

# Authoritarianism vs. Christian Liberty: The Peril and Promise of the Catholic University

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In this paper I want to argue that the Catholic university does have a special sort of essence that makes it a certain species of university; it is not merely a university that happens to be Catholic. Rather it is, if it lives up to its essence, a distinct kind of university that is shot through and through with its Catholicism. I further want to argue that the Catholic university can be a very good thing and a thing that is sorely needed in this secular world; however, if it is to be a very good thing, it must avoid both the pitfalls of authoritarianism on the one hand and shallow rationalism on the other. If it does so, it can stand as a beacon of truth against both fundamentalism, whether Protestant or Catholic, and positivism.

## **I: The University**

Before attempting an assessment of the nature and purpose of the Catholic university we should first briefly explore the genus it belongs to, that is, the university. A university is neither a substance<sup>1</sup> nor an attribute of a substance, nor a mere aggregate; it is an institution which has as its goal the imparting of knowledge of a certain sort. The ontological status of something like an institution is extremely difficult to define, so in this paper we can only give a rough approximation of its definition. An institution is a community of people drawn together for a certain purpose and run according to certain rules, which give those within it roles, duties, and privileges, and which provide for the continuance of the institution when those currently constituting it leave it. Institutions start with some group of people, but since they are run according to rules they can survive the absence of the particular people who founded them. An analogy with an organism is helpful. What chiefly defines an organism is the structure according to which its various parts are related in order to serve the ends of the organism as a whole (*viz.* vital operations). The structure of an organism can survive even when the particular matter constituting it at any time leaves it, so long as new matter takes its place. In an institution, the structure is the rules according to which the institution runs and which determine the roles of the various people within the institution as those bear upon its purpose (in the case of the university the attainment of new knowledge and the passing on of acquired knowledge).

So much for the general nature of institutions. The specific nature of a university is that it is an institution devoted to attaining new knowledge and to passing on old knowledge. That is, a university is a place where scholars pursue research in the hope of revealing truths never before ascertained by another human being, and it is a place where knowledge attained long ago is preserved and passed on.

I shall define "knowledge" as justified true belief. A belief is a mental act whereby a person assents, with a greater or lesser degree of certainty, to some proposition. A true belief is a belief which bears upon a proposition that correctly describes and, in that sense, corresponds to some state of affairs in the world. For example, as I write this, I believe that my cat is sitting on the table in the dining room. If my cat is sitting on the table in the dining room, then my belief is true. But, even if it is true, it is not knowledge because, although I have some reason to believe my cat is sitting on the table in the dining room (namely that he often sits there when he is not eating or playing), I do not have the sort of evidence which would give me real knowledge this is so. When I walk into the other room and see my cat on the dining room table, I would then have knowledge that the proposition, "My cat is on the dining room table," is true.

Universities, of course, are not concerned with such bits of knowledge as "My cat is sitting on the dining room table." Rather, universities are concerned, in the most general terms, with knowledge of the nature of the universe humans live in, of its origin and purpose, and of its relation to human beings. Of course the universe is very broad and can be broken up into many parts. Thus physics studies one part of the universe; namely, it studies the physical part of the universe insofar as it is physical. That is, a physicist is concerned with a physical body only insofar as it bears certain attributes. The nature of these attributes are difficult to delimit. But it is clear that the physicist is not directly and per se concerned with certain attributes of bodies, for example their aesthetic attributes. Breaking down the universe into all the parts studied by different disciplines in the university is an interesting task but one we are not concerned with here.<sup>2</sup> Suffice it to say that all university disciplines are concerned with rather general features of the universe and with the properties and relations that are essential to those features of the universe. To take the physicist again, the physicist, among other things, is concerned with certain relationships holding among all bodies. For example, she is concerned with a kind of relationship all bodies have to one another called "gravity." Of course, universities don't just want speculation about the world which arrives at beliefs which may or may not be true; they want knowledge, that is, justified true belief. Hence, the various disciplines within the university are very concerned with methodology, that is, with the general procedures by which evidence can be attained to support the truth of various kinds of belief.

With this general sketch of the university completed, we can move on to the essential question concerning the Catholic nature of the Catholic university.

## **II: The Catholic University**

A Catholic university is a university run by the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church is, if it really exists, not simply an institution but the Mystical Body of Christ, having Christ as its invisible head and the pope as its visible head and mouthpiece. According to Catholic teaching, God has revealed, through His Church, important truths about God, man, and the universe, which are inaccessible to unaided human reason.<sup>3</sup> Among such truths are the historic fall of man, the debt of eternal punishment that the fall incurred, the Incarnation of God in Christ, the vicarious atonement of Christ on the cross canceling the

debt of sin, the glorious resurrection of Christ, and the future bliss of those who die in communion with Him. These are certainly doctrines of the highest significance and, if they are true, are about the most important truths anyone could know. The Catholic university, being Catholic, must take the claim of the truth of these doctrines seriously. What does that mean?

It means, first of all, that the Catholic university must differ in species from the non-Catholic university. In light of the central importance of the truths Catholicism professes, the Catholic nature of a Catholic university cannot be an accidental feature of it. The Catholic university cannot differ from the non-Catholic university as the white man does from the black but as the zebra does from the tiger. The Catholicism of the Catholic university must penetrate all of its departments.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, this does not mean that all disciplines in the university will be equally concerned with the doctrines Catholicism teaches. Theology and philosophy, for example, will be much more concerned with those doctrines than Physics. Nevertheless, even a physicist who teaches at a Catholic university, must, I think, take Catholic doctrines seriously. This does not mean that she must believe them, it seems to me, because if the university is to be a place of free inquiry into the truth, then even a Catholic university ought to allow, nay, even encourage the presence of non-Catholics. As Mill argued so well, one does not have the right to believe any doctrine until one hears the strongest objections to it, and one does not really hear strong objections to a doctrine except from those who do not believe it.<sup>5</sup> Hence, it behooves the Catholic university to hire some nonbelievers for the very sake of its Catholicism. The physicist, as I was saying, therefore, need not believe Catholic doctrines but should take them seriously and should think about how the data the physicist studies must be interpreted differently according as to whether one believes the universe is a cosmic accident or a matter of intelligent design. Of course, none of this can impinge in a very direct way upon scientific research, but in a more remote and indirect way, I think it can. It can, for example, have an influence on the way a scientist thinks about the uses to which technology should be put, or even the sorts of technology which should be developed.<sup>6</sup>

The Catholic nature of the Catholic university will not come out only in the seriousness with which its faculty considers the truths of Catholicism but also in the structure of its curriculum. The more Catholic a university is, the more prominence theology and philosophy will have in the curriculum as being the disciplines most directly concerned with the content of Catholic teaching.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the Catholic nature of the Catholic university will be displayed in the emphasis it puts on the value of the individual human being as a child of God and on the importance of serving human needs. In this regard, the Catholic university will try to stress upon the minds of students attending it the need to serve people in one's profession and not simply the need to obtain a living. This message can be conveyed not only in the curriculum but in the presence of many student groups, such as a pro-life group.

### **III: Dangers and Challenges**

This brief sketch of the nature of the Catholic university has not so far addressed the chief problem many non-Catholics see with the whole notion of a Catholic university. One sometimes hears the statement that the very phrase "Catholic university" is a contradiction in terms. I think the meaning of this statement can be clarified if one attends to the criticism Bertrand Russell levels against Thomas Aquinas. Russell conceded that Aquinas was a very great intellect and that his *Summa Contra Gentiles* was a masterful system, but he denied that Aquinas was the equal of Aristotle. His reason was that:

There is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas. He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead. He is not engaged in an inquiry, the result of which it is impossible to know in advance. Before he begins to philosophize he already knows the truth; it is declared in the Catholic faith. The finding of arguments for a conclusion given in advance is not philosophy, but special pleading.

The relevance of this criticism to the notion of the Catholic university is clear. If the purpose of the university is to seek the truth by the use of human reason, is there not a danger present to the university in Catholicism's notion that it possesses revealed truths inaccessible to human reason? May not such purported truths become a sort of shackle to free thought and free inquiry, stifling any argument or evidence that leads to a conclusion opposed to Church teachings. One need only ponder the following text of Aquinas, from the very place where he defends the role reason plays in the contemplation of revealed truth, to see that this is a real danger:

From this (i.e., that reason and faith cannot conflict) we evidently gather the following conclusion: whatever arguments are brought forward against the doctrines of faith are conclusions incorrectly derived from the first and self-evident principles embedded in nature. Such conclusions do not have the force of demonstration; they are arguments that are either probable or sophistical.<sup>9</sup>

For all my deep admiration for Aquinas, an admiration that has grown over the years as I have studied, with some care, his thought and that of his medieval followers, I find these words chilling. Anytime the authority of the Church becomes a threat to free inquiry and to criticism of traditionally formulated doctrines, it is time to return to the enlightenment championing of the rational search for the truth:

It is possible for the philosopher to defend what is contrary either to an erroneous interpretation of Sacred Scripture or to what is not legitimately deduced from Sacred Scripture. For erroneous interpretations of Sacred Scripture and things which are not legitimately deduced from Sacred Scripture are not revealed truths. Now it sometimes happens that the philosopher comes up with a proposition which is contrary either to a theological proposition or to an interpretation of a text of Scripture. However, since the theologian as well as the philosopher can err, then not only should the philosopher re-examine his thesis, but the theologian should also reconsider his theological proposition and interpretation of Scripture.<sup>10</sup>

This passage by Wolff shows that enlightenment had the advantage over scholasticism of recognizing that the use of reason in theology is a two edged sword and that it can be used against theology as well as in support of it. Nor did this involve a theory of double truth, but merely the recognition that what theologians and the Church sometimes claim to be revealed conflicts with rationally known truths and as such is not revealed at all. If we are honest with ourselves, we will recognize that much of what we believe according to Church teaching we do not know to be true. Hence, if we are rational in our beliefs, we cannot dismiss any conclusions contrary to Church teaching with the thought that such conclusions must be false because they are opposed to revelation. This is for the simple reason that we do not know Church teaching to be revealed but merely believe it to be so. To keep ourselves honest in our beliefs then we cannot rule out a priori any conclusions apparently against Church teaching on the grounds that nothing that contradicts Church teaching can possibly be true.

This is important not only that we may keep our faith honest but that we may advance in our faith. If there were no theologians and philosophers critical of official Church teaching at a given time, much of what we now take to be inspired teaching would have never developed. I am thinking here of Vatican II's insistence that there are those outside the official pail of the Roman Catholic Church who will be saved.<sup>11</sup> If one reads the prevailing opinion of Catholic thinkers from the time of Trent or even of Vatican I, it will be apparent that this was not in those days the prevailing view.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, earlier Catholics and Protestants tended not only to think all non-Christians would be condemned to hell but even all Christians not of their sect. In light of the Church's stunning change concerning this point in recent years, one can hope that continued questioning by scholars and knowledgeable lay people of aspects of the present teaching of the Church will lead to future revisions of Church teaching as salutary as the revisions concerning the salvation of those outside of the Church. But if this is to happen, free inquiry leading to disagreement with official Church teaching cannot be silenced by the threat of anathemas from high places.<sup>13</sup>

So far I have dealt only with one intellectual danger facing the Catholic university and have not touched upon a danger that is of an opposite nature and which more typically faces secular universities. That is the danger of a rationalism that is not in any way grounded in its object, being, or in the tradition of the contemplation of being. At worst such a rationalism leads to a shallow positivism that accords to reason only the task of connecting its ideas and which denies entirely any transcendent being or goodness. Recently the philosopher Iris Murdoch has passionately warned of this danger in her book *Metaphysics as A Guide to Morals*:

We have been (we are told) profoundly mistaken in assuming that speech is in some profound sense prior to writing and represents a more direct and unambiguous communication. We must allow ourselves to be influenced by reflection upon languages of science; "natural language" is not the only language of the planet, the language of physics, for instance, may be, if we really think about it, felt to be more fundamental. Our ordinary "consciousness" of a separately existent external world of extra-linguistic entities is shown, in this light, to be an illusion. There are no "in themselves" signifieds

sitting about awaiting our attention, there are only mutually related signifiers. Indeed nothing "really" (deeply) exists except a sea or play of language of whose profound or sole reality "we" may be more or less aware as we follow unconscious codes or join the lively and playful creative movements of the linguistic totality that transcends us. Of course there is much novelty, scholarship, brilliance, to be seen in the structuralist compound. What is objectionable is the damage done to other modes of thinking and to literature by the presentation of this fanciful metaphysics as a fundamental system. Philosophy, anthropology, history, literature, have different procedures and methods of verification. It is only when the idea of truth as relation to separate reality is removed that they can seem in this odd hallucinatory light to be similar. With the idea of truth the idea of value also vanishes.<sup>14</sup>

In opposition to this rationalism run-a-muck, Murdoch wants a reason rooted in being and the good.

Plato's "Good" resembles Kant's "Reason," but is a better image, since, by contrast, reason, too, if we are to keep any force in the concept, is a specialized instrument. The sovereign Good is not an empty receptacle into which the arbitrary will place objects of its choice. It is something that we all experience as a creative force. This is metaphysics, which sets up a picture that it then offers as an appeal to us all to see if we cannot find just this in our deepest experience. The word "deep," or some such metaphor, will come in here as part of the essence of the appeal. In this respect metaphysical and religious pictures resemble each other.

Because of its belief in a transcendent source of all good and its respect for a long tradition devoted to exploring the depths of that good, Catholicism offers a powerful antidote to positivism.<sup>16</sup> If the Catholic university can hold on to Catholicism's belief in the transcendent and its respect for a tradition celebrating the transcendent, while at the same time avoiding the danger of authoritarianism that is inherent in its hierarchical structure, then it will truly embody the very essence of the university.

## Notes

1 By "substance" I here mean to refer to any complete individual entity such as a cat or a tree, in opposition to their parts and properties and to groups of them (like an army).

2 For more on the nature and relation of the various academic disciplines, see Mortimer J. Adler, *What Man Has Made of Man*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1937), 144-153. (Adler here leans heavily on J. Maritains's *Less Degres du Savoir*, Paris, 1932).

3 On this, see *The First Vatican Council*, in *The Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. by Norman Tanner, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1972), 806.

4 For a detailed examination of the way Catholicism should permeate all the disciplines in the Catholic university, see John Henry Newman, *The Idea of the University*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984),

58-74.

5 On Liberty, in *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, ed. by Marshall Cohen, (New York: Random House, 1961), c. 2, 225-228.

6 I am thinking here, for example, of medical technology that uses fetal tissue.

7 I do not here ignore the fact that philosophy is not theology, nor do I want philosophy to be but a "handmaiden" of the faith; nevertheless, philosophy, in the department of metaphysics especially, focuses on questions which theology also deals with from another point of view.

8 Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, (New York: Stratford Press, 1945), 463.

9 *Summa contra gentiles*, trans. Anton Pegis, (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), c. 7, 75.

10 Christian Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse on Philosophy in General*, trans. Richard J. Blackwell, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1963), 104

11 See *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. by Walter M. Abbot et al., (Piscataway, New Jersey: New Century Press, 1966), 35.

12 See *The Decrees of Vatican I*, session 2, Jan. 6, 1870, Tanner, 803.

13 The following words from Vatican I must have sent a chill down the backs of not a few Catholics (as well as non-Catholics living in Catholic lands): "Therefore we define that every assertion contrary to the truth of enlightened faith is totally false. Furthermore the Church, together with its apostolic office of teaching, has by divine appointment the right and duty of condemning what wrongly passes for knowledge, lest anyone be led astray by philosophy and empty deceit" (Tanner, 809). One need only look at the contemporaneous *Syllabus of Errors* to find out what notions the Holy See felt it had the right to condemn, the idea of the separation of Church and state being among them.

14 Published by the Penguin Press, New York, 1992,

201-202.

15 *Ibid*, 507.

16 A magnificent statement of Catholicism's doctrine of the transcendent good is to be found in session 3, c. 1 of the first Vatican Council: "The holy, catholic, apostolic and Roman Church believes and acknowledges that there is one true and living God, creator and lord of heaven and earth, almighty, eternal, immeasurable, incomprehensible, infinite in will, understanding and every perfection. Since His is one, singular, completely simple and unchangeable spiritual substance, He must be declared in reality and essence distinct from the world, supremely happy in Himself and from Himself, and inexpressibly loftier than anything besides Himself ... " (Tanner, 805).