

Then and Now: Pushing Christianity Out of Education

Steven D. Smith

Deja vu. The Fourth Century witnessed a major culture war, as paganism and Christianity struggled for mastery in the Roman Empire. The theaters of conflict were diverse. One major struggle was over public symbols: so the shrine to the pagan goddess Victory, placed outside the Senate house by the emperor Augustus, was maintained, then removed, then reinstated, then removed again, and later fiercely fought over as pagan and Christian emperors succeeded each other. Sexual morality was another major subject of difference and sometimes of legislation. Thus, historian Kyle Harper argues that sexual morality “came to mark the great divide between Christians and the world.”¹

Another crucial if less conspicuous arena of conflict involved education. Upon assuming power in 361, the fervently pagan emperor Julian did not revert to the crude and violent methods of the “Great Persecution” of a half-century earlier, in which Christians had been rounded up, tortured, and executed. Julian’s was a more subtle approach. While officially announcing a policy of religious toleration, he restored pagan public symbols and sacrifices, preferred pagans for high office, and declined to discipline the pagan mob that murdered the bishop of Cappadocia. But his most portentous policy consisted of systematically paganizing the schools.

In this vein, Julian decreed that Christians would be ineligible to teach the core subjects. There was an official rationale for this policy, of course. The pagan classics of Virgil, Homer and company were central to the curriculum, Julian argued, and the pagan gods were integral to those classics; so people who did not believe in the gods—namely Christians—were unqualified to teach that curriculum. The rationale was perhaps not utterly implausible (although even Julius’s pagan admirer, the historian Ammianus Marcellinus, condemned the ban for its intolerance). Be that as it may, the likely—and calculated—consequence of the ban was readily apparent. The law was “a masterstroke,” Adrian Murdoch observes: it “marginalized Christianity to the point where it could potentially have vanished within a generation or two, and without the need for

¹ Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity*, 85 (Harvard University Press, 2016).

physical coercion.”² Princeton historian G.W. Bowersock observes that “[w]ithin little more than a generation the educated elite of the empire would be pagan.”³

Had Julian not been killed in an ill-advised invasion of Persia, the strategy just might have worked. After all, if Christians are marginalized, and if the upcoming generation receives an entirely pagan education, what would you expect to happen?

Parallels to our own culture wars are hard to miss. Once again, controversies arise over public symbols: crosses, nativity scenes, the words “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance. Once again, sexual morality (along with the related issue of marriage) marks a huge gulf between traditional Christian or biblical and other views. And once again, there is a struggle over the institutions where future leaders and generations are formed—namely, the schools. Including, though not limited to, the nation’s colleges and universities.

Someone who came to the issue from the classical liberal perspective of, say, John Stuart Mill might think that, ideally, students who go to universities ought to be sympathetically exposed to a diversity of perspectives and worldviews, religious and non-religious. So they ought to be able to associate in a variety of religious and non-religious organizations, and to learn from faculty with a range of religious and non-religious perspectives. Probably there are institutions of higher education that do indeed retain such classical liberal commitments. But under the pressure of the culture wars, that older liberal philosophy of pedagogy has become endangered.

Instead, recent years have witnessed a sustained effort in higher education to eliminate or marginalize persons or groups with traditional Christian views and commitments. Often, as in antiquity, sexual morality has been the crucial dividing line. Thus, Christian student groups committed to traditional sexual morality have been decertified and marginalized. A faculty member at a professedly Catholic university was suspended for publicly criticizing a colleague who forbade students to speak against same-sex marriage. Conversely, at last report, the same university has taken no action against students who vandalized an anti-abortion exhibit.

An adjunct professor at a major Midwestern public university, hired to teach a class on Catholic social thought, was suspended allegedly for teaching natural law doctrine that the university deemed “hateful” with respect to homosexuality. At another major public university, a speaker

² Adrian Murdoch, *The Last Pagan: Julian the Apostate and the Death of the Ancient World*, 139 (Inner Traditions, 2008).

³ G.W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate*, 84 (Harvard University Press, 1997).

was cited for disorderly conduct after students complained that they were offended by his statements about sex and STDs. Instances proliferate.⁴

Perhaps the most ominous measure was a bill in California that would have denied state financial assistance to students attending religious universities that adhered in their policies to traditional Christian sexual morality. On the verge of enactment, the bill provoked sustained resistance and was withdrawn, but its sponsor vowed to bring it back again in the future. If adopted, the measure would put Christian colleges to a difficult choice: sign onto a policy that is incompatible with their Christian commitments, or else suffer crippling financial disadvantages.

Such measures and actions are, of course, not promoted under the heading of suppressing Christianity. They are offered, instead, as means of promoting equality, civility and, ironically, inclusiveness. Nor do the proponents such measures purport to oppose religious freedom. Students whose Christian club is decertified are still free to believe and practice their faith, they say— just without the university support that a host of other student associations receive. Christian colleges subjected to a measure like the one proposed in California can still attempt to carry on, albeit at a considerable economic disadvantage.

And yet the cumulative effect of such measures, if they are successful, would be to ensure that the upcoming generations of doctors, lawyers, educators, politicians, scientists, executives, salespeople, and policy-makers will nearly all have been educated in institutions in which “progressive” perspectives have been consistently inculcated while traditional Christian perspectives have been excluded, marginalized, undermined, and condemned. As with Julian’s ban, what would you expect the long-term consequences of this policy to be?

For serious Christians, and also for the dwindling remnant of classical or even 1950s- and 1960s-style liberals, it is an ominous prospect. Which is why the efforts to marginalize traditional Christianity on campuses, various and subtle as those efforts are, need to be identified and resisted.

Steven D. Smith is the Warren Distinguished Professor of Law at San Diego University School of Law and author of *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom* (Harvard University Press, 2014)

⁴ These and other similar instances are reported and discussed in Mary Eberstadt, *It’s Dangerous to Believe: Religious Freedom and Its Enemies* (Harper, 2016).