CATHOLICS AND THE UNIVERSITY

A Personal View

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THIS article should be regarded, perhaps even more than others in this series, as the expression of a very personal point of view. Dons are individualistic people, liable to hold highly original and sharply divergent views on questions both of principle and policy within the university, and I am very conscious that I have no right whatever to speak as representing any considerable body of opinion among Catholic senior members of universities in this country; indeed it cannot be said at present that any such coherent body of opinion exists, though the sort of subjects about which I am going to write are certainly being increasingly seriously considered and discussed.[1]

The appearance of a body of Catholics playing any noticeable part in the life of the universities of this country is a very recent phenomenon. It was the great movement of liberalism (in Newman's sense of the word 'liberal') in the middle nineteenth century which opened the universities to Catholics; and they were permitted to take advantage of the new possibilities only after what must now seem to us an unnecessary and regrettable delay. It was regrettable, not only from the point of view of the standards of taste and intelligence of the Catholic body, but from the point of view of the university: for, though some sort of university reform was certainly urgently needed, the reform which actually took place broke the connection between religion and learning which still existed in the ancient universities and effected a thorough-going secularisation of university life which has had very far-reaching consequences. It was just that secularisation

1 An excellent starting-point for discussion and stimulus to thought about the problems of the modern university is the new Pelican edition of *Redbrick University*, by 'Bruce Truscot', which includes the whole of the original *Redbrick University* (first published in 1943) and the major part of *These Vital Days*, its sequel dealing with problems which arose out of the war and commenting on some animated discussions which resulted from proposals put forward in *Redbrick University*.

which, by the abolition of religious tests, made it possible for Catholics to go to Oxford and Cambridge and which ensured that the civic universities should also be open to them as being undenominational—and in practice (and sometimes, as at Liverpool, by Charter) thoroughly secular. And this fact would seem to impose a certain obligation on Catholics to make their most powerful religious influence felt in the universities as quickly and effectively as possible as a counterbalance to the secularisation by which they have profited.

In any assessment of the present position of Catholics in the universities the first thing to consider is the intellectual climate in which they live, and which is the result of the movement of secularisation just referred to. On the whole there is not very much active hostility to religion in modern English universities; and where it exists it sometimes produces results opposite to those intended, by stimulating conversion to Catholicism or a return to the practice of Anglicanism. But religion is generally excluded from serious consideration. Any form of orthodox Christianity tends to be regarded as a rather tiresome survival from the past, unlikely to have any contribution to make to contemporary discussions which can be of real interest to intelligent people. There is, however, an increasing uneasiness about the emptiness at the centre, the intellectual disintegration which has resulted partly from the loss of the Christian religion as an integrating principle and partly from the excessive development of specialisation in the several disciplines, and attempts (not so far very successful) are being made to think of some way of pulling things together and to find some sort of unifying philosophy of life. A special problem arises from the divergence of the aims of the large and rapidly increasing 'applied' faculties of physical science and the social sciences from the old ideal of liberal education, the pursuit of truth for truth's sake without any ulterior motive or thought of its practical usefulness: an ideal which very many people of very divergent outlooks in other matters would still agree is necessary to the life of a university if it is really to be something more than a training-school in various techniques.

It may be worth while making a personal suggestion of what the attitude of Catholics to these much-discussed problems should be. We should certainly, I think, support the old ideal of liberal knowledge, and should do so at the deepest level and try to help

our fellow-members of the university to discover its real meaning: that is, we should bring forward and try to apply in our own work and thinking the traditional doctrine of the primacy of contemplation magnificently expounded by St Thomas.[2] If we can not only explain the central importance of contemplation but make our own work truly contemplative, finding in it the point from which our mind can ascend to God, we may do a good deal to convince others that we really have as Christians something important to contribute. On the other point, the search for a unifying principle, we should, I think be very guarded. We should realise that any such principle which could possibly command any widespread assent would be very unlikely to be satisfactory to us, and that its acceptance might in practice lead to the exclusion of Catholics from the universities altogether. The best we can hope for under present conditions is that the university should become rather a community of communities than an aggregate of individuals, and that many of those communities should be Christian, carrying on apostolic work with freedom and vigour in a way proper to their *milieu*. This does not mean that there might not be great value in the establishment of small religious universities of the traditional type, Catholic and non-Catholic, with rigorously high standards, devoted to bringing together again theology and the other intellectual disciplines, and conceived as centres of radiation rather than places for the intellectual segregation of believers. The example of Holland shows that denominational and secular or neutral universities can co-exist on friendly terms in one country with benefit to both. And of course Catholics should support, discreetly and intelligently, any attempt to make Christian theology count for more in the university curriculum (for instance, the establishment of the inter-denominational Faculty of Theology at Birmingham, where Catholics have made a notable contribution).

Experience has shown that for the proper functioning of the Catholic community in a neutral university a physical centre, the chaplaincy, and a full-time and properly qualified chaplain with a good understanding of the *milieu* are necessary. A Catholic Society meeting in lecture-rooms, occasionally assembling for Mass in a parish church, and with only the part-time services (often

2 Josef Pieper's *Musse und Kult* (Kosel, München 1948) is an admirable modern exposition and application of this doctrine.

admirable as far as they go) of an overworked parish priest or curate, cannot develop into a community of the sort required. But, given the chaplain and chaplaincy (and, of course, they are by no means 'given'; but it is impossible here to go into the serious economic problems of their support), and if certain other still more important intellectual and spiritual conditions are fulfilled, the Catholics in a university can, and often do, not only develop on the right lines spiritually and intellectually themselves, but play a most valuable part in the life of the university as a whole. These conditions seem to me to be: that the work of the chaplaincy should in general be conceived apostolically and positively, not negatively and defensively; that a deep spiritual life, soundly based on the Liturgy and the study of Scripture and theologically informed, should be built up in the group; this, of course, is vitally necessary to any Catholic group, but it is perhaps particularly necessary in a university because it is only through liturgical worship and the scriptural and theological piety that should always go with it that the intellect, along with man's other parts and powers, can in a complete and adult way be brought directly into the service of God; that there should be no pressure-group tactics, scalp-hunting proselytism, or indiscreet, impolite and ill-informed controversy; that the Catholics should be ready to co-operate to the fullest legitimate extent with other Christian bodies in the university, and should cultivate friendly relations with them; that they should, collectively and individually, show themselves ready to work disinterestedly and sincerely for the good of the university or of any of its subordinate groups or activities in which they find themselves engaged, to the glory of God in their proper temporal work and not for any ulterior motive[3]; and that everything they do, especially publicly and collectively, should be of the highest quality, from the Academic Mass to the Catholic Society dance. This is not an unattainable ideal. The two university Catholic Societies which I have known most intimately (one very large and the other very small) have made a very good attempt to realise it, and have consequently come to take a very high place and exercise a remarkable influence, at least among the undergraduate members of their respective universities.

3 Cf. on this point Fr V. Wilkin's excellent article in *Crux*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (January 1951).

In speaking of the chaplaincies one naturally tends to think predominantly of the undergraduate Catholic members of the universities. And, on the whole, not enough serious thinking has yet been done about the problems of the Catholic senior members (I mean those who are actually engaged in teaching in the universities). This is natural enough, for it is only very recently that there has appeared any considerable number of Catholics engaged in university teaching, and there are still not many universities in this country where the Catholics on the staff (those at least whose Catholicism is in any way perceptible) form any considerable group or body. One consequence of the lack of attention given to the position of Catholic university teachers is that, in the *Pax Romana* system of organisation adopted by the university Catholic societies of this country (which are of course integral parts of the international organisation of *Pax Romana*), they are grouped with the main body of graduates whose work, naturally, lies outside the universities and, in theory at least, rather sharply separated from the undergraduate members of their own universities. This is almost the exact reverse of what is desirable. University teachers, those at least who hold to the tradition of liberal knowledge, have to a large extent very different interests and concerns from the great body of professional and business men with university degrees; and the needs of their Catholic formation cannot altogether be met by *oeuvres de haute vulgarisation* and adult education activities of the 'university extension' type, however admirable (and much of the work of the Newman Association of this kind is admirable). They need some sort of grouping which will stimulate the advancement of learning and original and independent thought—this might well be arranged within the larger graduate organisation. And it is extremely important, that they should realise that their proper and principal Catholic activity lies within their own universities, and that they should be closely associated with the Catholic undergraduates and should exercise some degree of intellectual leadership among them. This of course often happens in practice at present, with the good will of all concerned; but the structure of the organisation seems defective.

It is urgently necessary that some thought should be given to the position of Catholic university teachers, because the gradual emergence of a body of laymen with their particular professional

vocation is an event of some significance in the life of the Church. For the first time in the history of the Western Church[4] since her distinctively Western characteristics made themselves clear, there is appearing a body of laymen *professionally* dedicated to the pursuit and teaching of truth (for this is what the university vocation must mean to a Christian if it means anything). They must necessarily, if they take their vocation seriously, be concerned with philosophy and also with theology—for all Catholic thinking about real things, and especially about man and what he does and thinks, which is the general subject of the disciplines of a University Faculty of Arts, must at some point become theology if it is carried on properly. We may perhaps call them, and those many others who have a personal rather than a professional vocation of the same kind, philosophers in the ancient, wide and humble sense of the word. It seems better than the rather shrill and snobbish 'intellectual'. They may bring great good to the Church by their work and the distinctive values and standards of their profession, respect for truth and for other people's minds, insistence on intellectual freedom and on accuracy and high quality in everything thought, said or done. But there are also formidable possibilities of conflict. For one thing, the approach of these philosophers to philosophy and theology is often very different from that of the somewhat over-professionalised post-Tridentine clerical schools. They have a tendency to be, like perhaps most educated laymen in the past, irremediably unscholastic. And, being dedicated to the service of truth, if the obligations of pursuing and speaking the truth, of following the argument or the evidence wherever it leads, clash with that of ecclesiastical obedience (and only an excessively apologetic- or official-minded person can maintain that they do not clash sometimes), their obligations to the truth will remain. But, given goodwill and understanding on both sides and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the possibilities for good of this new development may be very great.

4 The lay theologian or religious philosopher has, both in Byzantine and modern times, played an important and valuable part in the intellectual life of the Eastern Orthodox.

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