assume the truth of values and beliefs which stem from English Liberalism and the Enlightenment. Seldom are students seriously challenged to question English Liberalism's focus on the autonomous self or the equation of rational behavior with self-interested behavior. Seldom are they required to think seriously about the implications of the subjectivism and ethical relativism which pervade so many of these institutions. Most do not even consciously realize the degree to which such universities discriminate against other beliefs and values.

The sectarian quality of the modern university is also apparent in its disproportionate commitment to knowledge as that which gives control, power, and predictability and in its almost total preoccupation with means rather than ends. In light of the fact that science and technology give us enormous power over nature and over other people, is it not fundamentally irresponsible for the university to focus so exclusively on *how* to do things and so little on questioning whether we *ought* to be doing them?

Many secular thinkers who are humanistic in orientation, including some atheists, would agree with these latter criticisms of the modern secular university. The difficult question is what to do about the problem. Some, perhaps most, secular and humanistic thinkers would argue for a greater emphasis on philosophy, philosophical ethics, literature, and other subjects in the humanities. Some would also include the study of religion, as long as this was done in a descriptive, objective, and analytical mode. But my experience suggests that most would seriously object to copying the European pattern of including the theologian and the theological ethicist in the academic mix. They would argue that this would violate the idea of the separation of church and state and the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

So much for my analysis. What solutions do I propose?

Within our present system in which state universities possess a near-monopoly of access to government funding, a good deal more compromise and more of a conscious effort to institutionalize diversity would be in order. If we grant, for instance, that philosophical ethicists have no universally valid way of arriving at ethical truth and that their results are no more obviously based on reason in a purely technical sense than are the results of theological ethicists, then it would seem to make sense to welcome the practitioner of theological ethics into the university.

Which theologians and theological ethicists would be invited would remain a difficult issue. Roughly, this decision could be based on: (1) how widespread a particular tradition is in our society, (2) how much influence it has had in shaping our culture, (3) the education and intellectual qualifications of the individual candidate, and (4) a commitment to see that positions of even fairly small minorities are represented in at least one or more universities. Admittedly, a good deal of compromise and many trade-offs would be necessary for such a system to operate well. But, at least in principle, it would be far less discriminatory and would offer far more genuine freedom and diversity than does our present system of state universities.

My own judgment is that a far better plan would be to move as quickly as possible to disestablish the near-monopoly status which state universities now hold in their access to government funding. This could be done most easily by instituting a scheme of tuition vouchers, similar to the GI Bill, which could be redeemed at any college, university, or seminary that met minimum educational standards. Such a system would provide a great deal more choice than is now available and would do so with a minimum of state entanglement in religion.

Increasingly, the idea of vouchers is being advocated by a variety of writers on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. Thinkers such as John Stuart Mill have for many years recognized the danger of government's being too much involved in directing education. In his classic essay, *On Liberty*, Mill wrote:

> That the whole or any large part of the education of the people should be in State hands, I go so far as anyone in deprecating. . . . A general State education is a mere contrivance for molding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mold in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government, whether this be a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, *or the majority of the existing generation,* in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body [emphasis mine].[15]

With a system of tuition vouchers, funds would no longer be paid directly to state universities but would be given to individual students in the form of educational vouchers or entitlements. These vouchers could be redeemed at participating institutions. To be eligible to receive vouchers, schools would have to agree not to discriminate on the basis of race or national origin. It would also be possible to equalize opportunity by arranging for the value of the voucher to be inversely related to the income levels of the student or the student's family.

Within a voucher system, the sensitive problem of deciding which theologians should be included in the faculties of state universities would be less critical, for students who did not like the mix at a particular institution (or in state universities as a total group) would have other options which they could afford economically. They could attend nongovernment secular or religious schools without financial prejudice. In fairness, however, it would still be important for state universities to work for greater diversity in faculty and curriculum—although perhaps in terms of the total set of institutions rather than within each individual university.

In summary, culture and agriculture are intimately related, and culture cannot be understood properly apart from the study of religious beliefs and values. At present, many educators wrongly assume the religious neutrality of philosophy and philosophical ethics and thus see no injustice when these disciplines, but not theology and theological ethics, are included in the curriculum of state universities. This situation not only is indefensible philosphically, politically, and Constitutionally, but it also denies students and faculty who are wrestling with agricultural and environmental policy questions exposure to the insights of theological ethicists. This unfortunate situation can be corrected by insisting on more diversity of faculty and disciplines within existing state universities, and perhaps even more effectively by instituting a universal system of education vouchers which could be used at all institutions—secular or religious—meeting minimum educational standards.

Notes

1. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America,* New York: Avon Books, 1977.
2. Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros," in *Raids on the Unspeakable,* New York: New Directions, 1964, pp. 9–23.
3. See discussion in Rockne McCarthy, Donald Oppewal, Walfred Peterson, and Gordon Spykman, *Society, State, and Schools,* Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1981, pp, 81–86; also Rockne McCarthy, James Skillen, and William Harper, *Disestablishment a Second Time: Genuine Pluralism for American Schools,* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian University Press, 1982, pp. 15–29.
4. See discussion in Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* Notre Dame, Indiana: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, pp. 101–113.
5. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* Notre Dame, Indiana: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.
6. John Dewey, *A Common Faith,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934, p. 87.
7. Sidney Hook, "Is Secular Humanism a Religion?", *The Humanist* 36, no. 5 (September-October 1976), pp. 5–7.
8. Robert L. Cord, *Separation of Church and State: Historical Fact and Current Fiction,* New York: Lambeth Press, 1982.
9. Quoted in Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character,* Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, p. 79.
10. *Lynch v.Donnelly,* 104 S.Ct. 1355 (1984).
11. See especially John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature,* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974, pp. 73–100.
12. See C.B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism,* London: Oxford University Press, 1962.
13. This argument is similar to one which John Passmore, writing in a purely secular context, makes in *Man's Responsibility for Nature,* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974, pp. 87–88.
14. See Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square,* Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans, 1984.
15. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty,* 1859. Quoted from *Selected Writings of John Stuart Mill,* ed. Maurice Cowling, New York: New American Library, 1968, p. 220.