Dialogue, Diversity, and the Common Good

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David Hollenbach’s “The Catholic University and the Common Good” presents a passionate and deeply humane vision for a genuinely catholic university, one whose identity and moral mission are shaped by such quintessentially Catholic ideals as the pursuit of “general justice,” community, and the common good. It seeks to invigorate moral imagination within the university and beyond by emphasizing the value of public, rigorous intellectual debate on some of the major challenges that we face as a nation today—the eclipse of citizenship, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the clashes of values and group identities, and the place of religion in public life. And it does so, I believe, from a committed religious perspective, richly steeped in one tradition but intent on engaging others in search of a more broadly shared moral vision.

Given the centrality of the concept of dialogue in Professor Hollenbach’s analysis, I would like to comment briefly on two aspects of this notion. The first has to do with the goals of such dialogue and the ways that it can be achieved. In dealing with the challenges of pluralism and the diversity of values within our institutions, Hollenbach urges us to go beyond the classic liberal norm of “tolerance” (the live-and-let-live attitude) to a more proactive search, together with those whose values may differ from our own, for common grounds. Mere tolerance, he points out, not only hinders the possibility of developing shared visions, but, in my view, it also fails to grant due recognition to groups that are in the minority or that otherwise occupy positions on the margins. Indeed the denial of such recognition is the surest way to exclude such groups from genuine participation, if not to inflict damage to their self-image and distinctive identities. The overarching purpose of dialogue, needless to say, cannot be to achieve a singular vision or to affirm preordained dogmas; rather, the purpose must be to seek greater appreciation of the distinctive traditions, ideals, and constraints of each group, and a recognition of our “moral interdependence,” to use Professor Hollenbach’s apt phrase, as members of the same community.

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In the specific domain of interfaith dialogue, I believe such endeavors can be most effective if individuals from different religious persuasions (as well as non-believers), speaking from within their own traditions, could explore the possibilities for arriving at certain shared principles with respect to such normative values as tolerance, justice, solidarity, human rights, and the like. I can find strong echoes, for example, of at least two of the values that Professor Hollenbach elaborates in his article—the quest for solidarity and the pursuit of social justice—within the Islamic tradition with which I am most familiar and identified. In general, I am persuaded that our failure to engage in such dialogues within our academic institutions has more to do with inertia, apathy, the fragmentation of academic life, and the absence of institutional support for such activities than with deep, irreconcilable differences in value orientations among us.

My second point has to do with the reach and potential participants in such dialogues. The stupendous recent advances in communications allow us to go well beyond the confines of our campuses and the geographic boundaries of our society. Our endeavors in developing commonly shared definitions of the good life and the values undergirding it can be made in consort with colleagues and students from all corners of the world. Nothing of course can take the place of face-to-face encounters with colleagues and students here and abroad. And in this respect, the network of Jesuit colleges and universities around the globe is an enormously rich and, in my view, still untapped resource for deepening our understanding of other cultures and of international issues. This was certainly the case for me when I visited the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines last summer. The intellectual enrichment that came as a result of many formal and informal exchanges with colleagues and students and the opportunity to observe first-hand the enormous social transformations that have taken place since the democracy movement of a decade ago confirmed my belief in the unparalleled benefits of such extramural dialogues and linkages.

I find Professor Hollenbach’s article to be an inspiring example of what an informed religious perspective can contribute to the often barren academic discourse on social issues. It is an eloquent affirmation of faith in the critical role of the university in fostering more broadly shared meanings and moral visions in our richly diverse society.