Opinion

NCR Voices



From left, Harvard President Claudine Gay, University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill and Massachusetts Institute of Technology President Sally Kornbluth listen during a hearing of the House Committee on Education on Capitol Hill Dec. 5 in Washington. (AP/Mark Schiefelbein)



by Michael Sean Winters

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The congressional testimony by three presidents of some of the nation's most prominent universities, in which all three failed to unequivocally say whether advocating the genocide of Jews violated their school's codes of conduct, has rightly generated plenty of controversy. If you did not watch the video, do so. Their hemming and hawing was appalling.

University of Pennsylvania president Liz Magill, Harvard University president Claudine Gay, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology president Sally Kornbluth refused to give a "yes or no" answer to New York Republican Rep. Elise Stefanik's repeated questioning Dec. 5. All three insisted that whether a call for genocide violated their university's codes would depend on the circumstances. One wishes Stefanik had asked under what circumstances such a call would be acceptable.

It is not a tough question. If Stefanik had asked about Israel's response to the terrorist attack on Oct. 7, OK. We can all debate that. But the question was not about Gaza. It wasn't about Israel. The question was about students in the United States advocating the genocide of Jews.

These women are all obviously accomplished and highly intelligent. Their unwillingness to speak clearly cannot really be attributed to concerns about protecting free speech. We all should want to help build a culture that celebrates free speech, but universities are in the business of teaching students, and one of the lessons should be that there are consequences to speech.

What was most galling about the timid responses was the fact that many of today's leading universities are not known for tolerating divergent points of view. Harvard's president Gay, when serving as dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, helped push out a colleague when he announced he would represent Harvey Weinstein, the Hollywood producer accused, and later convicted, of sexual assault. She cited the "well-being of the students." Wouldn't a "trigger warning" have sufficed to ensure the students' well-being?

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Jason Willick, writing in The Washington Post, raised a question as pointed as Stefanik's:

> The contempt for intellectual competition and free debate so often shown by elite universities raises questions about their embrace of maximum toleration in the context of an upsurge in anti-Jewish hatred. Are they hypocritical? Or would it be more accurate to say that they believe in group hierarchies and are acting in accordance with the view that Jews, as "oppressors," don't deserve an identity-politics dividend that is owed to other groups?

The decline of contemporary higher education is a reality. The most prominent universities in the country have long since abandoned the kind of education in the humanities that built what we mean when we say the word "civilization." The classic texts of the Western intellectual tradition have been tossed aside. Who needs the writings of all those dead, white men? The slow acids of deconstructionism have robbed our sense of culture of any enduring meaning.

The result is an academic culture in which university presidents struggle to adequately confront the most obvious moral lesson of the 20th century.

No one knows whether last week's congressional testimony will serve as a kind of tipping point. But those engaged in Catholic higher education should see the highly conspicuous meltdown as a huge opportunity.

Our Catholic colleges should not shy away from teaching the Catholic intellectual tradition, a tradition that provides students — and even administrators — with the moral analytical tools needed to recognize calls for genocide as unacceptable. Our Catholic schools should lean into that tradition.

It is puzzling that secular universities think you can impart knowledge without some basic explanation of how Western thought got where it is, without some kind of a road map from the past. Required courses in philosophy and theology and the sciences and in literature are not there to sustain departments or because there are endowed chairs. They are required because one can't really be educated if you have

never read a book published before, say, 1850.

"Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors," G.K. Chesterton observed. "It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about."

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In addition to locating today's students within a long tradition, a tradition they are invited to join, make their own and develop in new ways, our Catholic understanding of knowledge reaches beyond the empirical. It extends to those questions that, by definition, lie beyond the horizon of human knowledge. The acknowledgement of such a horizon should keep all of us humble, and also keep us honest.

In 2004, the great German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger engaged in a public dialogue, which was published under the title The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion. The mutual admiration between these two learned men was palpable, even while their differences on fundamental issues were profound.

Ratzinger spoke these words, which are at the heart of the Catholic intellectual life:

> We have seen that there exist pathologies in religion that are extremely dangerous and that make it necessary to see the divine light of reason as a "controlling organ." Religion must continually allow itself to be purified and structured by reason; and this was the view of the Church Fathers, too. However, we have also seen in the course of our reflections that there are also pathologies of reason, although mankind in general is not as conscious of this fact today. There is a hubris of reason that is no less dangerous. Indeed, bearing in mind its potential effects, it poses an even greater threat — it suffices here to think of the atomic bomb or of man as a "product." This is why reason, too, must be warned to keep within its proper limits, and it must learn a willingness to listen to the great religious

> traditions of mankind. If it cuts itself completely adrift and rejects this willingness to learn, this relatedness, reason becomes destructive.

Other religious traditions also speak to this need to "purify" human reason, to say nothing of the human will. For the life of me, I do not see how anyone, looking at the catalog of folly that is human history, could fail to see the need for such a mutual purification between faith and reason.

At any rate, nothing, absolutely nothing, in that discussion between the two German giants was superficial or performative or timid.

Watching the three university presidents stammer, so obviously afraid of saying the "wrong thing" that they were unable to say the most obvious thing, my mind traveled back to that discussion in Munich in 2004. And I was so, so grateful for having received a Catholic education.

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