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Secularism with the Gloves Off: Vanderbilt University's Assault on Religious Organizations

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Like most of America's historic private universities, Vanderbilt University was founded by Christian believers for the purpose of inculcating Christian beliefs in its students. Vanderbilt was founded in the 1870s by Methodists and later funded largely by New York's Vanderbilt family. Within a remarkably short period of years, Vanderbilt had forfeited its conservative Methodist roots in order to identify with the emerging secular consensus in American higher education.

As Notre Dame's James Tunstead Burtchaell explained, Vanderbilt serves as a case study in the secularization of American higher education — a process Burtchaell described as the “disengagement of colleges and universities from their Christian churches.” Just a few decades after its founding, Vanderbilt had transformed itself into a secular university, embarrassed by its Christian founding. As Burtchaell made clear, this was not due to demands for secularization from outside the university. It was accomplished under the direction of liberal Protestants who desperately wanted to identify with the secular elites.



Well, if that was Vanderbilt's goal, the university has been stunningly successful. It is unlikely that many of Vanderbilt's students and faculty know anything of the university's Christian history. If they do, it would be cause for further embarrassment, mixed with relief that the university is now safely in liberal and secular hands.

In more recent months, Vanderbilt's administration decided to push secularism to the extreme — launching a virtual vendetta against religious organizations on campus. Officials of the university informed religious groups that had been recognized student organizations that they would have to comply with an absolute non-discrimination policy. This means that religious organizations (primarily Christian) must now allow any Vanderbilt student to be a candidate for a leadership office, regardless of religious beliefs or sexual orientation. In other words, a Christian student group would be forced to allow the candidacy of an atheist. A group of Christians who believe in the Bible's standard of sexual morality would be required to allow the candidacy of a homosexual member. There can be absolutely no discrimination, the university insists, even if that means that Christian organizations are no longer actually Christian.

In reality, that is the aim. The university is embarrassed again — this time by the mere presence of Christian organizations on its campus. It will deal with that embarrassment by eliminating the right of Christian organizations to operate on Christian principles. It will impose its own Stalinist definition of tolerance and freedom and deny the right of Christian students to participate in recognized campus organizations that can remain authentically Christian.

The provost of the university recently defended the policy, stating that student organizations may elect their own leaders, but may not disqualify any candidate based on, among other things, religious beliefs or sexual orientation.

Last week, the largest Roman Catholic student organization, Vanderbilt Catholic, announced that it will leave the university. In an open letter explaining their decision, the group stated:

“As Catholics we believe that faith in Jesus Christ and the truths that He has revealed to us through the Catholic Church are fundamental to our identity as Catholics and our mission in this life. Likewise, as a Catholic student organization, Catholic faith and practice precede all else that we do. We are an open and welcoming community that people of all faiths can join, but we require our leaders to share this Catholic faith and practice. A student group led by those who do not share these things might be a very worthwhile and beneficial organization, but it would not be Catholic in the fullest sense of the word. These faith-based requirements for leadership are as important to the integrity of our organization as musical range is for a choral group.”

Will evangelical Christian organizations reach a similar decision? The next few weeks will reveal the answer to that question. In the meantime, leaders of those evangelical groups should look to the Vanderbilt Catholic statement as an example of courage, candor, and specificity.

Leaders of Vanderbilt University, on the other hand, should be equally honest as they explain their draconian policy. The issue is not really tolerance. If so, the university would have to deal with the most intolerant and exclusivist organizations on campus –the recognized fraternities and sororities. As David French of *National Review* has argued, those recognized student organizations are allowed to discriminate on any ground at all, including appearance and wealth.

As French stated:

“The reality, of course, is that Vanderbilt is trying to force the orthodox Christian viewpoint off campus. The ‘nondiscrimination’ rhetoric is mere subterfuge. How can we know this? Because even as it works mightily to make sure that atheists can run Christian organizations, it is working just as mightily to protect the place and prerogatives of Vanderbilt’s powerful fraternities and sororities — organizations that explicitly discriminate, have never been open to ‘all comers,’ and cause more real heartache each semester for rejected students than any religious organization has ever inflicted in its entire history on campus. Vanderbilt’s embattled religious organizations welcome all students with open arms; Vanderbilt’s fraternities and sororities routinely reject their fellow students based on little more than appearance, family heritage, or personality quirks.”

David French’s most important point is his first — that Vanderbilt’s real agenda is to force any orthodox Christian viewpoint off campus.

What we see at Vanderbilt University is secularism with its gloves off. In the name of tolerance, it will not tolerate orthodox Christian conviction. The university now comes full circle and forces off campus the only organizations that hold to the Christian beliefs of the school’s founders. Look carefully at Vanderbilt’s intolerance. Be assured that it is coming soon to a campus near you.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

“[Why We Cannot Comply](#),” Letter from Vanderbilt Catholic, Sunday, April 1, 2012.

David French, “[Vanderbilt University Insults Our Intelligence](#),” *National Review*

Online, Friday, March 30, 2012.

Bob Smetana, "Anti-bias Policies Drive Some Religious Groups Off Campuses," *USA Today*, Monday, April 2, 2012.

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