

**The *Vagina Monologues* and Gonzaga's Jesuit, Catholic, Humanist  
Mission and Identity  
Gonzaga Socratic Club, Friday, October 21, 2011  
David H. Calhoun**

The classic authoritative studies of religious identity in American higher education are George M. Marsden's *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (Oxford, 1996) and *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* by Fr. Frank Tunstead Burtchell, C.S.C. (Eerdmans, 1998). These sources show clearly that institutions that do not actively and affirmatively nurture their religious identity and mission inevitably drift away from that mission toward neutralism and eventually secularization. They further show that this process is rarely the product of insistent and dedicated secularists moving the institution away from its religious character. Rather, the shift is typically an incremental process driven by well-meaning, often deeply religious faculty and administrators who repeatedly assert the rights and perquisites of academic freedom against the strictures of institutional church sponsors.

In April 2011 Gonzaga University officially hosted a performance of Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*. In my view, the controversies provoked by this university decision reflect a wider crisis of identity and mission at Gonzaga. If Marsden and Burtchell are right (as I believe their evidence demonstrates), then the mission and identity of an institution of higher education are embodied in its faculty and administration, curriculum and programs (especially its core curriculum), its co-curricular activities, and the public "face" it presents to the community, especially parents of prospective students, alumni, and donors. As such, an officially sanctioned performance of the *Vagina Monologues* is only a minor part of the entire way that Gonzaga represents itself and conceives of itself. So I'd like to say a few things about mission and the *VM*, which pretty quickly will move away from the *VM* specifically to larger issues.

**There are far better tools to highlight and critically respond to violence against women than the *VM*.**

Proponents of the *VM* argue, in keeping with author Eve Ensler's very successful PR campaign, that the play is a protest against violence against women. Of course, proponents defend the play on other grounds as well. For example, in the spring, a faculty-student panel enthusiastically endorsed the *VM* as a piece of consciousness-raising political theater, a weapon to shatter societal sexual taboos, a valuable means for challenging institutional Roman Catholic patriarchy and hegemony, a way to hear the silenced voices of women, and a way to stand in Christian solidarity and love with those who have been harmed by violence. Others suggested that the play offered an essential way for us to live out the Jesuit mission of bringing the gospel to the edges of culture, or following the instruction of Pope John Paul II in seeking the truth on matters of controversy.

I find the *VM* a poor tool for promoting critical inquiry into violence against women or the silencing of women's voices. I have many reasons for this judgment, among which I would include the following:

- Many of the individual monologues do not even address violence.
- Some monologues are awkward and rather juvenile attempts to generate humor by repeated pronouncements of "forbidden" words, while others are goofy attempts to normalize conversation about genitalia.
- The women's voices that we hear are filtered through the interests, questions, authorial objectives, political motivations, and editorial intervention of Eve Ensler rather than being allowed to speak for themselves.
- A vast range of female voices is silenced by omission.
- The overall theme of the *Vagina Monologues* is not so much violence against women as sexual liberation and the rejection of basic tenets of traditional sexual morality and Christian teaching on human good and sexuality.
- The focus on genitalia objectifies women and reduces female identity to sexuality and sexual activity.
- Even defenders of the play admit that the play is of poor literary quality.
- Much of the rhetoric of the play consists of exuberant and sophomoric attempts to shock the bourgeoisie.
- The play targets all manner of social taboos, without acknowledging that some taboos protect human dignity.

For these reasons and many more, I conclude that there are many texts and sources that offer far better educational potential to address violence against women than the *Vagina Monologues*.

**At the very least, public presentation of an event such as the *VM* cries out for a critical academic framing.**

When the performance of the *VM* was announced by the Gonzaga administration, we were assured that the performance would be part of an "interdisciplinary academic exploration." In particular, we were promised that the events of the spring would together constitute an impartial search for truth, of the sort envisioned by John Paul II in *Ex Corde Ecclesia*, and focused on the relationship between "the issue of violence against women [and] themes of Catholic theologies of the body and Catholic teaching on sexuality." As it turned out, however, the performance of the *VM* on Sunday was preceded by a panel of speakers who enthusiastically endorsed the performance of the play, and by a second event linking storytelling to social justice. Neither event raised any objections or criticisms of the play in any formal way, or placed the play into a critical academic framework.

Many people expected a talk scheduled a week after the play performance to provide some balance. The talk was described on a number of occasions as treating "Catholic theology of the body," which led many to anticipate something like John Paul II's well-known philosophy of the body and sexuality. The AVP formally advertised the event as a guest lecture by Dr. James Halstead, O.S.A., of DePaul University, on the topic of "Catholic perspectives on violence and broken bodies." In the end, however, Fr. Halstead spoke

instead on pluralism in Catholic Universities (about which more in a moment). In the end, therefore, there was *not a single formal statement of Catholic teaching on human sexuality* presented along with the performance of the *VM* (though a bibliography including some authoritative church documents was made available at the Monday panel).

It is hard to see how there is a genuine academic conversation seeking the truth when the teaching of the church is not even allowed to present one voice among many in an academic conversation. I think that hosting an officially sanctioned performance of the *VM*, outside of a critical academic framework, is bad pedagogy and irresponsible exercise of academic freedom. For in performing the play, we do not equip our students to see what might be constructive and destructive about it. Instead, we invite them to consume it as rhetorical subjects, carried along by its emotive power. This is not education, it is “consciousness-raising”—or what we might call propaganda.

**Academic freedom requires critical judgment about educational aims and methods, and must be exercised in a responsible way.**

The academic freedom that Gonzaga faculty and students enjoy is a commission to seek the truth by exploring ideas critically. However, academic freedom is not and never has been a blanket license to do or say anything whatsoever in an academic context. Faculty limit themselves by multiple judgments of practicality, pedagogy, professionalism, and ethics in choosing how best to promote critical reflection on the part of our students. Speaking for myself, I encourage study of controversial and painful topics, such as racism, sexual violence, and injustice, but professional practice demands that I avoid needless controversy and offense when doing so. Investigation of human sexuality does not justify live onstage demonstrations of sex toys (as recently occurred at Northwestern University), just as academic study of racism does not necessitate public readings of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Responsible exercise of academic freedom therefore requires informed professional judgment.

**Mission and identity should be conceived less as a set of rules about what is “censored” or “restricted” and more in terms of what an institution stands for and promotes.**

Opposition to performance of the *VM* and other controversial events is often attacked as “censorship,” with the suggestion that any such opposition is a violation of academic freedom. My view that the University should not officially sanction events such as the *VM* does not commit me to the position that the *VM* should be “banned.” I actually find the idea that any person or institution in the United States can “ban” a text near laughable. For Gonzaga to fail to endorse or sponsor a performance of a play, or for a professor to choose not to use a text in a class, is not to “ban” the play or text. I do not ban texts that I refrain from choosing to use in my courses. Students are free to consult and study them as they wish, and to bring the ideas they find in them into the classroom as they are appropriate. The *VM* should have exactly the same status at Gonzaga.

I find it helpful to think of library collection policies as an analogy to the identity an institution develops for itself. Library collections cannot include every publication published, even by major academic publishers, much less every volume issued by every trade, vanity, and independent press. Instead, a university library typically collects in areas that reflect the strengths and emphases of the University, its programs, and ultimately its identity. For example, Gonzaga's library collections feature particularly strong holdings in philosophy and philosophical theology, especially Catholic neo-Thomist thought, as a result of the fact that the library of the old Saint Michael's Institute was donated to the University library when SMI was closed in 1997 (and also given that some of these collection emphases have been continued). On this model, Jesuit Catholic identity (or more broadly, any identity assumed by an institution) has to do with the positive emphases it chooses to make in its choices, recommendations, and actions. What is omitted is much less important than what is affirmatively included.

The problem is the reality of pluralism. If there are many voices, the identity of the institution is threatened by multiplicity of directions and priorities of individual members. Without a committed cohort (such as a critical mass of members of the Society of Jesus), or fundamental agreement among the institutional community about what the emphases are, the inevitable tendency will be in the direction of neutralism and eventual secularism. Here Marsden and Burtchaell have demonstrated the trajectory.

As I've mentioned already, a promised talk on Catholic theology of the body morphed into a presentation, by Vincentian Fr. Halstead of DePaul University, on pluralism in Catholic Universities. Halstead's recommendation is that Catholic identity cannot be imposed, but must take the form of engaged conversation with the institutional community. The problem with such a view is that when there is fundamental disagreement about what "Catholic" is, what "Jesuit" is, or even the degree to which the Jesuit Catholic tradition should inform and guide the institution, the conversation will be confusing rather than enlightening. It is hard to see how secularism will not be the end result of such an approach.

**Finally, Gonzaga needs a robust, honest, and informed discussion about Jesuit Catholic humanist identity and mission.**

In my experience, authoritative pronouncements of Jesuit identity, Catholic identity, and higher education at Gonzaga are treated one of three ways: (1) they are ignored, (2) they are invoked in superficial ways to justify courses of action that are diametrically opposed to the actual intent of the authoritative statements, or (3) they are employed as near-vacuous buzz-words to inspire or pacify internal and external constituencies.

Examples of each: (1) ignoring of *Ex Corde Ecclesia* and other authoritative documents in discussions about revising GU's core, even though the Jesuits have formally said that any discussion of Jesuit identity in higher education "presumes that there has been local discussion on the essential characteristics of a Catholic university as these have been enunciated in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*" (Jesuit Conference, "Communal Reflection on the Jesuit Mission in Higher Education: A Way of Proceeding" [2002] available online at

<http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/HE-JesuitCharacteristics.PDF>). (2) use of authoritative statements about Jesuit and Catholic identity in justifying the *VM* (more on this in a moment). (3) repeated allusions to “social justice” in internal discussions at Gonzaga and external PR materials, though the term has been treated reductionistically, with no reference to the philosophical and theological doctrines—and documents—that give it coherence and depth.

Let me focus on the second use of authoritative statements, since they are most clearly at work in justifications of the *VM*. Some faculty members argue that the *VM* are essential to promotion of Jesuit Catholic mission. As most of us are aware, Jesuit Catholic mission means wildly different things to different people. At the panel preceding the performance of the *VM*, a Jesuit faculty member of Gonzaga argued that the play was necessary for Jesuit mission, and cited as an authoritative source Benedict XVI’s address of instruction to the Society of Jesus at the most recent General Congregation (“Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Fathers of the General Congregation of the Society of Jesus,” 21 February 2008; available online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2008/february/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080221\\_gesuiti\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080221_gesuiti_en.html)). As the faculty member pointed out, Benedict recalls the view of Paul VI that the task of the Jesuits is to bring the Gospel into confrontation with human culture, particularly at the frontiers or extremes of the human condition. Of course, many Gonzaga faculty members and administrators will likely reject Benedict’s articulation of Jesuit mission. However, core Jesuit texts reflect the same basic goals of evangelization, service of the church and its teaching, and promotion of faith and justice. In any case, a closer look at Benedict’s statement reveals that it cannot in any reasonable way be used to justify an officially sponsored performance of the *VM*.

Benedict concretizes the task of bringing the Gospel into relationship with culture in a variety of ways: he reminds the Society that it was founded “for the defence and propagation of the faith,” he calls them to attest to the “profound harmony between faith and reason, between the Gospel spirit, the thirst for justice and initiatives for peace,” and he urges the Society to “renewed commitment to promoting and defending Catholic doctrine,” especially against the attacks of secular culture and the values associated with it, such as “subjectivism, relativism, hedonism and practical materialism.” Measured against this set of mission tasks, an officially sanctioned performance of the *VM* seems at best irrelevant to the mission and at worst diametrically opposed to it. According to its defenders, performance of the *VM*, among other things, liberates viewers from social taboos regarding sexuality and female identity, reveals the bankruptcy of traditional sexual morality, and helps expose the Roman Catholic Church as a fundamentally corrupt institution. By the testimony of its defenders, performance of the *VM* will undermine rather than promote Jesuit mission.

In a critically important passage of the address of instruction to the Society of Jesus, it seems to me that Benedict speaks not only to the Society of Jesus but to Gonzaga:

while you seek to recognize the signs of God's presence and work in every corner of the world, even beyond the bounds of the visible Church, while you strive to build bridges of understanding and dialogue with those who do not belong to the Church or have difficulty in accepting her outlook or messages, at the same time you must loyally take on the Church's fundamental duty to remain faithful to her mandate and to adhere totally to the Word of God and to the Magisterium's task of preserving the integral truth and unity of Catholic doctrine. **This not only applies to the personal commitment of individual Jesuits: since you are working as members of an apostolic body, you must also take care that your work and institutions always maintain a clear and explicit identity,** so that the goal of your apostolic activity is neither ambiguous nor obscure (“Address of Benedict XVI to the General Congregation,” emphasis added)

As I understand it, Benedict means to assert that insofar as Gonzaga is an institution founded and inspired by the Society of Jesus, the instructions to the Society are by incorporation extended to the faculty and administration of Gonzaga. I'm sure many faculty members would read this passage with a deep worry that it conveys an ominous tone of oppressive authoritarianism. In my view, it is not authoritarian or oppressive, but is completely consonant with the goals of an institution of higher education. In the work of engaging culture, we should not allow critical inquiry to become corrosive skepticism that undermines or compromises the teaching of the Church. As we engage in the project of critical academic inquiry, we must articulate winsomely and powerfully the authoritative teaching of the Church, even where we note, as we are obligated to as academics, important competing positions and arguments. Most of all, we must avoid plunging the teaching of the church into confusion and ambiguity.

Dr McClelland has already pointed out that there is a fundamental problem of authority lurking in this issue. Do the official statements of the Society of Jesus and of the Roman Catholic Church have any weight in Gonzaga's conception of its fidelity to its Jesuit Catholic mission? I do not see how the statements cannot. At the very least, they must be honored as contributions to a necessary conversation.

As a non-Catholic member of the GU community, I treasure the opportunity to serve as a co-laborer in the critical work of educating young people with the distinctive approach of Jesuit Catholic mission. In my judgment, an officially sponsored performance of the *VM* abuses academic freedom and undermines Jesuit Catholic mission.