Campus tour: The university of all things

by Carol Zaleski in the August 10, 2004 issue

Summer is sailing past and we are trying to catch up to it in our 1988 Volvo with its worn upholstery, carpet of crushed Ritz crackers and Freon-guzzling air conditioner. We are on the road, not as carefree summer bohemians, but as the sober, hopeful parents of a high school senior searching for a good liberal arts college. Within the range we permit ourselves—no more than three hours from home—an immense wealth of possibilities opens up: public, private, urban, rural, secular, religious. I'm not sure what it's like for our son, but for his parents it is tremendously exciting. We can't help picturing ourselves in his place. If only we had realized in our youth what marvels a college has to offer, and what further marvels it conceals. Imagine four years in the artificial paradise of an American college campus, sheltered from mundane worries, devoting oneself wholeheartedly to the study of Egyptology or coastal and marine science or Scandinavian mythology or plate tectonics, in love with learning for its own sake, and rejoicing to see how all knowledge, in its separate departments and divisions, fits together to form an intelligible living, breathing whole, a universe whose wonders tell the glory of God.

What's God got to do with it? There's the rub. We hope that a college education will make John more deep-rooted in his faith, more articulate at giving reasons for the hope within, better able to resist the insinuations of a decadent culture, more truly himself. But we are far from sure about what sort of college is likely to foster such growth, or which colleges we do better to avoid. All the well-regarded colleges have excellent faculty because the competition for academic jobs is fierce; and they are filled with bright, lively, idealistic students who love to learn. The colleges we have visited present strikingly similar profiles: maximum freedom in the curriculum, with an emphasis on "interdisciplinarity" and "globalism"; small, discussion-oriented classes; innovative freshman seminars, abundant opportunities for study abroad, internships and service-learning; vegetarian and vegan alternatives in the dining halls; dorms that look like sitcom sets—think *Three's Company* or *Friends*; a never-ending stream of radical political lobbyists, late-night television celebrities, rock

bands, traveling monastics and world music groups; pornographic columns in the student newspaper (reverently serving the adolescent idol of oh-so-daring self-expression); incessant consciousness-raising sessions on diversity, gender and sexuality; espresso bars; fitness and stress-busting programs to rival a Palm Springs spa; jaunty safe-sex kits; wireless connectivity—all the trappings of contemporary undergraduate life. The spectacle is as disturbing as it is exhilarating; we sense that we are casting John off into the deep.

Wherever he enrolls, he will experience, we hope, the best gift college can offer, which is the chance to live in a genuine community of learning. He will avoid the politicized departments and search out the buried treasures: the professor of Old English whose colleagues think he is out of step, the math professor who makes visible the beauty of Euler's formula, the psychologist who acknowledges the mysteries of human volition.

Where is God in this picture? Surely if God is left out of the picture, the picture suffers; indeed, there *is* no picture but one the student is left to construct on his own. As John Henry Newman puts it in his *Idea of a University*, "To shut up this great truth . . . is to put our whole encyclopædia of knowledge out of joint," and more emphatic still:

> Religious Truth is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge. To blot it out is nothing short, if I may so speak, of unraveling the web of University Teaching. It is, according to the Greek proverb, to take the Spring from out of the year; it is to imitate the preposterous proceeding of those tragedians who represented a drama with the omission of its principal part.

Originally the liberal arts were supposed to be the servants, standard-bearers and troubadours of divine wisdom. This is the first lesson pilgrims learn when they look up at the great western facade of Chartres Cathedral and see the seven liberal arts making a graceful arc around Mary, the heavenly queen, enthroned as the seat of wisdom. If God is left out of the picture, then the seat of wisdom is empty: there is no maternal lap, no holy child to bring all knowledge into loving subjection.

But there is more than one way to bring God into the picture. I hope John will meet practitioners of what George Marsden has called "the outrageous idea of Christian scholarship." I hope he will encounter scholars who, whatever their religious convictions, humbly observe the limits of their specialized expertise, and manifest a

magnanimous dedication to sound method in the search for truth. I won’t mind, however, if John never encounters a biologist who teaches intelligent design, or a physicist who interrupts his board work to say, “. . . and then a miracle occurs.” It is enough if his teachers encourage, or at least do not thwart, the contemplation of the whole *universitas rerum*, the university of all things, as a miracle delivered by the hand of grace—so that by the end of his course of liberal arts, our son may look up and see that the throne of wisdom is not empty after all. As in the 12th century so in the 21st, the mother of God rests upon it, and the holy child sits in her lap, tossing the orb of earth like a glittering plaything, catching it and never letting it drop into the abyss.