

Politicized Religion

By Rev. Mark D.W. Edington

Just before Spring Break brings its transitory quiet to the streets and bars of Cambridge, the *Harvard Crimson* devoted a top-line editorial of more than 1,100 words to a question of religious life on campus.

You might well expect that the spilling of so much ink at this time in this place would surely be devoted to a current feature at the Harvard Square Cinema, not a hundred yards from the main gates to Harvard Yard – Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." Or it might be given over to the still-brewing contention following a pronouncement against anti-Semitism delivered more than a year ago by Harvard's president, Larry Summers.

Neither of these guesses would win you the prize, however. No, the *Crimson* had given over nearly all of its editorial page to the thus-far frustrated desire of a local religious community to gain access to the University's United Ministry, the collegial body of all accredited chaplains sent by various traditions to minister to communities at Harvard.

An Eastern tradition, perhaps? A lesser-known Orthodox grouping? Perhaps an indigenous tradition from Africa or South America?

No; the *Crimson* was fulsomely taking up the cause of the Anglican Church of the Incarnation, a tiny splinter off the Episcopal tree in the United States. The ACOI, as it is known here, rents space in a Swedenborgian church on the fringe of campus, which evokes not only its theological stance vis-a-vis its Episcopal origins but its place in the minds of well more than 99 percent of students on campus.

Why, then, this lengthy manifesto on the pages of the Harvard daily newspaper? Is there a sudden groundswell interest in a tiny, hidebound expression of the divided and torn Episcopal Church among students in Harvard University? Are students suddenly flocking to conservative religion – opposing the ordination of women, demanding the language of centuries past, decrying the acceptance of gay and lesbian people as full citizens in both state and church?

Hardly. The apparent fascination of the *Crimson* with the woes and wherefores of a small Anglican-flavored startup has little if anything to do with religious commitment or theological sensibilities. Instead it is an expression of a trend gathering disturbing strength on campus – the politicization of religion.

In some respects, this is hardly news. Much the same has been taking place throughout American civil society since at least the 1980s. Once it was the worry of a certain kind of stalwart citizen that politics be kept out of America's pulpits. Few of those same folks see any difficulty with the increasing presence of religious rhetoric in the public square.

The problem, of course, is that religious commitment or affiliation is emptied of its meaning by such gestures, reduced to a political bumper-sticker. Few if any of the staff editorialists at the *Crimson* know even the first thing about the theological claims about the Anglican Province of Christ the King--the larger national consortium of which Cambridge's ACOI is a member.

Instead, those few students who have become committed to the cause of this tiny community of faith do so because they associate with it certain qualities with which they wish to be identified: conservative; Christian; bucking the institution of the University; and, because of all these qualities, harassed.

Like it or not, we have brought this upon ourselves. The academy's emphasis on the construction of identity cannot, and does not, have only intellectual implications; it has psychological implications as well. We cannot expect undergraduates critically to examine the social sources of identity without thrusting them into the position of questioning the few pieces of their own identity that arrived here with them on Freshman Move-In Day, packed in their bags and boxes next to graduation gifts and bedsheets.

Anyone concerned with the future of the church should find cause for concern, if not panic, in this development. It is no longer the content of a given religious grouping that determines either the curiosity of a student in exploring that tradition or the interest of a student in joining it. It is rather the significance that association will have in establishing something of that student's identity vis-a-vis her peers that shapes these choices.

The result of this is twofold. First, it may very well lay the axe at the root of denominational, mainstream Protestant religion. No longer does Bill or Sally (or Kyle or Ashley) arrive at college regarding themselves primarily as Lutheran, or Methodist, or Episcopalian, or Congregationalist. They are not even certain whether they are Christian; the matter is still open, and the competition has opened for their loyalties.

This is less true in the South, where the establishment of religious identity is a more serious matter. Students arriving in Northern and Eastern colleges raised in a Southern Baptist tradition (say) are more likely, for cultural reasons, to hold onto the religious

identities with which they arrive, if only because it helps them to navigate the challenges that occur to virtually every other aspect of their identity in places that are far more different from their home towns than they ever imagined.

Certainly at a place like Harvard, however, ever greater numbers of students arrive who have not been raised in a church tradition, and for whom the decision on spiritual allegiance thus becomes a critical way in which a new, self-consciously assembled identity can be established.

But this simple fact leads to the second problem: it makes the spiritual quest more a matter of externalities than of internalities. Students don't choose a given affiliation because it most deeply connects with the particular and unique path they are following toward the divine. Rather they are shopping for what the labels will say about them. Evangelical? Happy and countercultural. University church? Socially ambitious. Catholic? Socially active--and likely conservative. And so on.

The question we are left with is whether the externalities will seep in at all to become internalities--whether the spiritual questions of the Abercrombie & Fitch generation will become anything more than another fashion accessory. The particular challenge of those working in college ministry is to introduce young and eager faith to the ideas, the values, and the commitments that will outlast the latest change in fashion--and can, blessedly for them, become a part of one's identity not so easily changed with the new season.

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