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Catholic universities are losing their autonomy

Pat Perriello | Nov. 4, 2013 NCR Today

Catholic universities in the United States used to serve as beacons of academic freedom and intellectual curiosity. They explored a variety of ideas and points of view from across the spectrum of thought. Under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the American bishops have little by little proceeded to exert more and more control over the operation of Catholic institutions of higher learning. They seem more interested in demanding a Catholic identity than in promoting a rigorous and vibrant intellectual community.

The controversy that arose over the refusal to allow President Barack Obama to speak at the University of Notre Dame is one example of this tendency. Many other speakers have also been disinvited at various universities. Such heavy-handed measures go against the grain of what a real university is supposed to be about. Autonomy, which should be expected in such centers of learning, is being eroded. This trend is particularly evident in this article at Inside Higher Ed [1], which highlights a number of disturbing changes that seem to be occurring at this time.

The article notes that Santa Clara and Loyola Marymount universities have dropped coverage for elective abortions. Providence College canceled its birth control coverage the previous year. Providence also banned a speaker advocating marriage equality from speaking on campus. Faculty members were particularly upset because of the lack of faculty input into such decisions.

It is important to note that these insurance plans and policies had been in place for many years. It was understood that an insurance plan provides a variety of benefits that each insured person may or may not use. Also, these Catholic universities employed individuals from a wide range of backgrounds who would be expected to make important contributions to the entire student body. It was not expected that all employees adhere to some strict code of Catholic morality. There are now concerns that such changes may reduce diversity on campus and force some valuable employees to consider other offers in more friendly environments.

The timing is particularly disconcerting. Tampering with ordinary insurance policies did not seem to occur to anyone until the bishops decided to make the Affordable Care Act their pet project. Behind the scenes, the bishops are calling the shots at institutions in their dioceses. They are choosing to interfere with the operation of what have been shining lights of Catholic education.

The bishops still have difficulty understanding that it is simply not right for them to compel all their employees to follow Catholic doctrine. In fact, they have an obligation to provide all of their employees with services that meet their needs, even if they may not conform to every point of Catholic teaching. That is what religious freedom is all about. That, I believe, represents the spirit of Pope Francis.

Apparently, Francis still has a lot of work to do.

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[1] http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/10/23/some-professors-fear-catholic-colleges-are-ignoring-call-pope-focus-less-abortion