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OXFORD UNIVERSITY COMMEMORATION DAY

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*'It is the glory of God to conceal a thing:
but the honour of kings is to search out a matter' (Prov. 25.2)*

When we commemorate our more remote benefactors, it is relatively easy to romanticise the early university, and to contrast it with apocalyptically gloomy visions of its modern successor - the latter apparently poised on the edge of barbarism, driven by the pressures of assessment, fundraising and arguments over fees. The university of the golden age of benefaction was surely different – a haven for disinterested scholarship, the unworldly fingering over of classical texts and arcane philosophical questions, patient of eccentricity, the object of a benevolence that asked no questions about research output, access, competitive profile and industrial investment. Tempting to lament all this, and to set out on an elegy for lost educational values.

Well, it has to be admitted that the question of values in higher education is one that has not exactly dominated the field in recent debate; the efforts of more than one bishop in the House of Lords lately to persuade government to include in legislation on HE some statement about what it's for, beyond creating a more profitable workforce seem so far to have borne relatively little fruit. But a closer look at the origins of the university might give us pause before we simply oppose modern pragmatism to ancient contemplation. There really is one all-important area of difference between the early and the modern university, but this isn't it. And if we do not take some care in examining the real difference, we shall miss the opportunity of addressing the weaknesses of our current philosophy of higher education in the most effective way.

I'm not referring simply to the great difference which the architecture and statutes of every mediaeval college loudly proclaim – the assumption that this institution is a cell of the Catholic Church, designed and organised for the good of Christ's Body on earth. That is important enough, and there will be more to say about it shortly; but we need to see why the church dimension of the early university reflected a larger set of issues, blithely ignored in a lot of educational thinking for a quarter of a century. When the University of Oxford began, its short-term survival depended heavily on the need for trained canon lawyers, and a significant phase of expansion in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had to do with a remarkable renaissance in the study of civil law; the mediaeval history of Oxford, just as much as its later development, is bound up with the formation of people whose job will be to govern the kingdom.

This will confirm some people's worst suspicions, of course – Oxford as the nursery of the governing class, Oxford as the playground of a self-perpetuating, self-appointed elite. But this isn't good enough as an account of how the university began, though it may be an uncomfortably accurate picture of some of its less glorious periods. This was in large part an institution designed to give a professional formation

to the clergy who would shape the policy of a kingdom; and that formation -so far from being in any way dilettantish - assumed that to govern a kingdom you needed to know how language worked, what the difference was between good and bad arguments, and how you might persuade people to morally defensible courses of action. You needed the tools of thought; and when you had acquired them, you could proceed to the other things you needed to know – the proportions and relations of the world, mathematics, music and the stars. Beyond that, specialisation set in; but when you had completed all these minor preliminaries, at least you had the techniques, the 'arts', of thinking. And when you proceeded to acquire the material you needed for medicine or law or the teaching and governance of the Church, you would have established a formidable common vocabulary and common method connecting you to all the other qualified technicians of thought in Europe.

People were learning how to exercise various sorts of authority; and they were doing so by acquiring the skills that would make them credible and convincing interpreters of the foundational texts of their culture. In the Middle Ages, the Church maintained a vision of political authority which assumed that such authority should be exercised by those who had been trained - in the broadest sense – in how to read, how to assess both metaphor and overt argument, open persuasion and unspoken assumption. God had made a world of riddles and subtlety and had encoded his own deeds in a sacred text of many-layered richness. The glory of the rational ruler, in state and church, was to search out the fundamental and defining meanings of nature and scripture, and to determine rational behaviour accordingly. Theology stood at the summit of the intellectual enterprise because it was above all the science of displaying the hidden consistencies of God's actions, and so of giving the ultimate guidance on what a consistent – a holy and faithful – life would look like, within the Body of Christ.

So: neither a narrow functionalism nor an unworldly pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, but a typically mediaeval practicality. You aspire to govern, to advise kings and magistrates? Then this is what you must learn. And this, I suggest, is the dimension of educational thinking which today is in eclipse; we don't think of education as a formation in the kind of reasonable argument and decision that will make someone a sure guide to others. The benefactors of this and other universities were clear about what they intended, as the Bidding Prayer reminds us – a steady supply of rational servants of Church and State.

All very well, you may say, but the university is no longer a school for clerical diplomats, and its scientific researches do not exist to serve the political order; we have moved beyond the mediaeval world and even beyond the none too savoury days of universities as webs of royal and governmental patronage in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or the golden age of Balliol as the school for the Empire's administrators. Fair comment. Yet in the current chaos of the thinking about higher education, this is so unfashionable an element that it is surely worth reflecting on – not least with the words of the Bidding Prayer in our ears. A university exists, let us say, to create 'public people' - people who, whatever their specialism, are committed not only to reasoned argument (itself a question-begging ideal, you might say, in an intellectually pluralist world), but to a responsibility to the ideal of rational governance and rational public discourse. A student at the university may be working at Modern Languages, Biochemistry, Business Studies or Media Studies; but, so the history of universities might suggest to us, he or she ought above all to be developing a vigorous sense of good argument and of the risks in the public sphere of shoddy and manipulative language, a sense of the importance and the vulnerability of reasoned conversation for a just common life. They should be developing a sceptical eye for the demagogue, the columnist, the campaigning obsessive, for those who dogmatise beyond their proper skills – and so yes, of course, for the preacher too.

In 1948, Dorothy Sayers published a pamphlet entitled 'The Lost Tools (ferramentas)of Learning', arguing, with abundant wit and irony, for the reintroduction of the mediaeval Trivium as a basis for modern education. Instead of the prosaic tools

of the thinking trade, she says, 'we have merely a set of complicated jigs, each of which will do but one task and no more, and in using which eye and hand receive no training, so that no man ever sees the work as a whole or "looks to the end of the work"' (134). She makes a powerful case for the essential role of the disciplines of grammar, logic and rhetoric, so that anyone who claimed education could reasonably be expected to know how language worked and how to use it honestly and accountably. As things are, she says, with the totalitarian fantasies of the twentieth century vividly before her, 'when whole classes and whole nations become hypnotised by the arts of the spellbinder, we have the impudence to be astonished' (118-9). We have never understood the priority of training people to know when they are being deceived – whether about human nature and morality, about their economic needs, about their friends or their enemies.

Yes; and the implication is that a true education is one which permits people to exercise their human nature without the constraints of delusion and manipulation – and therefore one that sets people free for the labour of constructing a reasonable society. We don't indeed think now in terms of learned clerks counselling feudal monarchs, nor even of classically educated young men running the Indian Civil Service; but we may rightly assume that in a relatively mature democracy everyone shares something of the responsibility of the ruler to 'search out matters', to understand argument and to be cautious of unexamined power. The reasonable society is not one in which some abstract ideal of rationality is imposed as a straitjacket on the organic life of communities; it is simply one in which we know how to talk with each other, how to negotiate, to challenge, to argue coherently about what is good for human beings as such. As much damage has been done in the past by rationalist schemes for social harmony (Soviet Communism, a rather startling byproduct of Enlightenment reason) as by unthinking submission to absolute power. The understanding of reason in the mediaeval background of this university sees it first as a capacity to respond with justice and accuracy to the inner structures of creation, the hidden glories - and so as something that constitutes the divine image in us; and then as the exercise of disciplined argument about the outworking of that vision. It is not a method for discovering by abstract argument what is best for everyone; inevitably, this seems to lead to schemes and constitutions for abstract persons, whose specific identities have to be reduced to statistical anonymity.

Reasonable conversation, on the other hand, assumes that differences can be talked about without being abolished; that justice is therefore both possible and difficult; and that the learning of the tools of thought is a preparation for public life in the sense that it expresses a profound faith in speech itself - or perhaps better, in speaking and listening, in the actions of understanding. The challenge to any institution of higher learning these days is to draw out these public dimensions of the intellectual life. The best reply to the narrow functionalism and economism that so often dominate discussions of HE is not to lament the passing of an intellectual world in which the private pursuit of excellence was all-important; that world is something of a fantasy. It is to insist upon the university's role in nourishing honest and hopeful speech, for the sake of a properly reasonable culture and politics. If in the course of this it puts firmly before its students the claims of a life in public service, so much the better, and so much more in accord with the vision of founders and benefactors.

And so to the cardinal element in the mediaeval rationale of the university. A university degree once meant that you were licensed to teach anywhere in Christendom; that you were entrusted with a recognizable and universal scheme for understanding human destiny. The university was, as I put it earlier, a cell of the Body of Christ. The Christian revelation was not thought to be a series of truths only; it was an action that created a form of human life together reflecting God's purpose for humanity: the propositions of revelation were not given so as to be digested by individual minds with no further end in view; they were the instructions for shaping and ordering holy lives, lives in which the rational divine image was becoming more

visible. Christians believe – and it is a very bold belief – that true public life, life in which humans exercise their innate power and responsibility in consulting and acting together, is most fully realised in the Body of Christ, where the guilt and burden of rivalry, the uprising of person against person which so damages and obscures the image of God, are taken away by the work of Christ, so that the Spirit may make each one a gift to every other. For the mediaeval, the entire process of acquiring the tools of thought reached its climax and found its meaning here.

What then becomes of the process deprived of its theological context? Even if Dorothy Sayers' lost tools of learning were restored, there would still be an area of unclarity, even discomfort. Learning scepticism without vision is an unwholesome recipe for public life; it simply canonises suspicion as the ultimate sign of intellectual maturity – which is a good way from what earlier ages understood by understanding. This is where the presence of theology, and specifically of theology grounded in living religious communities, becomes significant for the entire university. No-one wants to see ecclesiastical rule restored in universities; but the Church might properly say: 'If there is any commitment in the university to the nourishing of public discourse and public service, it has to have a serious place for the discussion of the shape of a just common human life – which involves, unavoidably, the religious question of what it is that human beings are 'involved' with over and above their material or personal or professional or national identities. To have an answer to this is to be able to undertake the sceptical questioning of popular halftruths, the resistance to manipulation, without cynicism. Suspicion is exercised for the sake of a positive truth, a positive rationality illuminated by the wisdom of God (to allude to a well-known university motto...).

What the Church has to say to the university, then, is perhaps this. Don't be afraid of assuming that your task is to equip people to take authority. In a democratic age, this is not the authority of a royal counsellor or an imperial proconsul; it is the authority of the literate and educated person to contribute to public reason. And don't be afraid of encouraging in whatever way is available the calling both to scientific research and to public service – administration and politics and social care; law and medicine, those ancient and persistent elements in the pattern of public life; the service, in one calling or another of the Body of Christ. Avoid the false polarisation between disinterested research and the world of target setting and assessment; remember that all properly intellectual work can be a form of witness to public values. It is interesting that benefactions have increased lately in fields to do with the public communication of certain fields of knowledge; a welcome sign, but less welcome if it's only a matter of disseminating information rather than shaping human judgement and the vision of the good.

'The honour of kings is to search out a matter'. The royal dignity for which God has created human beings, the capacity to order their environment according to divine wisdom, is, at every level, something to do with shaping and guarding just and truthful speech, knowing how to question and to listen, reasonable conversation in its fullest sense. God shows his glory in the paradox that he hides within every created moment, every finite bit of the universe; when he hides in the cross of Jesus of Nazareth, the paradox is at its sharpest and the glory at its brightest. As human beings grow into their kingly dignity, they have also to go through the darkness and disorientation this paradox involves: the searching out of God in the cross, where faith is most deeply tested, is where the 'honour' of humanity is most firmly established, the glory of the image of God restored as our understanding is transformed by the Spirit of God. And the transformed understanding that the Spirit gives becomes the foundation of life in the Body of Christ, where our human awareness of each other is turned into trust and gratitude. Here is the common good as Christians experience and grasp it; this is what the Church – often clumsily and falteringly – holds up to the world in which it is set and the societies it seeks to transform.

Among those societies is the society of intellectual life and practice, in its relation to the wider world. If it is the honour of rulers to search out truth and to resist

the tyranny of the slogan and the cliché, Christian faith offers a rationale for patience and generosity towards the intellectual community on the part of this wider society, because it is here that the tools of public life are formed, the skills to search out a shared truth. And the Church, committed as it is to the honour of human beings called by God into a royal priesthood, will continue – please God – its own rational conversation with the academy, probing its long view, the context of its labours for rationality. A university prepared to train its members for the service of the common good and to entertain the questioning of religious vision and commitment is one that remains worthy of its benefactors - and deserving still of public and private benevolence. Long may that be true for Oxford.

ENDS

Oxford University Commemoration Day Sermon,
University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford,
by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams
Sunday 20 June 2004
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