The Problem That "Lies" Within: How "Collegiality" Undermines the Academy

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THROUGH our work as members of the Status of the Women in the Profession Committee, we have come to realize that the hiring of women and people of color within the religious studies departments and theological schools has elicited mixed reactions. On the one hand, these institutions publicly present and support the view that "race-ing" forward to engender diversity within the academy is a marked sign of progress away from what once appeared to be an exclusive group. On the other hand, however, the addition of women and the smattering of underrepresented racial-ethnic groups have not altered, transformed, or ended institutional hegemony built on white male normativity.

While those of liberal sensibilities ballyhoo diversification in the academy, their conservative counterparts denounce and decry its effects and merits. Yet, all signs indicate that diversification is by no means as widespread as has been touted within higher education in general, or within the realm of religious studies and theological education in particular. Only 29 percent of faculty and 23 percent of tenured faculty are women within departments of religion and theology at colleges and universities, while 29 percent of seminary faculty and 26 percent of its tenured faculty are women. The statistics are even more bleak in both contexts where racial-ethnic minorities represent less than 16 percent of the total faculty. (This suggests that zero persons of color on a given faculty is the norm rather than the exception). Women of color represent less than 5 percent of all faculties within the field.[1] Consequently, the data runs contrary to the assumption of diversity's supporters or its critics that the academy is overrun with women and that the marginalization and exclusion of people of color are relics of the past. Given the rapid globalization of our society and economy, the religious pluralism in America, and the changing composition of our student bodies and campuses, the pragmatic demands of diversification are obvious: Institutions must take seriously their roles to prepare the way for diversity on campuses and for communities that are increasingly of color, and also have more than 50 percent women on faculty (faculty is currently on average 90–95 percent white, 80 percent male, and therefore disproportionately white and male).

Caught between a besieged past and an angst-ridden present, what was once delighted in as "the old boys' club" has been supplanted with, as feminist Susan Faludi suggests, the all-encompassing fear of white men as "the new endangered species."[2] As countless scholars have attested, regardless of advanced degrees or scholarly expertise, the entry of women and people of color into the profession can never translate into membership status within that most rarefied club, the collegium. Instead, those who embody the reality of diversity within the academy ironically become the supposed "problem of diversity" — a problem that elicits either liberal pity ("because they seem so out of place") or conservative contempt ("because they really don't belong").

As perennial outsiders, women and racial-ethnic faculty often must wonder: *Exactly what is the role and meaning of collegiality? What are its presumed behaviors? Most importantly, is it possible to prevent collegiality from becoming a fail-safe mechanism for nepotism or a disguise for discrimination against women and people of color?* These questions are necessary for us to ask aloud and engage, if we truly seek to advance our pursuit of knowledge production.

Not surprisingly, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has noted that collegiality is frequently employed incorrectly as an evaluative means designed to ensure homogeneity of faculty and thought, by excluding diversity of person and practice on the basis of their difference from a perceived norm. In this respect, the invocation of 'collegiality' often threatens the basic academic freedom that is of fundamental importance to the academic enterprise. In the heat of important decision-making regarding promotion and/or tenure, as well as other traditional areas of faculty responsibility such as curriculum revision and academic hiring, "collegiality" can and is often misconstrued as the expectation that a faculty member should display appropriate "enthusiasm" or "dedication," should evince "a constructive attitude" that will "foster harmony" and not encourage "divisiveness," or display an excessive deference to administrative or faculty decisions that are based upon "reasoned" discussion. Such expectations are flatly contrary to the very foundation of academic freedom that protects a faculty member's right to dissent from the judgments of colleagues and question the actions of administrators.[3]

Cultural critics such as bell hooks, Patricia Williams, and Cornel West, along with religion scholars such as M. Shawn Copeland, Katie Cannon, and Miguel de la Torre, have shown how this skewed environment is one wherein "collegial" behavior is (mis)perceived as the ability of women and people of color as intellectuals and scholars to function symbolically as white men.[4] Indeed, feminist scholar Michelle Wallace has shown how women of color are "the least convincing in this role, the least trustworthy."[5]

Since no one can "outwhite" or "outman" an actual white man, women and other underrepresented faculty simply become inferior. Herein is the reality inversion and implicit mendacity of the academy: collegiality, fit, and desirability are measured by how disembodied and duplicitous women and people of color can become, by denouncing and denying their difference from their white male counterparts. Therefore, to be different, or to think or do differently, is to be subjected routinely to excessive scrutiny and constant challenges concerning one's teaching, research, or service — regardless if one's qualifications, training, and performance speak to the contrary. Simply put, symmetry in merit does not necessarily translate to parity in regard to the professional respect of one's peers.[6]

This predicament of "collegiality" is especially daunting — if not dangerous — for pre-tenured faculty, for whom it is often as if two faculty manuals exist. One manual provides an explicit guide for underrepresented groups to follow, in order to understand collegiality as a virtue (as opposed to an evaluative criterion), that one displays through her or his successful execution of teaching, research, and service. The other manual is nothing more than an implicit handbook for the "old guard," in which collegiality is employed as an ambiguous, evaluative trump card used subversively and surreptitiously to maintain conformity, ensure deference, and silence dissenting opinions and "disobedient" personalities.

Embedded within hiring practices, peer evaluations, and promotion reviews, this ambiguous notion of collegiality not only represents a "safety mechanism" that protects white male privilege, but also poses a very real danger to the academic freedom and professional success of women and other underrepresented groups. Normative faculty powerbrokers often anticipate the arrival of those who do not embody the norm as if they are the veritable barbarians at the gate. Eventually, they come to sound the "collegial" alarm, in order to forestall in covert fashion the imminent discursive or demographic shift. That is, they will proclaim a deficiency in the underrepresented faculty member's performance that they will ground in his or her perceived lack of "collegiality" — be it his lack of "fit" (read embodiment), her "disrespect" (read dissenting opinion), or their "unwillingness to work for the best interest of the institution" (read criticism of discriminatory policies, procedures, and processes). No matter how competent, productive, or hard-working faculty of diversity may be, their very presence, promotion, and possible permanence somehow suggest an undermining of the mission, identity, and traditions of the (old boys') institution. As a result, white male normativity comes to bemoan the crucible of diversity as the crisis of our time.

Therein lies the problem. Its resolution will be found not merely by dealing with the "flesh and blood" demographics that facilitate the diversification of faculty, curricula, and student populations, but rather, and more importantly, by exorcising the "powers and principalities" of the "old boy's system" that wreaks and haunts our otherwise hallowed, would-be collegial halls. Echoing the words of the late political cartoonist Walt Kelly, "We have met the enemy and he is us," the old guard must look inward and invest in some serious soul-searching of its own, rather than continuing its course of scathing, collegial scrutiny of their sisters and darker brothers, if the academy is ever going to race forward and engender progress.

Endnotes

[1] Taken from "American Academy of Religion Survey of Undergraduate Religion and Theology Programs in the United States and Canada Further Data Analysis Summary of Results" presented at the Numbers Count: Gathering, Managing, and Using Census Data in Program Review and Enhancement Special Topics Forum at the 2003 Annual Meeting (Atlanta, Georgia, November 24, 2003) and the Association of Theological Schools "2008–2009 Annual Data Tables" (*http://www.ats.edu/Pages/default.aspx*).

[2] See Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1999).

[3] "On Collegiality as a Criterion for Faculty Evaluation" in *American Association of University Professors, Policy Documents and Reports*, 10th ed. (Washington, DC, 2006), 39–40.

[4] See Patricia Williams, Seeing a Color-blind Future: The Paradox of Race (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1997); bell hooks, Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black (Boston: South End Press, 1989); M. Shawn Copeland, "Collegiality as a Moral and Ethical Practice," in Practice What You Preach: Virtues, Ethics, and Power in the Lives of Pastoral Ministers and Their Congregations, ed. by James F. Keenan, S.J., and Joseph Kotva, Jr. (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 1999); Katie Cannon, Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community (New York: Continuum, November 1997); and Miguel A. De La Torre, Editor, *AAR Career Guide for Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession* (Atlanta: American Academy of Religion), online.*www.aarweb.org/publications/Online_Publications/Career_Guide*; *Guide to the Perplexing: A Survival Manual for Women in Religious Studies* (The American Academy of Religion Individual Volumes, No 2), (Atlanta: American Academy of Religion, 1992).

[5] Michel Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pot to Theory* (New York: Verson, 1990), 7, as found in Shawn Copeland, "Collegiality as a Moral and Ethical Practice," 318.

[6] Shawn Copeland, "Collegiality as a Moral and Ethical Practice," 317.