

“The Betrayal of the Intellectuals: Orthodox Clergy and the Suspicion of Expertise”

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My remarks come from my observations and experiences in three distinct but inter-related perspectives. I am a priest of the Antiochian Archdiocese and have now served for some 16 years as deacon and priest. My second point of view is shaped by a more than 40-year career as a professor of history and religious studies in both private and public universities in the U.S. and lecturing in European universities. Finally, I served for 10 years as a university administrator heading one of the largest departments of history in the United States and directing a research institute.

For these reflections I chose to use the title of a 1927 book by the French author Julien Benda, *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals*. The title was intended as an indictment of the intelligentsia for failing in their public duty to pursue integrity in analyzing the issues and authoritarian persons threatening contemporary society regardless of the social or political costs to themselves. The American situation is slightly different because historically Americans have seldom been inclined to defer to the wisdom of the highly educated in any way comparable to what has been the case, and remains so even today, in many European countries. Historians of higher education in the U.S. have pointed out that Americans have been willing to support what we would call “practical knowledge”. Land grant universities that furthered the progress of agriculture, industry, and national defense did not generate hostility on the part of the population as a whole. If we think of what were traditionally called the “learned professions” of clergy, lawyers, and medical doctors, public trust was placed in those three groups in exactly that order—and to a degree that has not changed even today. (For an example, see Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Professions: A Social History of the New England Ministry, 1750-1850* (Philadelphia, 1978). As late as the 1920s most Americans were not high school graduates, and a college degree remained beyond the hopes of the majority of Americans until after World War II. Only the availability of the GI Bill enabled male veterans into aspire to study—and in some notable cases— to pursue careers, in the American academy. Through the so-called Sputnik scare of the early 1960s Americans paid little attention to experts in the humanities and social sciences, but they were not uniformly hostile, either. (See Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York, 1976). But all of this has changed in the past half-century.

I want to argue for two main causes for the shift in attitude. One has to do with an internal change in university and college life. Through the 1960s, faculty who taught in the humanities and social sciences were not especially well paid—“genteel poverty” was what described the life of those men and some women who were drawn from agricultural, small town, urban, and suburban communities. But the competition for government grants and money transformed the major universities and many of the elite liberal arts colleges during the 1960s into entrepreneurial institutions where competition to hire the best and the brightest led to a market-place mentality that meant faculty showed little loyalty to an institution or religious tradition and a readiness to be bought up by elite institutions that could afford to pay more and offer a prestige title as well.

The brief change in undergraduate enrollment of the late 1940s and 50s that had recruited working class, rural, and in some cases, minority candidates, began to disappear as well. By the 1970s, the overwhelming majority of graduate students and new faculty were suburban, white, and with few or no memories of the working class or farming communities that had briefly produced teachers and researchers in the American academy. Politically, this has led to a distinct shift in political identity to the left, generated in part by the loathing with which academics had regarded the communist-red-baiting of the Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. The alienation was already obvious to some scholars, most famously Richard Hofstadter whose 1963 book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* should have generated more self-criticism within the academy than it did. If there has been a treason of the intellectuals during the past half century, part of that has manifested itself in an indifference toward the disappearance of conservative, religiously observant colleagues and a shameful willingness to bow to the pressure of student consumers who now insist on being protected from speech, knowledge, and discussion they claim to find threatening. Some have suggested that there is nothing new in these patterns—for example David F. Labaree, *A Perfect Mess: The Unlikely Ascendancy of American Higher Education* (Chicago, 2017). But at least for North Americans looking to do graduate work in theology, I conclude that the situation has in fact, become far more dire. This shift in university culture coincided with the alienation of many Protestant and Catholic Christians from the faculties of theology in the elite universities, a development chronicled by George Marsden's 1994 analysis *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Non-belief*. That alienation occurred just as the old American industrial economy imploded leaving ethnic, working class Christian neighborhoods and entire cities facing what is by now a multi-generational struggle with social, economic, and political marginalization.

The secondary cause of the fraught relationship of the Orthodox with the Academy is rooted in this first sequence of events. With rare exceptions, candidates for the Orthodox clergy in the United States have been recruited from the ethnic, white, working classes that had little or no positive personal or collective engagement with the American research university or its internal transformation. Fear, and lack of personal experience have driven too many Orthodox critics of the academy to a kind of guilt by association mentality where even participation by Orthodox scholars in non-Orthodox events have come to be regarded with hostility. Despite the creation of the Assembly of Bishops's predecessor body in 1960, the Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops of the Americas did not include all bishops. The 1994 meeting of 29 bishops at Ligonier, Pennsylvania began a process of bishops getting to know one another personally, but with rare exceptions, these men had never enjoyed the opportunity for advanced study in theology or any other discipline. Moreover, the refusal of the various "mother churches" to endorse a move away from "diaspora" thinking toward a unified Orthodox Church re-enforced attacks that had already been directed at the theologians of the old Metropolia such as Alexander Schmemmann, John Meyendorff, or Thomas Hopko who labored in the attempt to create and sustain a tradition of scholarly theological inquiry inherited from the St Sergius Institute in Paris. Movement back to the familiar, the tribal, and the comfortable has not only accelerated among the various jurisdictions in North America since the 1990s. The more insidious tendency to contrast theological learning coupled with genuine expertise in other fields of knowledge with a "spirituality" has also intensified into a myopic vision that sees only a "Christ against culture"

model of the church as authentically Orthodox in North America. This spurious version of a hyper-Orthodoxy claims its roots in a romanticized past located only in the “traditional” geographic centers of the Orthodox world where the pernicious effects of the apostate West have, so it is claimed, been kept at bay. The threat of attack from these quarters has also worked against those few bishops who might be positively inclined to call upon lay and ordained academic expertise as the Orthodox in North America confront the challenges of living in a society and culture where they, at least for the foreseeable future, will need to summon the courage to be a vocal, but informed, minority voice. Both bishops, and the lower clergy and laity need to re-commit themselves to an informed, critical, but mutually supportive realization of authentic Orthodox Tradition in a self-ruled Church of North America.