

The (Lost) Idea of the University*

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IN HIS seminal *Political Theory* article of 1984, Michael Sandel lamented “the gradual shift, in our practices and institutions, from a public philosophy of common purposes to one of fair procedures, from a politics of good to a politics of right, from the national republic to the procedural republic.”¹ The university, we may say—and the two facts are certainly connected—has undergone an analogous shift, to the point where it is no longer reasonable to think of it as a *universitas*, a single community with a common center and purpose. By 1963 Clark Kerr had already redubbed it the *multiversity*: “a series of processes producing a series of results—a mechanism held together by administrative rules and powered by money.”² It has come to resemble, in Cardinal Newman’s words, “a sort of bazaar, or pantechmicon, in which wares of all kinds are heaped together for sale in stalls independent of each other.”³

This is not all bad, let us admit, for its wares and results are often impressive, as Kerr observed in his Godkin lectures. A good “multiversity” (I gratefully work at one) is still a fine place, or can be, both for students and for professional scholars, not to speak of the many others it employs. There is a moral vacuum at its heart, however, into which raw utilitarianism has

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¹ Michael J. Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” *Political Theory* 12 (1984): 81–96, at 93.

² Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963; 5th ed. 2001), 20.

³ John Henry Newman, *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education*, 1852 (E-Texts for Victorianists, ed. Alfred J. Drake, 2001), Discourse V, 139.

for some time been rushing. "American higher education," wrote Kerr more recently, "began as an effort at moral uplift. It continues as an effort to get a good or better job. A life of affluence is replacing a philosophy of life as the main purpose of higher education."⁴

Now we ought to exercise caution concerning this talk of moral uplift and a philosophy of life. Was not Michael Oakeshott essentially right in describing more modestly the university's distinctive gift to the undergraduate as "the gift of an interval"⁵ for the purpose of developing the art of conversation? This art, or rather this conversation, might lead to a philosophy of life, but the immediate object of education is simply "to enable a man to make his own thought clear and to attend to what passes before him."⁶ That was also Newman's view: "Liberal Education, viewed in itself, is simply the cultivation of the intellect, as such, and its object is nothing more or less than intellectual excellence."⁷ The characteristic virtues of the university, therefore, must be those that create space and opportunity for patient attention and for undistracted scrutiny. But of course this supposition requires precisely that we resist a utilitarian approach to university education and that we reject the indiscriminate multiplication of specializations. If it does not permit us to expect the university to provide students with moral integrity or a coherent worldview, it does require that the university maintain the communal virtues conducive to the art of conversation and that it repudiate "that most dismal of all sentiments: *scientia propter potentiam*"—the pursuit of knowledge merely for the sake of power.⁸

On the other hand, it should be observed that this repudiation is already a turning towards the good and, as such, a moral turning. Though moral uplift and moral formation and the achievement of a philosophy of life require higher resources than the university can provide—though it be entirely true that, even when the university introduces students to some

⁴ Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 221. Insofar as that is the case, it helps to explain a declining interest in the humanities, though the decline of the humanities themselves provides a more immediate explanation. Whether it helps to explain a decline in our democracy too (cf. Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010]) is more difficult to say; perhaps it works the other way round.

⁵ Michael Oakeshott, "The Idea of a University" (1950), in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 101.

⁶ Oakeshott, "The Universities" (1949), in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 133.

⁷ Newman, *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education*, Discourse VI, 196.

⁸ Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 128. "The problem of the universities today is how to avoid destruction at the hands of men who have no use for their characteristic virtues, men who are convinced that 'knowledge is power'" (130).

of those resources in their literary form, it is powerless to render them effective against human frailty and sin⁹—the decision against mere utility, and in favor of a liberal education as the university's main object, is itself a moral decision shaped by our Hellenic and Judeo-Christian heritage.¹⁰

To this we must advert again lest we prove, not to be over-cautious, but to be cautious in the wrong way. Meanwhile, let us ask what follows from the advance of utilitarianism and from the decline of the university's characteristic virtues—the communal virtues that make for good scholarly conversation and for a *universitas*.

A Brief Pathology

Among the consequences I want to mention are the following:¹¹

First, a decline in autonomy; that is, a new susceptibility to the political and economic and ideological forces that seek to manipulate or even dictate the terms of the university's work. While such forces have always been in play (recall, say, Cromwellian Oxford) the weakness of the modern university makes it easier, perhaps more willing, prey.¹² Neither as a *universitas scholarum* nor as a *universitas scientorum* can it claim the degree of integrity, internal accountability, or fortitude necessary to resist subduction as it engages the greater and lesser causes of the day. The difficulty in maintaining its independence from state and market has even led some to speak of a crisis of the university.¹³ While that may be an exaggeration—crises,

⁹ "Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man" (Newman, *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education*, Discourse VI, 196).

¹⁰ To repudiate raw utilitarianism is not, of course, to repudiate utility as such, but through affirmation of the good to place means in proper relation to ends, and ends in proper relation to each other. Oakeshott, unlike Newman, takes too little account of this in his rendering of the good of the university, though that is understandable in view of the provocation provided by Sir Walter Moberly.

¹¹ The list might be much longer, and the list of remedial steps much longer yet; when it comes to the latter, I intend to concentrate on one only.

¹² The failure of Berlin, the prototypical modern university, to resist either the Kaiser or the Führer is frequently cited in this connection.

¹³ Cf. William Neilson and Chad Gaffield, *Universities in Crisis: A Mediaeval Institution in the Twenty-First Century* (Montreal: The Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1986). Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) is more pessimistic, but the object of his consideration has a brief lifespan of but two centuries. Mark Taylor has proclaimed a quite different kind of crisis, and a solution attuned to the global marketplace, in *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming our Colleges and Universities* (New York: Knopf, 2010). Taylor's book, I think, is susceptible to the same critique with which

in any case, “ye shall always have with you” and it is a great mistake to over-react—it is safe to say that the peculiar good of the university that determines its proper activity, and its autonomy in that activity, is not as clear as once it was.

Second, creeping bureaucratization. Behind the still impressive mediaeval façades, featuring “provosts” and “deans” and other remnants of an almost forgotten symbolic world,¹⁴ is a growing army of administrative officers whose task is more managerial than academic; who indeed find reason, or are given it by their counterparts in the Ministry of Education, to bury their colleagues in procedural considerations and in the paper-work that apparently holds the whole contraption together. In short, the tendency of the multiversity—the diverse ends of which are not ordered to a common goal—is to undermine the communal life on which a good education, like a healthy republic, depends,¹⁵ and to replace it with committee life. Such is the price of elevating procedure over purpose, and form over content.¹⁶ What is to be rationalized in the modern university, and reduced to order, is first and foremost the university itself. But the bazaar that the university has become is not really capable of any persistent order; hence the endless rounds of tinkering that keep everyone busy with matters managerial.

Third, disciplinary inflation—by which I mean the tendency of a discipline to become indistinct, not knowing its own limits. What Benedict XVI referred to in his Regensburg lecture as “attempts to construct an ethic from the rules of evolution or from psychology and sociology” is one rather important example.¹⁷ A different example might be drawn from English or other literature departments, say, which these days do double service as departments of post-modern philosophy. Or from geography and environmental units, which may go so far as to fancy themselves saviors of the world. This, of course, is what Newman foresaw and warned

Oakeshott demolished Moberly's *The Crisis of the Universities* (London: SCM, 1949)—a “peculiarly faithless” book, according to Oakeshott, having “the hysterical atmosphere of a revivalist meeting” (109).

¹⁴ Cf. Patrick J. Deneen, “Science and the Decline of the Liberal Arts,” *The New Atlantis* No. 26 (Fall 2009/Winter 2010): 60f.

¹⁵ Cf. Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” 93.

¹⁶ And of unitarian over trinitarian theology, which preceded this; but I am getting ahead of myself. On the ascendancy of the bureaucrat over the professor, see Readings (pp. 3, 8), who refers us to Alphonso Borrero Cabal's *The University as an Institution Today* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1993).

¹⁷ Such attempts are “simply inadequate” (“Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections,” Lecture of the Holy Father, 12 September 2006, University of Regensburg).

against, when in his Fifth Discourse he pointed out that “one science is ever pressing upon another, unless kept in check; and the only guarantee of Truth is the cultivation of them all.” Such, he insisted, “is the office of a University.”¹⁸

Fourth, sliding standards and grade inflation. Need it be said that far too many students today, even at elite universities, have a remarkably narrow range of historical reference points, miss most literary allusions, are unable to recognize and avoid standard fallacies in argumentation, and haven’t the faintest idea how to use a semi-colon—that their primary and secondary education, in other words, has not brought them even as far as an elementary mastery of the *trivium*? These same students are bemused by the expectation that they should learn to inhabit the library; in spite of their failure to do so, they nonetheless find the awarding of a *C* or even a *B* (leaving aside the *D* or *F* they may deserve) an enormous insult. All of this goes quite naturally, however, with the consumerism that characterizes the multiversity and with the democratization of higher education.¹⁹

Fifth, disoriented students. The shift from a politics of good to a politics of right has unhinged an entire civilization. The analogous shift in education from the pursuit of wisdom, or at least of some knowledge of the good, to the mere provision of degrees has unhinged recent generations of students. Our best universities may aspire, as McGill does, to be “research-intensive and student-centered,” but that begs the question as to what they can contribute to the student’s own centeredness or integrity. Can they help their students, even indirectly, to discover what a human being is and what makes for human flourishing? If not, how can they help them decide what research is worth pursuing and under what conditions? In this connection it is worth noticing that we now have ethics committees to oversee almost everything done in the university, but (vague gestures in the direction of human dignity notwithstanding) these

¹⁸ *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education*, Discourse V, 136. (This discourse, unfortunately, was not included in the *The Idea of a University*, in which the Fifth Discourse is actually Newman’s sixth.) Oakeshott makes his approach from the other side but observes the same shallowness: “the real defect of a specialism does not spring from its failure to be the whole, or [even] its failure to know its place in the whole to which it belongs, but when it succeeds in being no more than superficial within its own limits” (*The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 132).

¹⁹ If there is a crisis in the university today it has something to do with “the altogether excessive number of undergraduates” (Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 117). To immerse oneself in a great crowd is not the way to develop the art of conversation, nor is everyone fitted for the kind of conversation the university seeks. The reintroduction of challenging entrance exams would go some way towards addressing this problem.

committees seldom rise to the challenge of wrestling with fundamental questions. Shall we conduct research on human embryos, modify germ lines, harvest fetal matter, etc.? Such questions are not addressed because we no longer have the necessary confidence to address them; and we do not have the confidence because in ethics, too, we are no more than a procedural republic. In the procedural republic such matters are left to lobbyists, not ethicists, or to ethicists who are but lobbyists. And the lobbyists know their business. They know how to turn “right” into rights, and “rights” into wrongs²⁰—which is just what happens when right is detached from good.²¹

Sixth, academic hucksterism. One problem with the pantechicon is that it carries the counterfeit as well as the real, the imitation as well as the genuine article; and this is increasingly the case in the multiversity as it rumbles down the road from one stop to the next. Take, for example, the multiplying artifacts of the social constructionists, who proffer their wares these days throughout the entire spectrum of the humanities. Gender studies and sexual diversity programs are their bread and butter, but in various other ways they promote the anti-scientific notion that the universe has no order but the order we choose to give it—in short, that there is no such thing as the universe but only the kaleidoscopic, quickly collapsible, and ultimately unintelligible worlds that we choose to make for ourselves.²² Is it not time to acknowledge that this notion, however partnered with genuine insights in social psychology, is inimical to the

²⁰ Indeed, into what would be plain silliness—witness, for example, the “all-comers” policy of the Hastings School of Law, recently upheld by the Supreme Court (561 U.S. 2010)—were it not an evil kind of silliness.

²¹ Perhaps in this paragraph I sound more like Moberly than like Oakeshott, who rightly worries that too much emphasis on acquiring a philosophy of life risks turning the university into a worthless “forum for the discussion of ideologies” (Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 122). But we must place this worry in the context of the latter’s broader concerns: “A university will have ceased to exist when its learning has degenerated into what is now called research, when its teaching has become mere instruction and occupies the whole of an undergraduate’s time, and when those who came to be taught come, not in search of their intellectual fortune but with a vitality so unroused or exhausted that they wish only to be provided with a serviceable moral and intellectual outfit; when they come with no understanding of the manners of conversation but desire only a qualification for earning a living or a certificate to let them in on the exploitation of the world” (104). What Oakeshott is trying to avoid—utilitarianism—can be avoided only if moral development (as opposed to a moral “outfit”) is recognized as something essential.

²² This view we are presently in danger of incorporating into law via “gender identity” legislation; cf. Farrow, “Blurring Sexual Boundaries,” *First Things* (March 2011): 17–19.

whole idea of the university and toxic to society as such? On the part of the physical sciences, we might mention the global warming débâcle, complete with peer review cartels and manipulated data, but there is no need to go into that. Suffice it to say that the manners of scholarly conversation have been violated here as well, under pressure of ideologies that have insinuated themselves into the university. Disoriented students, it may be added, are easily misled by sophists and their pseudo-disciplines, as they are easily misled by the provocations of Frosh Week; and they get no help from those who can only shrug their shoulders when faced with the question “What is good?” or wash their hands at the question “What is truth?”

Seventh, the elevation of the art of conversation into “a separate *techné*,” as Oakeshott puts it;²³ that is, into a discipline in its own right, perhaps even into a master discipline presiding over the circle of learning—as if the medium really were the message (something literally true, as McLuhan knew, only in the case of Christ). Here the classroom also becomes a procedural republic, in which more and more importance is ascribed to the *process* of communication and less and less to what is communicated. Call it attending to attending, rather than attending to what passes before a man. I do not deny that there is something to be gained from this; but it nurtures the narcissistic tendency in contemporary education and concedes too much to its (open or hidden) anthropological assumptions. But we must not embark now on that topic.²⁴

Building the Bazaar

If we pause to ask how the shift whose consequences we have been tracing came about—that is, how Newman’s bazaar was built—we might begin with Newman’s own analysis: it was built by disjoining education from religion.²⁵ “You will soon break up into fragments the whole circle of secular knowledge,” claimed Newman, “if you begin the mutilation with divine”; for “Religious Truth is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge.”²⁶ It is a portion, in that God gives himself to be

²³ Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 126

²⁴ I have said something about it in my expert’s report in *Loyola and Zucchi v. Courschesne* (Québec Superior Court No. 500-17-045278-085), available at www.mcgill.ca/prpp.

²⁵ That disjunction, argued Newman (*Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education*, Discourse II, 37f.), was the consequence of the Lutheran tendency to reduce religion to a matter of private judgment, and of the pragmatic decision of liberal statesmen that if, for the purpose of public education, society cannot have one religion, it shall have none.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 45 (Discourse II) and 101 (Discourse III). With this statement Charles Taylor would seem to agree, if I am not misreading *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA:

known by the creature, and the science of God is therefore a positive science, analogous to other sciences.²⁷ It is a condition, in that the science of God, though but one science among others, is necessary for the completeness and perfection of the rest. While this is true of every science, it is especially true of theology, to remove which is to unravel the whole web of liberal education, making it “a mere fortuitous heap of acquisitions and accomplishments.”²⁸ Only theology can underwrite the unity of knowledge, for only theology deals with the first and final cause of all that is. In other words, it was no accident that the university was originally a religious institution, built round the great cathedrals and chapter houses of Christian Europe. For the *universitas* depends upon some grasp of the *universum*, and that is ultimately a theological achievement.²⁹

From this perspective, the unraveling of the university began already in the era of the *philosophes*, who had (with some justification) a very low view of theology and a very high view of their republic of letters.³⁰ It began just as “the education of the human race” was coming into focus and the first encyclopedias were being written. There was then much

Belknap Press, 2007) at 768; but it is interesting that neither Newman nor the university merits an entry in the index of this very large book. Is there some Illichian instinct that steers Taylor away?

²⁷ We cannot take up the different ways in which it is a positive science—or their sometimes controversial relation—though these are generally considered under the rubrics of natural and revealed theology.

²⁸ *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education*, 141 (Discourse V); cf. 100f.: “I say then, if the various branches of knowledge, which are the matter of teaching in a University, so hang together, that none can be neglected without prejudice to the perfection of the rest, and if Theology be a branch of knowledge, of wide reception, of philosophical structure, of unutterable importance, and of supreme influence, to what conclusion are we brought from these two premises but this? that to withdraw Theology from the public schools, is to impair the completeness and to invalidate the trustworthiness of all that is actually taught in them. . . . In a word, 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 Education. It is, according to the Greek proverb, to take the Spring from out the year; it is to imitate the preposterous proceeding of those tragedians, who represented a drama with the omission of its principal part.”

²⁹ We may concede to Oakeshott that it is not always necessary to have consciously before us, whether individually or institutionally, this dependence and this achievement. Moreover, we may admit that “the world of knowledge never has been integrated by a *Summa*” (*The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 133), nor can be. Nevertheless, I think we must agree with Newman that the relation of dependence exists and find Oakeshott’s analysis wanting insofar as it fails to treat of it.

³⁰ Even of Plato’s call for properly rational forms of God-talk (*tupoi peri theologias*, *Republic* 379a) they were suspicious, though Kant somewhat grudgingly repeated that call in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793).

enthusiasm for universal knowledge, but that enthusiasm was distinctly a-theological and even anti-metaphysical. Theology, having lost touch with its own fundamentals, was in no position to defend itself.³¹ It was discredited in the eyes of many by the unresolved disputes of the Reformation, and by the wars of religion that followed the Reformation. The mutilation of the divine had preceded the mutilation of Europe itself, and the mutilation of Europe seemed ample reason to lop the theological head off the body of human knowledge.³²

Hobbes struck an early blow by attacking “Aristotelity,” by which he meant, not merely Greek or Christian teleology, but any reification of the virtues that might undermine civil peace by permitting religious obligations (backed by the transcendent) to trump or transform political obligations.³³ Other blows were struck later by the likes of Rousseau, Lessing, and Kant. That the so-called wars of religion were really power struggles between the great families of Europe, once religion (being itself divided) was no longer a restraining force, was conveniently overlooked. So too was the fact that the new physics and other experimental sciences, which were touted by some as the fruit of independence from theology—the Galileo myth was invented for that purpose—had their roots deep into the very doctrine that fundamentally distinguishes the Christian idea of the *universum* from its Greek and Enlightenment counterparts: *creatio ex nihilo*.³⁴ But with the mention of *creatio ex nihilo*, we should be reminded that the unraveling actually began much earlier than any of this. In fact, the malaise of the multiversity must be traced back into the late middle ages; that is to say, to a point much nearer its origins. That point was the rise of nominalism, without which any subsequent reformation would doubtless have looked quite different.

³¹ See Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

³² Since philosophy aspired to take its place, it was not yet understood what had been lost. Indeed it was not yet understood in Newman’s time: “A philosophical comprehensiveness, an orderly expansiveness, an elastic constructiveness, men have lost them, and cannot make out why. This is why: because they have lost the idea of unity: because they cut off the head of a living thing, and think it is perfect, all but the head” (*Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education*, 142f., Discourse V).

³³ Of Aristotle himself Hobbes retained only enough—a modified hierarchy of disciplines corresponding to his re-evaluation of virtue in the absence of any *summum bonum* other than worldly “peace”—to provide a pedestal for his new political science. Cf. Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 37ff.

³⁴ Cf. Gerhard May, *Creatio ex nihilo: The Doctrine of ‘Creation out of Nothing’ in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984).

A quick explanation: *Creatio ex nihilo*, though well articulated by the end of the second century, was dogmatized in the thirteenth against another kind of “Aristotelity”—an Averroist kind that threatened to draw the West back into some form of determinism. This ecclesiastical decision in favor of contingency over necessity helped pave the way for the experimental sciences and for the discovery, *inter alia*, of the first law of motion.³⁵ It also paved the way for nominalism, but the way the nominalists construed God’s freedom was deeply flawed. They rejected the extra-mental reality of forms or essences on the grounds that, even if brought into existence by God, such entities would then limit God’s own freedom. Their emphasis on what Scotus called *haecceitas* certainly helped to cultivate the attention now being paid to the particular in its contingency and otherness—the *sine qua non* of modern science. But their stress on the arbitrariness of divine power, the unpredictability of divine decisions, and the discreteness of divine acts, profoundly weakened confidence in the unity of knowledge and of the universe itself.³⁶

Confidence in the unity of knowledge was already in jeopardy, of course, before nominalism became prevalent in the fourteenth century. When Bishop Stephen (d. 1279) accused certain scholars in Paris of holding the notion that there are two distinct realms of truth—one theological and the other philosophical or natural—realms that need not and perhaps could not be harmonized, he rightly suspected that this notion was a threat not only to theology but to all sound learning. From the notion that there were two truths would eventually come the notion that there are many truths, or rather a return to the skeptic’s notion that there is no truth at all. That indeed has become an astonishingly popular view, despite the fact that it is fatal to all science and to civil politics as well, as it is to the idea and function of the university. Its popularity has been fed by a related feature of nominalism, *viz.*, an attraction to mind–body dualism and hence to an unseemly exaltation of the human will,³⁷ which now finds its god-likeness in an equally arbitrary kind of freedom: freedom *from* nature rather than *for* nature; or at all events freedom to see “nature” as something posited by us as an expression of our own autonomy or will to power.

³⁵ See Stanley L. Jaki, *The Saviour of Science* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1990), chap. 2, though a fuller pre-history of Newton’s first law can be given.

³⁶ Cf. Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), chap. 1. Regrettably, this highly stimulating book on the role of nominalism is marred by its Procrustean tendency.

³⁷ Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield 2009), chap. 12.

Today we are a long way down this road, which helps to explain why the humanities, which for a time tried to ape the physical sciences, are growing ever more alienated from them, as indeed from one another. That is the inevitable consequence of their propensity for the arbitrary, and of their susceptibility to this or that form of social constructivism. Theology, in many universities, is the most alienated of all, even where it does its best to ape the constructivism that now dominates the humanities. If it is to recover its own vitality, and so also its proper role in academia as a minister of unity, it will have to recognize again its own character as a positive science.³⁸ It will also have to show that nominalism and its offspring represent the perversion of a sound idea. Who told the nominalists that God could not remain God (that is, genuinely free) if in his act of creation he bound his world, and so also himself as guarantor of that world, to real forms and solid laws and unbreakable promises? Who told their post-Reformation heirs that freedom is incompatible both with law and with promise? Who told their late-modern progeny that man, whether to be like God or perhaps even to be God, must exalt his will above all things, and only so be free? Who told them that not only society, but even the university, must abandon any pursuit of a comprehensive or universal truth? That it must cease being, not only theological, but a university?

Rediscovering the University

The search for the *universitas* is not quite dead in today's multiversity, even where theology evinces few signs of revival. It shows up, for example, in the creation of inter-disciplinary programs that attempt, as it were, to do theology's work. This was brought home to me in a recent committee meeting at my own university, during which a new inter-faculty major in "Sustainability, Science, and Society" came up for consideration. At first glance the proposal seemed almost Newmanesque in its commitment to combine science and technology with economics and governance, and both with ethics and justice, creating a partnership that spanned the sciences and the humanities in its pursuit of "a transition to sustainability." Of course, I had my usual qualms about the word "sustainability"—an adjective clumsily masquerading as a noun that sits awkwardly alongside "science" and "society." I was also a little worried that this partnership between Geography and the School of the Environment seemed blissfully unaware of two supposed partners of the latter, namely, Philosophy and Religious Studies. But what really gave me pause for thought were its apocalyptic premises and soteriological aspirations—both articulated with a confidence few theological

³⁸ Signs of this revival have been apparent from the pontificate of Leo XIII onwards, and, in Protestant circles, from Barth (if not from Kierkegaard) onwards.

programs would dare emulate. "At the dawn of a new millennium, we stand at a critical juncture in human history," began the rationale. "In the face of multiple threats," it asserted, "the grand challenge of the twenty-first century is Sustainable Well-Being."³⁹ And Sustainable Well-Being (capitals and all) is what the program meant to help deliver. Indeed, its supporters spoke quite happily about wanting to "save the world."⁴⁰

I wish them well, of course, as one who also lives in the world. But I found myself having to object to their appeal to apocalyptic worries and millennarian dreams, since these are not appropriate foundations for an academic program, and having to point out that some of the offerings were not properly based in recognizable disciplines, particularly where the important "justice, equity, and ethics" pillar was concerned (which seemed a rather shaky attempt at moral uplift). Moreover, I had to point out that the program was likely to encourage intellectual dilettantism among crusading students and instructors⁴¹—in short, that it appeared to be an example not so much of genuine inter-disciplinarity as of that disciplinary inflation against which Newman had warned.

Genuine inter-disciplinarity, as a function of the *universitas*, is something with which theology can help, I believe, because it can help with the very idea of the university. Here let it be said that I do not subscribe (as my readers may think) to some Platonic or Romantic myth of a true *universitas* from which we have fallen and to which we may now aspire to return. Nor do I mean to suggest that Newman's proposals for a more authentic *universitas* are achievable under present conditions, or to imply that increasing the ranks of the theologians must substantially change present conditions. But I do think that Newman is right that there is, or ought to be, such a thing as a university; and that what at first approximated a university has less claim now to that designation than it did before. To correct its course we will have to take up again, not an attempt to save the world, which was never the university's purpose, but a determined pursuit of *the* good as the proper ground of all our talk about the common good, or even about private goods. Which means that we will have to take theology seriously once again in the university.

³⁹ A later defense of the document appealed to the university's Sustainability Policy, which aims at making McGill "a leader in research and education, creating and communicating the knowledge required for humans to live sustainably at the local, regional and global scales."

⁴⁰ The university that marginalizes theology will not eradicate soteriological interests; it will merely be uncritical of them.

⁴¹ Mark Taylor's proposals (abolishing departments in favor of problem-oriented joint projects, etc.) would seem to court the same danger. Newman, by the way, makes no appearance in *Crisis on Campus*.

Theology, as Daniel Cere observed some years ago, “is a discourse which moves the God question, the question of the ‘supreme good,’ to center stage.”⁴² Newman, he argued, was convinced that “the renaissance of a more enriched and substantive debate on the question of the good is dependent upon one crucial requirement—the revival of a vibrant theistic discourse within the academy.”⁴³ The university that welcomes such a revival is a university committed to the unity of knowledge as well as the diversity of disciplines. This commitment will be reflected both in the standards it maintains and in the students it attracts and produces. Belief in the unity of knowledge immediately declares the need for competence in things necessary (grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic) to sound communication within and between disciplines. In other words, it lends significance even to the humble semicolon. At the same time, it makes a rudimentary knowledge of history and literature, math and science, art and music, philosophy and theology, indispensable as the prerequisite to specialization or to the higher vocations. Neither in secondary nor in tertiary education is this broad, rudimentary knowledge still common, however, or the necessity thereof commonly upheld. Sliding standards are both a cause and a consequence, in a vicious cycle mediated by our faculties of education. Another consequence is declining interest in the humanities, especially among men, who at the undergraduate level are now outnumbered in Arts faculties two to one.⁴⁴

⁴² Cere, “Newman, God, and the Academy,” *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 14; reprinted as “Theology to the Rescue” in *The Wilson Quarterly* (Summer 1994).

⁴³ Cere, “Newman, God, and the Academy,” 23. This crucial requirement, he noted, was missing in Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1987), which “implicitly raises, then delicately begs . . . the fundamental question, the question of the ‘supreme good’ or the ‘universal end’” (3). Ironically it was missing also in the postmodern project of John Milbank, whose *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell 1990) refused to confine theology to the place afforded it by the likes of Weber, Durkheim, and Troeltsch, but instead took it to the azure heights of an almost Nietzschean superiority. Cere highlights Milbank’s differences with Newman and with MacIntyre—differences that are undoubtedly as real as his differences, say, with Slavoj Žižek. But mention of the Milbank–Žižek debate (see *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* ed. C. Davis [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009]) may serve to remind us just how dated Newman’s idea of a “vibrant theistic discourse” must seem today. In its way, it may also serve to raise fruitful questions about Newman’s conception of theology and its place among the disciplines, about which Milbank and even Žižek have their own ideas.

⁴⁴ At McGill, Theology (like Law and Science, e.g.) has achieved an almost even balance, slightly favoring men, while Education runs at almost three to one in favor of women.

The courage to confront such problems can only come from a reaffirmation of the unity of knowledge; that is, from a commitment—already theological—that strikes at the heart of the relativism and pragmatism to which the multiversity has fallen prey. Where that courage is not found, even the good multiversity, in its steady decline from the idea of the university, will in due course cease to be good, or good at very much. And this will be true of its students as well, unless they are able to draw on sources of goodness alien to the institution that purports to educate them. The university, let us not hesitate to admit, has a very raw sort of material with which to work; those entrusted to its care need both direction and discipline, as do those who do the caring. (Here another ecclesiastical intervention in Bishop Stephen's time comes to mind—the proclamation of A.D. 1269 “against Clerks and Scholars who go about Paris armed by Day and Night and commit Crimes”!) But this also requires courage. Where that courage is lacking, as so often it is among the priesthood of the bureaucrats, the field is left open to predators who find in the university endless opportunity for mischief. Among these may be numbered those who prey on the bodies of the naïve or the disillusioned, heedless of the betrayal of their persons. More subtle are those who prey on gullible minds, who cultivate what Whittaker Chambers called “the treason of ideas,” dedicated as they are “to the purpose of betraying the institutions they live under.”⁴⁵

With all of this, theology can help, if we let it. That is because theology, while tempered by philosophy and by its dialogue with other key disciplines, has resources deriving from a community higher and greater than the university. It therefore transcends, without sublating, the main object of liberal education. In the regular conduct of its own peculiar disciplinary tasks, it participates *both* in the work of disciplining the mind for the art of scholarly conversation *and* in the work of cultivating a philosophy of life that does not stop short of moral and spiritual formation.⁴⁶ That is to say: theology, particularly where it is committed to the axiom *gratia non tollit sed perficit naturam*, provides not only a bridge between disciplines but also a bridge between the university as an institution of the “interval” and the social institutions (including especially

⁴⁵ Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (Washington, DC: Regnery Press, 1980), 524.

⁴⁶ Theology, in abstraction from the liturgy in which it has its foundations, cannot provide that formation or enable the university to provide it, which in any case is not the university's task. But if, as Christopher Dawson argues in *The Crisis of Western Education* (1961; 2nd ed. Princeton 2010), a renewed awareness of the spiritual component in culture is necessary for the recovery of the university, theology can certainly help with that.

religious institutions) that structure the whole of life. It was traffic across this bridge that created the university in the first place. What is more, theology can mediate between the university's primary task of offering a liberal education (think "student-centered") and its secondary task of advancing the disciplines themselves (think "research-intensive"). It can help keep these in their proper relation, which is necessary in order to distinguish a university *qua* university from independent research establishments, without diminishment of either.⁴⁷

But is the rejoining of education to religion, even to the limited extent of restoring theology to an active role in the university, thinkable today? Would that not entail a deepening of the problem of autonomy that has already, at least in some minds, reached crisis proportions? Would it not offend the dearest principles of secularism and of *pluralisme normatif*? A lot of water has passed under the bridge since the founding of the *Humboldt Universität zu Berlin* in A.D. 1809 as the prototypical modern university, or of University College London in 1826, or of McGill about that same time,⁴⁸ or of Johns Hopkins in 1876. Theology may have had a prominent place in the first of these, which retained the traditional four faculties (Theology, Law, Medicine, and Philosophy), but even there it was set on a new trajectory determined by revisionist forces. Today Berlin does not list theology among its topic areas.⁴⁹ Most public and private

⁴⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan pushes Newman in the right direction in *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992)—a book, I confess, I have only just begun to read—but Newman, for his part, doubted the capacity of the university to offer a liberal education if it really intended to be research-intensive. (Cf. Michael J. Hofstetter, *The Romantic Idea of the University: England and Germany 1770–1850* [New York: Palgrave 2001], 130ff.) It seems to me, however, that theology itself requires a research-intensive approach, albeit one that effectively resists the temptation to isolation and de-personalization. At the same time, it must certainly confront the tendency produced by the complex, large-scale operations that are necessary in managing the physical and social sciences to strip the university of its conversational character, and to impose on other disciplines inapposite funding, accountability, and organizational structures.

⁴⁸ McGill was chartered in 1821 and became operative in 1829.

⁴⁹ Schleiermacher, who helped found the University of Berlin, drafted the charter for theology's capitulation to the new order, while attempting to preserve a place for his dethroned discipline by putting it into the service of the cult of progress. That place, however, like the cult of progress itself, shrunk dramatically in the second half of the twentieth century. The reasons for that are as much systemic as circumstantial. For in Protestant realms, as I have observed elsewhere, there has been a pronounced tendency in theology to self-evisceration, turning "eschatology into utopianism, ecclesiology into a branch of secular politics or of social history, sacramental theology into semiotics, and doxology into ethics. Academia

universities, even where theology is still taught, have divested themselves of formal theological commitments (as of ecclesiastical oversight) in the name of academic freedom. Those that have not tend to be viewed with deep suspicion.⁵⁰

This is the place, however, to point out that the foundations of academic freedom were laid by the mediaeval universities, the prevalence today of ignorant remarks about the Inquisition and of much nonsense about the Galileo affair—most recently at *La Sapienza* in Rome, where certain members of the science faculty made fools of themselves in their ignorance of history and theology—notwithstanding.⁵¹ Which is to say: academic freedom was not invented by modernity but merely reminted with an anti-theological cast that has proved injurious both to the concept and to its application, and with a preference for new parameters set by the state⁵² or by ideologues within the university itself, which today is regularly flooded by waves of political correctness and other conformist torrents that undermine academic freedom. The nature of academic freedom is not our present topic, but we can hardly avoid observing that no meaningful theory or practice of academic freedom can be sustained where commitment to truth and to the unity of knowledge is lacking, and that no such commitment can be sustained without

has responded to this by inventing the modern university, with its disciplinary instruments (called by the Germans *Religionsgeschichte* and *Religionswissenschaft*) for dissecting and classifying the remains: a university with no soul for a society with no church” (*Ascension Theology* London: T&T Clark 2011], 81). Such a university cannot but lapse into the hollow culture of “excellence” lamented by Bill Readings. It was already set on that course by Kant, who in *The Contest of Faculties* (1798) turned the university upside down, and indeed inside out, by mistaking “reason” for the immanent ordering principle of the university, much as he mistook “pure religious faith” for the immanent ordering principle of religion in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

⁵⁰ In Canada, witness the recent CAUT (Canadian Association of University Teachers) controversy around Trinity Western University and other such institutions.

⁵¹ I refer to the protests in 2008, at a university founded some 700 years earlier by papal charter, that prevented Pope Benedict from giving his planned address that touched on the relation between science and theology. Regarding the Inquisition, see e.g. William Courtenay, “Inquiry and Inquisition: Academic Freedom in Medieval Universities,” *Church History* 58.2 (1989): 168–81; on the Galileo affair, cf. the *Catholic Encyclopedia* article on Galileo and also Rivka Feldhay, *Galileo and the Church: Political Inquisition or Critical Dialogue?* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See also William Hoye, “The Religious Roots of Academic Freedom,” *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 409–28.

⁵² Witness Humboldt University’s fascist period, for example, which was more a permutation than an aberration.

treading on theological ground. "The truth shall set you free" is the true principle of freedom, in academia as elsewhere.⁵³

Where that is acknowledged, the rejoining of education to religion is indeed thinkable, and what has been lost in the idea of the university recoverable. Where it is not acknowledged, education tends to become either a substitute for religion (as in Dewey and his heirs) or a lackey (as in Comte and Mill) to the not quite moribund Religion of Humanity. Faith in the perfectibility of man, untempered by a doctrine of the fall, seduces us down the path of false optimism and thence into the bogs of a weary pragmatism, from which the cynicism that has already overtaken the humanities is the only apparent escape. Meanwhile the university becomes prey to forces greater and more determined than itself, which is why loss of autonomy rightly stands at the head of any list of the consequences that follow from its once immodest, now increasingly uncertain, purpose. Benedict, who last year presided over Newman's beatification, provided the pathology—or would have—in his censored *La Sapienza* lecture: "Today the danger of the Western world . . . is that man, precisely in the consideration of the grandeur of his knowledge and power, might give up before the question of truth. And that means at the same time that reason, in the end, bows to the pressure of interests and the charm of utility, constrained to recognize it as the ultimate criterion."⁵⁴

Permit me in conclusion to repeat myself: I am not such a fool as to think that the moral vacuum at the heart of the university, into which utilitarianism, shadowed by cynicism, has been rushing, can be overcome merely by a new commitment to theology. That in any case would beg the question "What kind of theology?"—which cannot be further addressed here. But any new commitment on the part of the university to theology will have to come from a new commitment to pursuit of knowledge of the Good, which the theologian will want to say is another

⁵³ John 8:32. In *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), Martha Nussbaum expounds this principle in her own inimitable way. Unfortunately she tends to get it backwards, since she leans not on Jesus but on a "Socrates" that is actually J. S. Mill in disguise. (See William Gairdner's trenchant remarks on Mill in *The Trouble with Democracy* [Toronto: Stoddart, 2001], 298ff.) Nussbaum, it should be said, rejects the caricature of the contemporary academy that she finds in critics like Bloom; like Bloom, however, she fails to invite theology to the disciplinary table—and a broad table it is!—since "true world citizenship" is about as close to the universal good as she wants to get, given her uncertainty "about metaphysical belief" (262).

⁵⁴ "The Truth Makes Us Good and Goodness is True" (www.zenit.org/article-21526?l=english).

name for God.⁵⁵ Letting the theologian make his case for saying that is what the university owes *itself*. N-V

⁵⁵ Aquinas, knowing God and man better than Plato did, preferred “happiness” even over “goodness” when considering the anthropological implications (cf. *ST* I–II, q. 3), which is one of many reasons why the *Summa theologiae* is a still more promising place than the works of Plato (*pace* Allan Bloom) to look for help in rebuilding the university. But the conclusion to the present paragraph, and to this article, represents a conscious attempt to affirm the kind of theological relativism that Newman was operating with in his original fifth discourse—of which his superiors in the Church, it seems, were unnecessarily suspicious (see further Cere, “Newman, God, and the Academy,” 17, n. 98).