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The Value of Attending a Religious University

If there is any single question that I am tired of hearing, it would have to be "Oh, are you Catholic?" Not that I have anything against Catholics, of course, but just because I hear it so often, and always in the same context. Whenever anyone asks what college I go to and I tell them Regis University, the follow-up question is always the same: "Oh, are you Catholic?" The most baffling place I get that question is at my church--a Methodist church, the church I was baptized and raised in, the church I go to every Sunday. The person next to me in the pew asks where I go to school. I tell him that I go to Regis University. He answers, "Oh, are you Catholic?" "No, sir." "Are your parents Catholic?" "No, sir, we're Protestants." "Oh, that's interesting."

I never really elaborate on why I chose Regis when that happens because I assume that they already think I'm kind of nutty for being a good Methodist girl that goes to a Catholic school. But the reason why I chose Regis and why my parents supported that decision was very clear. When I was talking with my mom about choosing a school, she told me that even though it was the most expensive choice, it might look more attractive to medical schools if I had a degree from Regis than if I had the same degree from the University of Colorado Denver just because Regis is a private Catholic school and UCD is a public secular school. But is that actually true? Is a degree from a religiously-based school really worth more than its secular equivalent?

To help answer this question, I would like to first look at the essential differences between religiously-affiliated schools and secular schools in the classroom. At secular research schools like UCD, religion is only explicitly taught in religious courses, which is to be expected since it's a public school. Marian de Souza, a professor at a Catholic university, explains why religious learning and spiritual learning (which are very closely tied together) have a better place in religious institutions when she explains that "Spiritual learning is usually ignored in the state education system and, with religion, is viewed as something separate, to be addressed elsewhere, for instance, in religious oriented schools" (167). However, those different religious schools have different views on when to bring religion into courses that aren't explicitly about religion. In a survey of faculty at various religious colleges by scholars at Baylor University, the faculty were asked what they think is the ideal way to integrate religion into all of the different types of classrooms. The results of the survey concluded that most of the faculty fell in either one of two camps: it's best to integrate religion systematically in every subject area, or religion should only be integrated as the opportunities arise in the various disciplines, but not systematically (Lyon et al., 67). So while religion is integrated differently in religious schools, it is still integrated somehow. In contrast to religious schools, some secular schools do not even require any classes in religion in order to graduate, so religion is not a necessary component to their education at all.

So now, seeing that as the main difference between the two types of schools, I'd like to start examining what value those different types of education contributes to a college degree. Now, even though the word "value" itself has many different definitions, the definition I'll be using is simply "a thing regarded as worth having" (OED).

There are people, unlike my mother, who believe that attending a religious university actually decreases the value of that education because the universities are somewhat trapped by their religious identity. In an article published by two professors from two private Christian universities, they found that the apparent dilemma is that universities either have to choose between religious identity or academic reputation--having both may not be a feasible option (Swezey and Ross, 99). It appears that the general trend is currently favoring academic reputation over religious identity. In 1881, 80% of universities were church related and private, and in 2001, that number dropped down to only 20% of the total amount of universities. (StateUniversity.com) This is even the case with many schools thought to be the elite schools in the United States. After all, Yale, Brown, Dartmouth, Princeton, Harvard, Chicago, and Duke all stemmed from religious roots, but they all now contain only vestiges of their former religious identities (Mixon, Lyon, and Beaty, 401). Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, both sociologists from Harvard University, maintained that a religious university "that wants to compete in this market is unlikely to have much success unless it reinterprets its denominational commitments in largely secular terms or else gives them the flavor of snob appeal rather than piety" (329), which is why schools like Notre Dame are still alive and thriving because of that "snob appeal", even though it technically is still a Catholic school. In other words, religious schools have to sell out their religious identities in order to attract more of the well-to-do students with its snobbishness. As if being pious was a bad thing or something to be ashamed of!

That is something that I just can't get behind. By just focusing on the idea of an academic reputation, the critics of religious schools overlook the deeper idea of what exactly a religious school can offer to a student that is strictly unique to religious institutions. Colin

Armstrong, one of my best friends, just graduated from college and has experience on both sides of the issue--he went to two state schools, and two religious schools, and his degree is from Methodist University. One thing that he said that he absolutely loved about being on a Christian campus was that "it was almost impossible to be on campus and not be exposed in some way to the Christian faith, and the reason why it was so beautiful is because there was a genuine feel on campus about what Christianity actually stands for as opposed to just what the bias for it is." That was one thing that I didn't expect to hear, and it seems very simple, but I think that it connects an idea of the university that is found everywhere: a university is somewhere you go to seek and find the truth. I think that this is where a religious college actually offers more to its students than its secular counterpart. Where knowledge is gained at both types of schools, the difference in the environment allows students to really understand what a religion preaches and to live it out if they agree with it instead of just listening to lectures about the key parts of a religion.

One other thing that Colin said that really stood out to me was that there was one student that he knew that was a through-and-through "science kid", as he put it, that was really skeptical about how science and religion could coexist. However, one day when Colin walked into the chapel, he saw that student there for the first time. When he went up to that student to talk to him, the student told him that the Christian university "offered that opportunity for him to explore different avenues of living", and it changed how he saw that connection between science and religion. That university offered a unique avenue that he wouldn't have had at a state secular school just because of the fact that it's a private religious college. It made him open his eyes to new ideas, which helped him change his way of living. Having religion and faith as a part of the

curriculum is what broadened his viewpoints and showed him a connection that he either didn't know was there or denied even existed earlier.

That experience of forging a new connection between subject matter follows exactly what John Henry Newman's idea of knowledge is in *The Idea of a University*, and acquiring knowledge is, in a way, one of the endgames of a student in a university. Newman's idea is that "all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and the work of the Creator" (99). Being able to make those connections is, I believe, one of the most important and critical processes of learning. It shows a mastery of the material by applying it to separate, and maybe seemingly unrelated, fields, just like the student at the Christian university was able to make the connection between science and religion. The Christian university gave that student the opportunity to make that connection in a way that a public school couldn't, and I would argue that he was much better off being at the Christian school because I really doubt that would have happened at a public school.

I think this happens because religious schools take a more holistic approach to education instead of the sole focus just being on acquiring knowledge. Religious schools not only focus on knowledge, but also on questions of morals and ethics. For example, one of the biggest questions on campus here at Regis is "how ought we to live?", and help in answering that question can be found in many areas on campus, both outside and inside of the classroom. Inside of the classroom, that can be found in the integrated core curriculum. The integrated core curriculum at Regis is not what I think of when I think of traditional classes. The integrated core classes focus on how we can better ourselves as well as improving different aspects of the world around us, and passing all four classes is required for graduation.

However, the complicated part of that situation is that it's sort of a trade-off between learning morals and ethics and learning just strictly for knowledge. In cases like this, it could be easy for some to say that taking classes like "Search for Meaning" and "Justice and the Common Good" is a waste of university resources because universities should be teaching facts and should be more strictly focused on knowledge. You can search for meaning almost anywhere outside of a classroom, they could say, and you can come to your own conclusions about what exactly the "common good" is by living out in the real world, instead of just sitting in a classroom and learning about it in theoretical terms.

One key thing that is missing in that perspective is that the learning from all of the integrative core classes can be supplemented by other outside-of-the-classroom opportunities that Regis offers like service learning projects and the study abroad program, so it takes that learning and puts it out there in the real world. Regis has quite a few different service learning opportunities through volunteering in the community and with Father Woody's program. If the topic of gang violence in communities was brought up, there's a service learning project to help at-risk kids. That way, the knowledge of the problem is gained as well as making a connection with someone that actually has firsthand experience with the problem. There are even service learning opportunities that directly relate to the integrative core class called "Global Environmental Awareness". To go along with that, there are three different environmentally-centered service learning opportunities all about sustainable solutions to global problems, so that learning isn't just confined to the classroom. In addition to that, it isn't as if those are the only classes that students have to take. It's a liberal arts school, so students get a dose of the "hard sciences" and math classes, as well. The students at religious schools like Regis just get extra

classes to help promote that sense of global community and awareness, which not only benefits the student, but others around them.

Even in science classes where it mostly is all about facts and vocabulary words, at religious schools, specifically Regis, it's expanded to Jesuit values and ethics and what would be most beneficial to everyone. A good example of this happened just this last week in my biology lab. In class, we were throwing around all kinds of fancy science vocabulary like "gram-negative bacteria" and "nosocomial infections" and talking about the problem of antibiotic resistant bacteria. However, the conversation didn't stop there. We had to think about different groups of people that are affected by the antibiotic industry (like pharmaceutical companies, epidemiologists, and livestock workers) and come up with pros and cons for reducing the use of antibiotics for those specific groups of people. That was easy enough, but there was more. Then, we had to start thinking about the common good and what solution would accomplish the greatest possible good for the greatest possible number of individuals, following the Jesuit focus on fostering the common good. That's when it got difficult. That's when we really had to start thinking about the consequences of different actions and how it would impact different people. We had to take a theoretical problem and draw out its real world implications, and as a result, we had to think hard about what would really be the best way to solve a real-world problem.

All of the integrated core classes, service learning, and thinking about the common good follows an idea that de Souza mentions in her article that the most successful educational program is perhaps one "that is designed to give students the ability to access and nurture their inner lives, to develop their sense of self and to promote a feeling of connectedness to the Other in their community, world and beyond" (167). She argues that it can only be found at a religious

school because the political sphere errs on the side of caution when it comes to teaching anything that could be remotely considered spiritual in a public school, so most of the programs like the one mentioned are exclusively found at religious schools. By not having programs like this that focus on the spiritual building part of education, de Souza argues, it creates an environment where "competition, fragmentation and division are promoted" and it prevents students from "providing meaning and purpose in their everyday life, and perhaps preparing them to be purposeful and hope-filled citizens of the future" (167). Having the educational programs that religious schools have that focus on values does, incidentally enough, increase the value of the education that students receive because it enhances their lives and the lives of those around them because they're able to see past that environment of competition and really begin to be purposeful people.

Although the value of education itself may only seem to concern students and professors, it in fact concerns just about everyone that the students come in contact with. The student enriches his or her own life through a values-based education system like those found in religious universities, and it improves their relationships with other people because they can come to be more empathic people through what they're taught in school. They're not just people with knowledge and a degree—they're people that understand their own world and how it relates to the world around them. Going through that values-centered education world affect every sphere of their life, from their home life to their work life and beyond that. The schools that did make the switch from being religious to secular or religious to only snobbish failed to see that in dropping their religious values-centered education, they were also dropping the quality and value of the education that they were doling out, making their education less of a thing worth having than that of their religiously-centered counterparts.

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