

B.C.

# Has Notre Dame University lost its faith?

## Some fear being labelled 'not open to serious intellectual dialogue'

By C.S. Morrissey  
Special to The B.C. Catholic

President Barack Obama was scheduled to be the principal speaker and the recipient of an honorary doctor of laws degree at the University of Notre Dame's commencement ceremony May 17. The university's president said the invitation served the cause of intellectual dialogue.

In this essay Dr. C.S. Morrissey, who teaches Latin and philosophy at Redeemer Pacific College, addresses the controversy, arguing intellectual dialogue alone is not enough for a university.

A Catholic university incapable of giving reasons why it cannot honour the pro-abortion President Obama has lost its faith. By inviting President Obama to speak at its commencement and to receive an honorary law degree, Notre Dame University has undermined its foundational Catholic commitment to both faith and reason.

Father John Jenkins, the president of Notre Dame, doesn't seem to understand why this dishonours Notre Dame, a Catholic entity. He thinks that any "positive engagement" with Obama requires, not simply intellectual dialogue, but the gift of all these honours, as if a Catholic university would belittle itself by begrudging a famous and popular politician the adulation he seeks.

It is true that intellectual dialogue alone is not enough for a university, because the university exists for the sake of something greater than itself. For example, Redeemer Pacific College, the Catholic college in partnership



Redeemer Pacific College / Special to The B.C. Catholic

"Faith-based" institutions like Redeemer Pacific College would be better characterized as "faith-and-reason-based," says RPC lecturer Chris Morrissey, because they provide a mediating ecumenical role between human reason and particular faiths. The Catholic college, in partnership with Trinity Western University in Langley, is dedicated to serious dialogue with all.

with Trinity Western University, is dedicated to serious dialogue with all cultures, traditions, and disciplines about what each may contribute to a common global culture.

Some people argue that the problems encountered in this pursuit cannot adequately be faced by so-called "faith-based" institutions, if, for example, they insist that certain teachers identify themselves as faithful to a particular tradition, or if they insist that honouring pro-abortion politicians or speakers undermines their own "faith-based" identity.

Many Catholic universities, therefore, are afraid to be criticized as "intolerant" or "not open to serious intellectual dialogue" if they make distinctions about what

and whom they will honour. They are scared that by drawing such lines they will be criticized for suppressing "academic freedom."

This confused thinking arises from a lack of harmony between disciplines in the modern university. "Faith-based" institutions that emphasize the intrinsic harmony of faith and reason, such as Redeemer Pacific College, foster the achievements of reason and science in a way that is respectful of the complementary approaches to reality of other cultures and traditions.

Because of this balanced and harmonious approach, "faith-based" institutions like RPC (and TWU) are better characterized as "faith-and-reason-based," since their reason for existence is to pro-

vide a mediating, ecumenical role between human reason and particular faiths.

On one hand, there is a secular humanism that approaches cultural issues with a Western ideological perspective. On the other hand, there are other cultures recognizing spiritual reality as something transcending Western scientific ideologies.

In fact, both approaches do possess insights that may contribute to a common ground for global culture. Requirements by institutions that "faith-and-reason-based" teachers profess fidelity to the particular Catholic tradition of faith and reason therefore act as a guarantee that such scholars will be committed to their mediating ecumenical role.

In short, a Christian university must be able to "speak the languages" of faith and of reason, with a whole-hearted commitment to both that refuses to shortchange either one. This equal balance of faith and reason, as historically developed in Catholic Christian universities, is a rich cultural heritage and a great resource for global culture.

Because of the levelling effect that unbridled Western scientism and economic globalization threaten to bring to global culture, Christian universities offer a unique model for safeguarding the voices of human tradition within global culture.

Why are the voices of opposition to this idea of a Christian university in today's world so loud, and why have they persuaded people like Father Jenkins?

It would seem that adherence to a particular faith would militate against the Christian university's mediating, ecumenical goal, but this has not been what Catholics have found. Protection for particular faiths is precisely what is necessary to protect reason from falling into the mistake of subtly promoting only one dimly-understood, yet all-pervasive, implicit ideology.

By explicitly highlighting an institutional "bias," its "faith" commitment, this commitment is therefore never taken for granted,

but rather always put forth as a perspective to be challenged vigorously and renewed through rational inquiry.

The strength of a university tradition based on faith and reason is that its very constitution is designed to highlight self-critical, autonomous inquiry. On the other hand, the weakness of a secular institution committed to "the official ideology of having no official ideology" is that it is tempted to think the problems encountered in dialogue with all other groups have already been solved once and for all by this "official ideology of no ideology."

The university tradition based on faith and reason, however, by its very nature, does not see this problem of perspectives as solvable by an easy declaration of neutrality. This is because, much like the life of a believer in a particular faith, the mind of the university itself is constantly changing.

A dynamic, changing life needs to be autonomous and yet self-critical. The bias of "officially having no bias" is arguably the most dangerous of all intellectual delusions. Because it considers the perennial problems of self-examination and dialogue to have been officially solved it is an invitation to intellectual complacency.

It is this secular delusion that is at the root of Notre Dame's decision to invite and honour the U.S. president, no matter what his ideologies or actions.

"All speakers are welcome; we honour them all, and thereby honour academic freedom," is the dubious message. "It is official: we are Catholic, but we have no bias."

This is a grave delusion, because serious dialogue never honours another's view by dishonouring one's own.

An intellectual argument worthy of a serious Catholic university would be this: to dishonour a famous and popular president, and then to explain why it guards the common good of society by protecting its right and its duty to render such rebukes unto Caesar. □

### 5-Year Term Deposit

# 3.00%

**CASHABLE**  
on each anniversary\*\*



\*Rates are subject to change without notice. Some conditions apply, contact one of our branches for details.  
\*\*Subject to a 1% penalty.

**GVCC credit union**  
GREATER VANCOUVER COMMUNITY  
**For Real People**

**With 5 locations**  
to serve you!

Chequing, Savings, Mortgages, Loans & Friendly Advice  
[www.gvccu.com](http://www.gvccu.com)

**VANCOUVER**  
100-4088 Cambie St.  
604 876 7101

**BRENTWOOD**  
1801 Willingdon Ave.  
604 298 3344

**LOUGHEED**  
9608 Cameron St.  
604 421 3456

**NEW WESTMINSTER**  
25B-800 McBride Blvd.  
604 525 1414

**SURREY**  
1-9989 152nd St.  
604 584 4434