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THE THEOLOGICAL MODELS OR VISIONS
OF A CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
— A COMMUNITY OF FAITH IN THE COMMUNITY
OF KNOWLEDGE

"Some seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge; that is curiosity; others seek knowledge that they may themselves be known: that is vanity; but there are still others who seek knowledge in order to serve and edify others, and that is charity."

St. Bernard of Clairvaux

INTRODUCTION: AN OXYMORON?

Let us start our train of thought with a reflection on the nature and mission of a Christian university. What is the "Christian university"? Is there such a thing?

At first sight the idea of a "Christian university" might strike us as an oxymoron, i.e. a contradiction in terms. Christian faith means commitment to a closed (declarative, assertive and dogmatic) set of values while a university is committed to curiosity, openness, questioning, scepticism and academic freedom. To put it bluntly: if it is Christian, it cannot be a university, if it is a university, it cannot be Christian. Of course, I exaggerate, but I am doing this in order to clarify the identity of a "Christian university".

The church and the university represent two ways of thinking and perhaps even two kinds of languages which, sometimes even seem to be incompatible with each other. Neither the language of science nor that of the humanities conform to the language of the church which is, ultimately, authoritative. The church from the very beginning speaks with the voice of authority invested upon her by its Founder. The university with its openness refuses to acknowledge such

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an a priori authority; however, it recognises a posteriori authority, i.e. authority in retrospect when it has proved itself and has been approved by the community of knowledge.

True, there have always been committed Christian scientists and scholars who were able to live up to the requirements of this "double citizenship": they were loyal members of their churches, sometimes even of high ecclesiastical rank, and at the same time fully acknowledged members of their academic communities. As members, "citizens" of the "community of faith", they were also citizens of the "community of knowledge".

My thesis in this paper is, that the Christian university could be a common space for these two different, even diverging, communities: the community of faith and the community of knowledge.

THEOLOGICAL MODELS

According to Bob Benne there are three components of the Christian tradition that are publicly relevant for Christian colleges and universities: its vision, its ethos (practice) and the people who "understand and articulate the Christian vision and embody the ethos of that particular tradition".²

A Christian university is born out of a theological vision. Though at the end of my paper I shall argue for the relevance of a Christian rather than of a denominational identity, it must be acknowledged that a theological vision is usually the result of a particular theological interpretation. I would like to offer three such theological interpretations: the Roman Catholic, the Reformed, and the Lutheran. It seems useful to relate these interpretations to three of the five models offered by H. R. Niebuhr in his now classic *Christ and Culture* (1951).³

The Catholic Vision

The Roman Catholic vision, characterised by unity and integrity, corresponds to the model of "Christ above culture". According to this vision Christ appears "as a supernatural fulfillment of the aspirations of culture, in the same way that grace is seen as perfecting nature and theology as perfecting philosophy... All learning pointed, with the assistance of revelation and grace, toward the supernatural source of the world and reason and toward the supernatural end of

² Benne, Robert, *Quality with Soul, How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith in Their Religious Traditions*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001, 8.

³ Niebuhr, H. R., *Christ and Culture*, New York, Harper and Row Publisher, 1951.

