

**Robert K. Carlson - *Truth on Trial: Liberal Education Be Hanged*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Crisis Books, 1995.**

If someone were to write a history of the political correctness movement of the 1980s and 1990s that has revolutionized higher education in America, *Truth On Trial* would serve as a seminal work, as a kind of *Locus Classicus* that verifies the hypocrisy and cant that have corrupted academe. Although the term “political correctness” was not current during the controversy regarding the Integrated Humanities Program at Kansas University in the 1970s, all the horrors of this hydraheaded monster appeared in all their ugliness.

Relying upon all the important documents—memoranda, correspondence, an audiotaped lecture, interviews, newspaper articles, committee reports, and speeches to the College Assembly—Dr. Carlson presents the facts and lets the poignant story of the Pearson Integrated Humanities Program tell itself from beginning to end. The tale begins with three experienced, renowned professors—all of them having received prestigious teaching awards—organizing a program informed by the great works of Western civilization for freshman and sophomores at a state university. For four continuous semesters students would regale themselves upon such classics as the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, *Don Quixote*, and *Ivanhoe*. They would listen twice a week to the three professors discuss these books in a conversational, Socratic method that studied literature as a source of perennial wisdom and timeless truth for the human condition. Animated by their mentors’ enormous learning, love of knowledge, and wonder for the true, the good, and the beautiful, the students of the program formed a dynamic community within the university. Memorizing poetry, studying Latin, mastering calligraphy, learning waltzes, and travelling to Europe opened the minds of these students to the riches of Western civilization and the roots of Christian culture. The great benefit of this authentic liberal arts education was its “quixotic” spirit, its awareness of those things that are to be

valued for their own sake rather than as a means to an end: wisdom, beauty, goodness, worship, friendship, and play. Thus the Integrated Humanities Program offered to its students the motto of "*nascantur in admiratione*" (let them be born in wonder) as it taught them how to play with their minds, enjoy learning, and love life. Like a child in love with the sheer fun of play, the students who studied in this program were in love with truth and enjoyed the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, for its priceless wisdom.

Cardinal Newman writes in his novel *Loss and Gain* that one cannot stop the growth of the mind. This law of the mental life not only led the students of the Integrated Humanities Program to a knowledge of the classics and an appreciation of Western civilization but also to a recognition of the Catholic nature of the truth and the Catholic shape of Christian culture. Those who love the truth will seek it, and those who seek it will discover it in the Catholic Church. As wonder is the beginning of all knowledge—a lesson these students learned from their study of Plato and Aristotle—so the love of knowledge naturally leads to the fullness of the truth in the Catholic Church. When a number of students in the program converted to the Catholic faith, there was a hue and cry from some parents, from the faculty, from Protestant and Jewish clergymen, from the American Civil Liberties Union, and from the media. Professors Nelick, Quinn, and Senior were accused of proselytizing and of teaching in bad faith, brainwashing and indoctrinating impressionable, naive students. Presumed to be guilty because of the large numbers of conversions that resulted from the program, the three professors never received a fair hearing, they were subjected to calumny and bigotry, and the testimonies of students and the public content of their lecture were totally disregarded as university authorities mounted their case to terminate the integrated program, a "death by administration" that Professor Quinn described as "a discreet and slow euthanasia, performed for our own good. This is the style preferred by good bureaucrats."

The real issue was not the fact that three Catholic professors provided a course of study in the liberal arts that inspired hundreds to follow the road to Rome. Professor Senior stated the crux of the matter best: "In a university where the teaching of relatively trivial and even bizarre matters is tolerated under an inflated idea of academic freedom it is stupid and indecent to suggest that the teaching of a magnificent, venerable, intellectually brilliant, and spiritually splendid body of thought should be suppressed by an anxious and inquisitorial pluralism." The Integrated Humanities Program violated the canons of relativism, skepticism, and pluralism that modern universities propagate. It did not cultivate a tolerance for diversity but demonstrated that the classical-Christian tradition in Western civilization was founded on the objectivity of knowledge and on the power of human reason to discover the truth. Like the ancient Sophists who accused Socrates of corrupting the youth of Athens, the administrators and

faculty of Kansas University argued that the Pearson professors were guilty of imposing their morality and religious belief upon unwitting minds. The university that defended the academic freedom to think according to the dictates of reason and evidence could not tolerate the free and open exchange of thought in the forum of ideas.

Like Socratic teachers rather than Sophists, Professors Nelick, Quinn, and Senior appealed to the light of reason in the minds of students themselves to discover the truths of the perennial philosophy reflected in the great books. When these truths challenged the prevailing opinions and ideologies of modernity, then these professors were accused of “bias” and their teaching called “indoctrination.” Of course their critics presume that they are above bias; they hold points of view. While these critics speak the cant of academic freedom and tolerance for multiple points of view, they are so doctrinaire about relativism and pluralism that censorship is their final response to all real intellectual debate. Why was Socrates imprisoned and silenced? Why did three professors out of 1,800 at Kansas University suffer for the integrity of their teaching? Because the truth is that powerful.

*Truth On Trial* is a timely book that not only exposes the politicization of the university and the ugliness of political correctness on many campuses but also illuminates for us the real purpose of education and the true vocation of teaching. As Socrates proved by his example and as Professors Nelick, Quinn, and Senior follow in his tradition, the martyrdom required of great teachers demands that they seek the truth, love the truth, defend the truth, and suffer for the truth regardless of the price it exacts—whether it is hanging or “death by administration.” Dr. Carlson lets the principal actors of this drama speak for themselves, and the most powerful and eloquent voices of all are the students whose testimonies form the epilogue of the book:

Professors Senior, Quinn, and Nelick were among the best teachers I ever had. Their lectures about the great books were really conversations about the true, the good, and the beautiful. That they cared passionately about these things was manifest, I think, to everyone. Equally obvious was their genuine concern for the students as well.

When truth, reason, debate, and fairmindedness are sacrificed for the idols of political correctness, then the very basis of civilization itself is threatened, and only “might makes right.”

—Mitchell Kalpakgian  
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