For Openers: Tolerance or Avoidance

Editorial Board
Tolerance or Avoidance?

David Hollenbach asks readers of Conversations to rethink the assumption that, because a society as diverse as the United States requires a great deal of tolerance in order to function, mere tolerance is the best we can do. In an intellectual climate that tends to value a “live-and-let-live” attitude above all other possibilities, he argues, we risk turning good intentions not to harm others into destructive avoidance of the responsibility to seek the good of all. If we have an unlimited right to speak, do we not also have a serious responsibility to listen? Or does tolerance only guarantee a right to say anything one wants, as long as it doesn’t make a difference?

According to Hollenbach’s analysis, making tolerance the sole virtue of public life, insofar as it rules out bounds serious discussion of substantive notions of the good, ironically exacerbates the social tensions it is meant to assuage. An all-too-familiar scenario of contemporary American intellectual life pits advocates of “open-mindedness” and “diversity” against traditionalists of various sorts. The problem, of course, is that the one side is so often ready to embrace everything except the possibility of a good that is common to all, while the other all too often builds its ideal of a harmonious society on a notion of the common good that turns out to be neither common nor good. The protesters stand, bull-horns in hand, outside the gated “lifestyle enclave,” misnamed a “community.” For Hollenbach, the Catholic university is uniquely positioned to help us find a peaceful way out of this standoff, by virtue of its rich tradition of teaching about the sanctity of the individual human person and of the identity of that person as inextricably intertwined with all human persons and with God.

Hollenbach’s analysis also suggests that those within Jesuit higher-education circles who see the Jesuit universi-

ty’s affirmation of its particular tradition as running counter to a commitment to diversity may have an inadequate understanding of the deep commitment to intellectual and social “solidarity” within the Catholic tradition. As Roberto S. Goizueta writes, responding to Hollenbach, “as long as diversity and inclusivity are defined by mere tolerance, marginalization will be reinforced even as existing inequalities are hidden beneath an appearance of pluralism.” In an intellectual climate that lacks the language to assert to, or even understand, the “preferential option for the poor,” inclusion seldom goes beyond mere representation. Hollenbach and Goizueta suggest that a full embrace of the “preferential option” impels the Catholic university to a much greater, more comprehensive, and richer engagement with the genuine diversity of our society than would any program based upon mere tolerance. As Goizueta puts it, from a Catholic perspective, the marginalized deserve not only to be allowed to speak, as “representatives” of “their” position. They deserve to be listened to, as human beings bearing truths we need to know. Like the shepherds in Luke’s gospel, they may have seen a thing or two about which we need to hear.

With this issue, we begin a new feature we call “Taproots.” These brief essays, contributed by various hands, will trace connections between the current topic of the magazine and the history of the Society of Jesus and Jesuit education. We are honored and delighted to have John Padberg, S.J., director of the Institute of Jesuit Sources and chairman of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher education, as our first “Taproots” columnist.

As always, Conversations invites and encourages readers to enter into conversation about the work of Jesuit colleges and universities. We welcome your comments, questions, criticisms, or suggestions for future issues.