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SPECIAL REPORT

Father Jenkins' "Creative Contextualization"

*A look at the fallout from and issues raised by the Notre Dame president's decision to keep *The Vagina Monologues* on campus.*

by Thomas S. Hibbs | August-September 2008

In his influential study of modern moral discourse, *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre identifies taboos as unintelligible fragments of moral discourse from bygone periods that originally were parts of a coherent moral vision. Who would have thought that in the contemporary Catholic university the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church on sexuality would become taboos, fragments isolated from context and nearly unintelligible to large numbers of faculty and students?

There is a double irony here: in addition to the obvious incongruity of Catholic teachings becoming inexplicable in a purportedly Catholic institution, there is also the irony of the trap into which Catholic administrators keep falling. They are, generally speaking, more ashamed of the sexual teaching of the Church than of almost anything regarding the faith. Yet they have ceded so much ground on so many other matters—curriculum, hiring, student life—that the only issue left for them to defend is some residue of the traditional teaching on sexuality. Their feeble, half-hearted defense is usually provoked by questions over whether Catholic universities should officially sanction gay and lesbian or abortion-rights groups.

After giving a remarkable Inaugural Lecture when he took over the reins as president of Notre Dame in 2005—a lecture that boldly challenged the university to have the “courage...to be different from the world”—Father John Jenkins hinted that it might be time to prohibit performance of the play *The Vagina Monologues* on campus.

He then initiated a study of the matter and invited comments from all quarters of the university. Ultimately, he ruled in favor of permitting the performance, with the proviso that any performance be part of an academic exercise that would include a presentation of the Catholic Church's teaching on sexuality. He commented that “as long as the Gospel message and the Catholic intellectual tradition are present,” Notre Dame can welcome “any serious debate.”

After having turned what is—under the most charitable interpretation possible—a tawdry piece of mediocre art into a defining litmus test for academic freedom and issues of Catholic identity at the University of Notre Dame, Father Jenkins worried about *The Vagina Monologues* taking on an “undue stature.” A little late for that, I'd say.

At the most highly ranked Catholic universities in America, decades have gone by



with little attention to what makes these schools distinctively Catholic—much conversation in some cases, but little real change where it matters. In fact, one has the distinct sense that talk about Catholic identity is often a mechanism to insure entropy.

There is almost nothing distinctively Catholic about the curricula at these schools, and faculty have been hired exclusively on the basis of academic pedigree, with nothing more than lip service paid to hiring for the Catholic identity of the institution. It is hardly surprising, then, that faculty are often taken aback when issues such as those surrounding *The Vagina Monologues* arise. The very suggestion that such a play might not receive permission seems a peculiar holdover from the dark ages of medieval Catholicism—in short, a taboo.

Yet, at Notre Dame, the furor over *The Vagina Monologues*—and it has been more heated there than at any other Catholic institution, perhaps because so few Catholic institutions now allow such performances—has spawned a very interesting new organization, Project Sycamore, an alumni group concerned “about preserving the Catholic identity of the university.” Established by alumni, its name and mission are described thus:

Project Sycamore takes its name from the “Guardian of the Grotto,” the ancient tree standing watch over the Grotto that, according to legend, reaches with its gnarled branches toward God in prayerful memorial to the innocent Indian murdered where it took root. As this sentinel is perpetually protective of the Grotto, so, too, have Notre Dame alumni always been protective of the school’s formative heritage as it is adapted to the challenges of each age. At the heart of that heritage are Notre Dame’s Catholic identity and its sustaining relationship to the Church, even as institutional links have been dissolved.

Project Sycamore has taken note of the increasing tension between Notre Dame’s mission statement, which affirms that the “Catholic identity of the university depends upon...the presence of a predominant number of Catholic intellectuals,” and the sharp decline in Catholic faculty at the school.

Father Jenkins himself is a Catholic intellectual of some note. Jenkins is an able philosopher, trained as a Thomist, a pedigree he shares with another academic and priest, Dominican Father Brian Shanley, president of Providence College in Rhode Island. Installed at roughly the same time, both presidents faced an early test of leadership with the issue of *The Vagina Monologues*. The striking contrast between the two is evident not merely in the different decisions made, with Jenkins allowing and Shanley disallowing the performance of the play. Rather, the differences emerge most sharply in the reasoning each Thomist president brought to bear upon the matter.

While Jenkins reiterated his view that *The Vagina Monologues* was incompatible with Catholic teaching on sexuality, he went on to talk about balancing academic freedom and representation of the Catholic tradition. Shanley, by contrast, allowed a much more detailed argument about the incompatibility of the play with Catholic teaching to inform his judgment about permissibility.

He wrote, “Far from celebrating the complexity and mystery of female sexuality, *The Vagina Monologues* simplifies and demystifies it by reducing it to the vagina. In contrast, Roman Catholic teaching sees female sexuality as ordered toward a loving giving of self to another in a union of body, mind, and soul that is ordered to the procreation of new life.”

Not only does the play depict sexuality in a way incompatible with Catholic

teaching, Shanley proceeds to note, but it also treats perverse sexual discovery—the specific case is an “alcohol-fueled seduction of a 16-year-old girl by a 24-year-old woman”—as a religious experience, a “kind of heaven.” At the same time that he forbade performance of the play, Shanley initiated an alternative forum for educating students about sexual abuse. The denial of permission for the performance, Shanley admits, will likely spark controversy, but such disputes are an important part of education—something Father Shanley states that he has learned as a long-time student of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Reductionism, as Father Shanley observes, is what *The Vagina Monologues* is all about. There is of course some discussion of the sexual abuse of women, but, as noted above, the play also celebrates the seduction of an underage woman. The play also depicts men in reductionist terms—as for the most part ominous predators and, in exceptional cases, as dispassionate admirers of the biological beauty of the vagina.

In Eve Ensler’s version of the play, available on DVD, she ends the entire series of discourses with an effusive statement of praise for the vagina, praise—called “deep worship” at one point—based upon her experience of watching her daughter-in-law give birth. Toward the end, reference is actually made to the baby, but rather than the biological process being seen as the means of bringing new life, the baby appears as a sign of the wonder of the vagina.

As for the giggling litany of names for the vagina, it is spoken as an apparent act of liberating rebellion. A Notre Dame sociologist, participating in one of the academic panels following the performance, professed to be “shocked” at the language of the play, a shock that underscores “the power of language” and the significance of the issues raised in the play. Focusing, as many proponents of the play do, on the issues of sexual abuse, the professor urged those critical of the play not to ignore the issues, but to find “better language.”

Finding better language would not be difficult. (Father Shanley in fact recognized that challenge at the outset and found an alternative way of bringing these important issues to the fore.) Commenting on the Ensler production, critic Camille Paglia detects trivial conventionality masquerading as counter-cultural revolution: “That in the year 2001 the group chanting of crude four-letter words for female genitalia is viewed as some sort of radical liberation implies that the real issue in *The Vagina Monologues* isn’t male oppression but bourgeois oppression—the malady of the dainty, decorous professional class.”

Finding better language was, one might surmise, what Father Jenkins had in mind when he insisted that any performance of the play be inserted into an academic setting in which the Church’s teaching would be heard. But on the panel discussions that have followed the plays, those willing or even able to articulate the Church’s position have been in the minority.

In the past year, the task fell almost exclusively to Lisa Everett, a representative of the office of Bishop John D’Arcy, whose diocese includes Notre Dame. In her comments, Everett drew from John Paul II’s theology of the body to argue that “we cannot hope to build a truly human civilization where women and children are cherished and protected unless we help young people mature in this most important area [of a proper understanding of sexuality].”

She then quoted *Evangelium Vitae*:

It is an illusion to think that we can build a true culture of human life if we do not help the young to accept and experience sexuality and love and the whole of life according to their true meaning and in their close interconnection.... Only a true love is able to protect life. There can be no

avoiding the duty to offer, especially to adolescents and young adults, an authentic education in sexuality and in love, an education which involves training in chastity as a virtue which fosters personal maturity and makes one capable of respecting the “nuptial” meaning of the body (*Evangelium Vitae*, #97).

In fact, a strong argument can be made that *The Vagina Monologues* only reinforces the sort of narcissistic libertarianism that, on both the right and the left, advances the notion of the body and its pleasures as what Wendell Berry has called “the dispirited working of a sort of anatomy.” For all its gushing enthusiasm about bodily parts, *The Vagina Monologues* never transcends the plane of commerce, conceiving of the body as property over which women are counseled to take possession: “my vagina, my vagina...me.”

[Dropcap]William Dempsey, president of Project Sycamore, and supporters of his organization think that the conditions under which Father Jenkins approved the play have not been upheld and that it is time for Father Jenkins to reconsider the matter. Not only is the Church’s position a minority voice on panels purportedly designed to supply a Catholic commentary on the play, but the very idea of an academic setting has been publicly mocked by the fact that so few students are present for the panel discussions. This past spring, hundreds of students showed for the play itself, but very few—estimates are in the 20 percent range—remained for the discussion. Jenkins’s hope for “creative contextualization” has failed.

Meanwhile, tensions over *The Vagina Monologues* between the Notre Dame administration and the US bishops heated up last winter. Bishop D’Arcy has been a consistent, clear, and charitable critic of Father Jenkins’ decision to allow the play to go forward. Then, last February, the bishops’ committee on doctrine, scheduled to meet on campus, moved its meeting off campus and decided not to stay at Notre Dame’s Morris Inn because of the disagreement.

Bishop D’Arcy stated, “Because of the likelihood of the presentation of...*The Vagina Monologues*...the bishops made a collective decision to move the seminar off campus.” To which the university responded that it “worked collaboratively with the bishops to move the conference” and that it is “sure that our partnerships will continue in the future.”

Longtime Notre Dame president Father Theodore Hesburgh used to describe Notre Dame as the place where the Church does its thinking. To outsiders that has always seemed a sign of Notre Dame’s inordinate sense of self-importance. Whatever it now means, Notre Dame seems willing to do its theological thinking in the absence of Catholic bishops.

The recent controversy with the bishops rendered the reflections of Professor John Cavadini, chair of the Notre Dame theology department, prophetic. In an open letter to the university community, Cavadini spoke, not so much about Jenkins’ decision, but about the way in which the entire conversation had been conducted.

The University of Notre Dame, he objected, has gone about discussing its Catholic identity in the absence of an indispensable conversation partner, namely, the Church—not merely the Catholic intellectual tradition, or even “an imaginary Church we sometimes might wish existed, but the concrete, visible communion of ‘hierarchical and charismatic gifts,’ ‘at once holy and always in need of purification,’ in which ‘each bishop represents his own church and all of [the bishops] together with the Pope represent the whole Church’ (*Lumen Gentium* 1.4.8; 3.23).” Substituting a “disincarnate, a-historical church of the mind” for the “incarnate, historical body” is a form of Gnosticism.

The Catholic novelist Walker Percy once quipped that the great heresy of the modern age is angelism, the denial that we are bodily creatures or that our embodiment teaches us anything significant about who and what we are and how we ought to live. Angelism is recognizably a version of the ancient heresy of Gnosticism. One of the paradoxes of Gnosticism is that, even as it neglects the body in favor of an ethereal spiritualism, it also introduces the possibility of the liberation of the enjoyment of the merely material body, whose insignificance follows from the divorcing of the material and the spiritual.

Whether the persuasive powers of the bishops or the alumni group, Project Sycamore, will have any long-term impact remains to be seen. Its fabulous wealth and standing in the national rankings supplied by U.S. News and World Report—the *biblia sacra* for administrators—effectively inoculate the University of Notre Dame from concern over, or even the need to respond to, criticisms about its fidelity to its ecclesial mission. But that means that the university is also inoculated from self-knowledge. If Cavadini is right, then *The Vagina Monologues* may be symptomatic of an alienation of Catholic universities from the Church that is deeper than either its fondest defenders or its most adamant critics have yet been able to fathom.

Thomas S. Hibbs is dean of the Honors College and Distinguished Professor of Ethics and Culture at Baylor University.

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