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THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY DEBATE: AN UNNECESSARY CONTROVERSY

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The past few years have witnessed a recrudescence of the debate whether a Catholic university can or should exist. The debate flourishes because defenders of the Catholic university have placed themselves in a false position by unwittingly conforming to the positivistic presuppositions of their antagonists. Critics of the Catholic university assert that Catholicism constitutes a bias inimical to the pursuit of pure truth, ignoring the fact that no human person can ever be free of prejudice in the most basic sense, i.e. perceptual distortion. In conceding that the university exists to seek truth, one must bear constantly in mind that no researcher can perceive reality without imposing upon it. Similarly, in stipulating that truth is the object of the intellect, one must not facily assume that the intellect is the only means to truth. Therefore, in describing the function of the Catholic intellectual, one must avoid unnecessarily sacrificing either his Catholicism or his intellectuality.

The Quest for Pure Truth

The first pitfall in considering the rationale of a Catholic university lies in an uncritical acceptance of the dictum that the university must be defined in terms of the quest for pure truth. Even were one to accept the dictum without regard for the serious challenges recently offered it, one would have to deal with its underlying assumption that somewhere outside the mind exists the ultimate prize, the untarnished, uninterpreted datum, that the true researcher must divest himself of all presuppositions, especially a religious worldview, in order to isolate that datum.

In point of fact, any datum must be perceived in order to be used, and no man perceives without imposing something of himself on reality. He cannot prescind from all viewpoints; if he abjures a religious one, he cannot avoid assuming an equally arbitrary secular viewpoint. "Why the religious searcher should be frisked at the university gate while the secular searcher slips in unchallenged, no one has ever made clear."¹ Nor can it be made clear.

In pledging allegiance to the quest for truth, we must bear constantly in mind that our hold on objective reality is quite tenuous. The rigid scientific methodologies of the various disciplines are less imposing when we consider that the basis of our entire structure of knowledge is the unprovable principle of identity: "a thing is what it is and no other". That consideration is heightened by the fact that our techniques of investigation interfere with the phenomenon under investigation. After all, techniques of investigation logically precede the investigation and attempt to structure extramental reality to fit minds ceased to be blank slates long before they became critical. Psychologists can support the proposition, "whatever is received is received according to the modality of the receiver," with an almost infinite number of cautionary tales.

The researcher is not, of course, an uncritical observer. Yet no amount of training can divest him of all personal and philosophical biases. Moreover, his methodology itself constitutes a bias. Social scientists must often rely on untrained observers,² and Heisenberg's attempt simultaneously to measure the velocity and position of subatomic particles has, among other things, demonstrated the vulnerability of physical science methodology.³

The nature of the quest for pure truth must be evaluated in the light of such considerations. The notion that the researcher can divest himself of bias is insidious, providing as it does a cloak of justification for accepting secular faith in preference to religious faith, and thus creating the "problem" of the Catholic university.

Man and the Ways of Knowing

These considerations inevitably suggest that one is on somewhat shaky ground in asserting that what cannot be demonstrated empirically cannot adequately be understood. Perhaps it is time to consider whether the limitations placed on the quest for truth by the total emphasis on reason as the sole source of adequate knowledge are not merely arbitrary. Intellectual apprehension, after all, does not always compel personal assent. Indeed, personal assent often precedes intellectual apprehension. Especially is this true in the case of values.

"Values are not neutral. They are not achieved as the result of neutral inquiry. But we desperately need them."⁴ Is the university then to prescind from questions of value? How can it? The very structure and method of the various disciplines enshrine value choices. There is a contradiction inherent in the position emphasizing rigid commitment to intellectual method as the only road to truth.

It is worth suggesting that faith, "intuition," and other conclusively unscientific means of knowledge have their place in the search for truth. If we are unwilling to consider their use,

we have delimited our access to data before the search.

To accept only the four-dimensional universe of our rational comprehension as given is like envisioning the universe as a dried-out sponge when it may in fact be more like a sponge in water, simultaneously surrounded and permeated by a further dimension. Functioning in ignorance of a dimension would be ludicrous were we to conceive it in terms of a man functioning in ignorance of extension or time—particularly if that man refused to consider the existence of extension or time because of an inflexible, self-imposed methodology.⁵

It should be clear that the general basis for attacking the existence and function of the Catholic university is the faith of secular humanism, as uncompromisingly dogmatic a faith as Catholicism.

The Function of the Catholic Intellectual

Apologists for the Catholic university thus do violence to the Catholic intellectual in trying to pass him off as one who wears the strait jacket of secular humanism everywhere but to Church. He should be conceived of as qualitatively different in that he has a real apostolate which is an irreplaceable part of his function.

Where can we go to discover the nature and vocation of the Catholic intellectual? Gustave Weigel wrote in 1957, "to date, no theology of the intellectual life, as we know it, has appeared,"⁶ and his remark still appears valid. Perhaps we can follow Jacques Maritain's lead and rely on that current of thought which has perennially proposed that man's highest activity is contemplation.⁷ While it is true that this tradition has often concerned itself almost exclusively with the contemplation of God, we do it no violence by extending the notion to the contemplation of all truth. Primacy in intellectual work must then belong to pure contemplation carried out with passionate dedication to the truth, truth being construed broadly.

If we halt here, restricting intellectual work to the confines of the quest for pure truth, we imprison all intellectuals in an ivory tower. Yet, pursuing our similitude with the scholastic notion of contemplation, we find that thought and perception necessarily flow into action. "It must be conceded," wrote Suarez, "that no state of life which does not share something of action and something of contemplation is able to be properly ordained to obtaining perfection."⁸ There is more, then, to the intellectual life than pure thought. There pertains to it also such action as is truly the overflow of thought, extending and elucidating it without in any way being cut off from it. This is to say, in effect, that an intrinsic part of the intellectual vocation is the communication of thought or its fruit to others.

This should not be any startling discovery; it should already

have been evident from the fact that intellectuals are radical conservatives. By terming them conservatives, I do not mean to lump them with the forces of reaction. Their commitment is not to the "old", nor, in point of fact, to the "new", but to the "always" which is truth. They are conservatives in the sense that they have custody of our past, they think within a tradition, and they live within a community shaped by it. This tradition they carry on, always extending and perfecting it, and since this tradition is of vital import to the community, they are responsible to and for the community. To say this is not to say that every intellectual is obliged to apply the fruits of his researches to the practical realm. What it does mean is that no intellectual can be indifferent to the way in which these are applied, and that some intellectuals must so apply them.

Essential to our understanding of intellectuals is the awareness that part of their custodianship of social structures is critical and evaluative. Like careful gardeners, they must sometimes prune their favorite plant in order that it may flourish. In practice, this means social criticism. The intellectual cannot abandon his role as critic, for when he "withdraws from society, he leaves its ultimate direction up to the salesman and the politician, to classes not devoted professionally to the truth."⁹ This creates an obligation on the part of the community to remain open to intellectuals, to hear their criticism fairly.

With an ordered understanding of the work of intellectuals, we can assay a definition of them, and the best seems that proposed by Merle Curti. To him, intellectuals are "those whose main interest is the advancement of knowledge, or the clarification of cultural issues and public problems."¹⁰

What shall we say now of those intellectuals who are Catholics? First of all, we must distinguish those whose pursuit is non-theological from those whose pursuit is theological. The latter function within a tradition which is one of the sources of dogma; they are servants of tradition without being its masters.

Let us consider the case of the Catholic intellectuals whose pursuit is non-theological. Their responsibility to the Church finds its basic not in custody of a theological tradition but in the sacraments of initiation by which they are born into and made responsible for the Church. In this, of course, they do not differ from other Catholics. Their concern for the Church sometimes assumes the form of criticism and evaluation of it; it always assumes the form of a strengthened obligation to the perfection of the human community. Their vocation is not specified but intensified by their being Catholics, so that their work in and for the Church is to be totally dedicated to the pursuit of truth in their non-theological concerns and in a non-theological way. By definition, Catholic intellectuals do not contemplate as a means to an apostolate; their contemplation is their apostolate.

It is quite important that we realize that Catholic intellectuals possess autonomy within their field of study. To submit their work to the judgment of theology or to force their subject matter to support the conclusions of theology is to do violence to both disciplines. Catholic intellectuals bring Christ to their environs not by forcing an artificial synthesis of their discipline and theology, but by bearing him about in their persons. Cardinal Suhard has said of the Christian that "he does not choose his method. His manner of acting is imposed upon him by the milieu he lives in: it is the action of leaven."^{1 2} Other than that, we must leave the Catholic intellectual to his discipline, confident that it is possible for him to build natural knowledge into the vision of revelation without doing so in any forced way.

Conclusion

The notion of a Catholic university is not radically different in basic presumptions from that of a secular university. The problem is that secular humanism is often insufficiently flexible in establishing its canons of research methodology. The defense of the Catholic university must begin at this point.

Footnotes

¹"The Church and the University," *America*, CXIV, 5 (January 29, 1966), 165.

²For some consideration of the problems of history in particular, one may consult Charles Beard's essays, "That Noble Dream," in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History* (N.Y., 1956), 315-328 and "Written History as an Act of Faith," in Han Meyerhoff, ed., *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (Garden City, N.Y., 1959), 140-151, and Raymond Aron's "Relativism in History," in Meyerhoff, 153-161.

³Cf. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (N.Y., 1958) and *Physics and Beyond: Encounters and Conversations* (N.Y., 1971).

⁴W. Seavey Joyce, *Notes Toward the Idea of a Catholic University* (Chestnut Hill, Mass., 1969), 7.

⁵Cf. Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (5th ed. rev.; N.Y., 1963).

⁶"American Catholic Intellectuals—A Theologian's Reflections," *Review of Politics*, XIX (1958), 285.

⁷Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II, IIae, p. 180-182.

⁸*De Religione*, Tract. I, c.5, n.5.

⁹Thomas P. O'Neil, "The Social Function of the Intellectual," *Thought*, XXXII (1958), 208.

¹⁰*American Paradox* (Newark, 1956), 73.

¹¹O. Mueller, "Zum Begriff der Tradition in der Theologie der letzten hundert Jahre," *Muenchener Theologische Studien*, IV (1953), 164-86.

¹²*The Church Today: Growth or Decline?* (Notre Dame, Inc., 1948), 83.