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THEOLOGY IN THE UNIVERSITY

There are many ways in which one might approach the subject of theology in the university. By way of background, one might give a brief historical summary of the place of theology in the life of the university. This would bring us from the past to the present, from what theology has been in university life to what it actually is today. Then one might assess the actual situation of theology in modern universities, and attempt to judge whether or not the present position of theology is what it ought to be. Having taken a position, one might then make a few practical suggestions. This is briefly what I intend to do. May I preface my remarks by admitting candidly that to do all of this briefly is to do it superficially. One should have some justification for treating superficially, both theology, one of the most ancient and certainly the most sacred of sciences, and the university, one of our most cherished and most important institutions. My only justification is the obvious limitation of time on the one hand, and my own limitations on the other. My only hope is that by raising a few questions, and by indicating some important perspectives, you may be encouraged to give the subject the more adequate and profound study that it deserves. This is a modest hope. Fortunately, fruitful sources of study are not wanting in our day. I shall indicate some of these in the course of my remarks.

First a word of history. Rashdall, in his book on The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages, tells us of the ecclesiastical monopoly on learning in the Dark Ages when clerics were the only class that possessed or desired learning. It was from the monasteries and cathedral schools that the first

universities sprang. During this first period, all other sciences were subordinate or instrumental to theology. In the thirteenth century, theology reached its greatest height, as a truly learned science, although the Schoolmen recognized the relative autonomy of other studies. In this age of the primacy of theology in the university, law and medicine also came into their own as faculties, while theology was considered the Queen of the sciences, the integrating force in the new learning. It should perhaps be noted that there was nothing illiberal about the Schoolmen. In their Summas they ranged throughout all of the known knowledge of their day and of ages past, and did indeed, through theology, elaborate a synthesis that one would almost despair of attempting today, given the explosive growth of knowledge since their day. The third stage of theology might be said to be one of equality such as prevailed, for example, in Oxford and Cambridge in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Theology had become one of a number of university faculties, but it was no longer the over-all integrating force that it had been in the Middle Ages. The final stage, in which we are today, is in some cases a matter of toleration, more or less benign, or of insignificant isolation, or of revived interest after virtual extinction in the university. Historically then, theology has descended from a place of primacy to a struggle for existence in the university.

One might tentatively suggest at this point that what is, is not necessarily what ought to be. We can obviously recognize that much has happened in the history of learning, in the course of world events, and in the development of universities since the Middle Ages. But we can still study the case for theology in the university world, whatever the historical and existential factors that bear upon the actual situation. The case for theology has had

no more eloquent champion than Cardinal Newman in the opening chapters of his Idea of a University. There are three points to his argument, and I trust that you will bear with me if I repeat them in his own words:

"I say, then, that if a university be, from the nature of the case, a place of instruction, where universal knowledge is professed, and if in a certain university, so called, the subject of Religion is excluded, one of two conclusions is inevitable - either, on the one hand, that the province of Religion is very barren of real knowledge, or, on the other hand, that in such university one special and important branch of knowledge is omitted. I say, the advocate of such an institution must say this, or he must say that; he must own, either that little or nothing is known about the Supreme Being, or that his seat of learning calls itself what it is not."

"If, then, in an institution which professes all knowledge, nothing is professed, nothing is taught about the Supreme Being, it is fair to infer that every individual in the number of those who advocate that institution, supposing him consistent, distinctly holds that nothing is known for certain about the Supreme Being; nothing such, as to have any claim to be regarded as a material addition to the stock of general knowledge existing in the world. If on the other hand it turns out that something considerable is known about the Supreme Being, whether from Reason or Revelation, then the institution in question professes every science, and yet leaves out the foremost of them. In a word, strong as may appear the assertion, I do not see how I can avoid making it, and bear with me, Gentlemen,

while I do so, viz., such an institution cannot be what it professes, if there be a God. I do not wish to declaim; but, by the very force of the terms, it is very plain, that a Divine Being and a university so circumstanced cannot co-exist."

Newman secondly attempts to show that the exclusion of theology is prejudicial to the other subjects taught in the university.

"....All knowledge forms one whole, because its subject-matter is one; for the universe in its length and breadth is so intimately knit together, that we cannot separate off portion from portion, and operation from operation, except by a mental abstraction; and then again, as to its Creator, though He of course in His own Being is infinitely separate from it, and Theology has its departments towards which human knowledge has no relations, yet He has so implicated Himself with it, and taken it into His very bosom, by His presence in it, His providence over it, His impressions upon it, and His influences through it, that we cannot truly or fully contemplate it without in some main aspects contemplating Him."

"I only say, if there be Religious Truth at all, we cannot shut our eyes to it without prejudice to truth of every kind, physical, metaphysical, historical and moral; for it bears upon all truth."

At this point, Newman gives an eloquent description of Theology as the science of God, or the truths we know about God, from reason or revelation, put into a system. Following this description he says:

"If this be a sketch, accurate in substance and as far as it goes, of the doctrines proper to Theology, and especially of the doctrine of a particular Providence, which is the portion of it most on a level with human sciences, I cannot understand at all how, supposing it to be true, it can fail, considered as knowledge, to exert a powerful influence on philosophy, literature, and every intellectual creation or discovery whatever. I cannot understand how it is possible, as the phrase goes, to blink the question of its truth or falsehood. It meets us with a profession and a proffer of the highest truths of which the human mind is capable; it embraces a range of subjects the most diversified and distant from each other. What science will not find one part or other of its province traversed by its path? What results of philosophic speculation are unquestionable, if they have been gained without inquiry as to what Theology had to say to them? Does it cast no light upon history? has it no influence upon the principles of ethics? is it without any sort of bearing on physics, metaphysics, and political science? Can we drop it out of the circle of knowledge, without allowing, either that that circle is thereby mutilated, or on the other hand, that Theology is really no science?"

".....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 premisses but this? that to withdraw Theology from the 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 unravelling the web of university teaching. It is, according to the Greek proverb, to take the Spring from out of the year"

Newman's third point is that if Theology is not taught in a university its place and necessary function will be usurped by other sciences.

"The human mind cannot keep from speculating and systematizing; and if Theology is not allowed to occupy its own territory, adjacent sciences, nay, sciences which are quite foreign to Theology, will take possession of it (Theology's place)."

This latter point of Newman's was somewhat prophetically elaborated by Dr. Pusey, one of Newman's anglican contemporaries at Oxford:

"All things must speak of God, refer to God, or they are atheistic. History, without God, is a chaos without design or end or aim. Political Economy, without God, would be a selfish teaching about the acquisition of wealth, making the larger portion of mankind animate machines for its production; Physics,

without God, would be but a dull inquiry into certain meaningless phenomena; Ethics, without God, would be a varying rule without principle, or substance, or centre, or ruling hand; Metaphysics, without God, would make man his own temporary God, to be resolved, after his brief hour here, into the nothingness out of which he proceeded. All sciences ...will tend to exclude the thought of God if they are not cultivated with reference to Him. History will become an account of man's passions and brute strength instead of the ordering of God's providence for creatures' good; Physics will materialize man, and Metaphysics, God." (Collegiate and Professional Teaching and Discipline, p. 25)

The words of Newman and Pusey were written about a century ago. If we grant that the nature of theology has not changed, and that the commitment of the university to adequacy of knowledge has not changed, these words may be taken as a fair statement of the case for theology in the university today. We certainly should note, however, that much has happened in the last century to complicate the case. There has been the fall of empires, world wars, the advent of a new industrialized society, the steady drift towards ^{an} all-encompassing secularism in human thought and action, the new technology, the development of social sciences, the nuclear age barely out of its infancy with the thermonuclear age hard upon its heels, and now the prospect of an exciting new frontier: outer space.

The case for theology that Newman and Pusey made a century ago may be complicated by these new developments, but the urgency of the case is, if

anything, heightened by the present historical moment. One might say that the power of man over the physical world and over his fellow man has increased far more rapidly than his wisdom, his prudence, or his moral stature. There is a sense of physical insecurity in the world today that is matched and heightened by man's moral and spiritual insecurity. We are reminded of the phrase that Manzoni uses in *I Promessi Sposi* to describe man faced with unspeakable crisis: "guazzabuglio del cuore umano" -- the utter confusion in the heart of man. Recent studies have restated the case for theology with telling force. Jacques Maritain has spoken in Education at the Crossroads; Arnold Nash in The University and the Modern World; Howard Lowry in The Mind's Adventure; and Henry Van Dusen in God in Education. Perhaps the most eloquent of the modern critics is Sir Walter Moberly in The Crisis in the University. Moberly speaks of the malaise and impotence of the universities of the world today because of their increasing awareness that they lack any clear, agreed sense of direction and purpose. The really fundamental questions are not being asked. His summary of the situation is somewhat devastating:

"Our predicament then is this. Most students go through our universities without ever having been forced to exercise their minds on the issues which are really momentous. Under the guise of academic neutrality they are subtly conditioned to unthinking acquiescence in the social and political status quo and in a secularism on which they have never seriously reflected. Owing to the prevailing fragmentation of studies, they are not challenged

to decide responsibly on a life-purpose or equipped to make such a decision wisely. They are not incited to disentangle and examine critically the assumptions and emotional attitudes underlying the particular studies they pursue, the profession for which they are preparing, the ethical judgments they are accustomed to make, and the political or religious convictions they hold. Fundamentally they are uneducated."

We may or may not agree with Moberly's description of our present predicament, but the whole force of Maritain's, Nash's, Lowry's, and Van Dusen's analysis of our situation would have us meditate for a moment on Moberly's reasoning about its cause. Moberly claims that in our supposed objectivity and neutrality regarding fundamental religious issues and moral values we have actually been anti-Christian in the modern university. He does not mince words, and one seems to hear Newman speaking with a modern voice:

"On the fundamental religious issue (the existence of God), the modern university intends to be, and supposes it is, neutral, but it is not. Certainly it neither inculcates nor expressly repudiates belief in God. But it does what is far more deadly than open rejection; it ignores Him.... In modern universities, as in modern society 'some think God exists, some think not, some think it is impossible to tell, and the impression grows that it does not matter.' It is in this sense that the university today is atheistic. If in your organization,

your curriculum, and your communal customs and ways of life, you leave God out, you teach with tremendous force that, for most people and at most times, He does not count; that religion is at best something extra and optional, a comfort for the few who are minded that way, but among the luxuries rather than the necessities of life ... Since it is the habit of the modern university to study all other subjects without any reference to theology at all, the obvious inference is that it does not 'admit a God' in any sense that is of practical importance. It is a fallacy to suppose that by omitting a subject you teach nothing about it. On the contrary you teach that it is to be omitted, and that it is therefore a matter of secondary importance. And you teach this not openly and explicitly, which would invite criticism; you simply take it for granted and thereby insinuate it silently, insidiously, and all but irresistibly....

"In the assumptions governing curriculum and academic method, the universities today are implicitly, if not intentionally, hostile to the Christian faith and even to a liberal humanism."

While the inditement is serious, and reflective of what some scholars assess to be the condition of theology in the university today, one should at this point also remember that there is considerable effort being made to rectify the situation. Church-related colleges are continually studying the impact of

their faith upon their educative efforts. Privately-supported universities, many of which began as religious institutions, have reorganized departments of religion after having lost contact with their founding fathers. Professor Shedd's study of some years ago showed that 62 of the 70 state universities accredited by the Association of American Universities offered their students academic credit courses in religion. And there have been many new developments since. We might be deceiving ourselves, however, to believe that what is being done to recognize theology in the university is the complete ^{and} effective answer to the problem of our times, ^{since} when theology and religion suffer from the same fragmentation that afflicts all areas of knowledge in the university. Again, as Moberly has said, "No half-belief in a casual creed can stand for a moment before the daemonic forces now abroad in the world."

T. S. Eliot has soberly described the situation that faces us, in the world, no less than in the university. First, our culture, insofar as it is positive, is still Christian. Secondly, our culture cannot simply remain static in its present form. It must become more Christian, or utterly secular. Thirdly, if our people really were confronted with this issue, with all its inherent implications for the future, they would choose Christianity, at least in a more vital form than they now do. It takes no great imagination or intelligence to see the relevance of Eliot's thesis to the educative process.

When one comes to practical suggestions, all of the existential difficulties of our situation must be taken into account. Departments of theology and religious practices as such are not going to turn the balance. What is first needed is that individual faculty members become concerned enough to study theology and its relevance and urgency in the world today, especially in the world of

ideas, ideals, and values. Theology is not a neutral subject like geometry. Once convinced that God has spoken, once imbued with the importance ~~about~~ of what He has said about Himself, and man and the world, this truth must begin to have an effect in the personal life of the individual. And it must cast his whole professional life into a revitalized form, too, for if there is a God, and if He has created man in His image and likeness, and if He has redeemed him from sin and prepared a place for him in life everlasting, then human life in all of its occupations, particularly in the world of ideas, will never be lived as if God had not spoken and done these things.

Much must also be done by Christian faculty members today to labor without stint for the unity of knowledge that has been fragmented. Communications must be established between theology and science, for example. The nature and destiny of man must be restudied in relation to the technological problems of survival in our day. The dignity of man must be restudied as a clue to the equality and fraternity of man so cruelly wounded throughout the world and in our own America. Each of us in education must be theologically conscious enough to portray in our own personal lives and convictions the kind of person we hope to educate our students to become. If this be commitment, then let us be committed to truth ~~an~~ whatever level we may attain it, scientifically, poetically, philosophically, and theologically. And let us not see in this commitment any real threat to our freedom as men of intelligence, for one of the greatest truths of divine revelation has been this wonderful promise: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."