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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.

humanity, which is the contemplation of God”.⁴ We can recall here the ideas of the 19th century Catholic Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801–1890) and his influential *The Idea of the Christian University* (1854), in which the Catholic convert eloquently argued for the principles of “unity”, “universality” and “integrity” (loosely coinciding with the Trinitarian framework of Creation, Redemption and Sanctification).⁵

A Catholic university, as John Paul II declared in his Apostolic Constitution, is born out of the “heart of the church” – “*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*” (1990). It is explicitly said that

“A Catholic university’s privileged task is to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth.”⁶

This sentence hits the nail on the head as it recognises that both the community of faith and the community of knowledge are concerned with the question of truth. The former is committed to the search for truth and the latter is to the “certainty of the fount of truth”. Accordingly, the vision of a Christian (or Catholic) university is to “unite” these two orders of reality.

The Reformed Vision

The Reformed theological vision corresponds to the model of “Christ the Transformer of Culture”. According to this vision, everything on earth and in human existence belongs to, and is therefore ruled, by Christ. A leading figure of the Reformed vision of education was the Dutch Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), a theologian, university founder and politician. Kuyperian Calvinists lay the emphasis on the integration of faith (revelation) and learning (culture). Followers of Christ are, therefore, invited to transform this world. Christian philosophers, politicians, artists, it is believed, can make this world better. No wonder therefore, that it has been a frequent practice, both globally and also in Hungary, that

⁴ Here I shall rely on the analysis of an excellent article by Edwards, Jr. Mark U., Christian Colleges, A Dying Light or a New Refraction?, *Christian Century*, April 21–28, 1999, 459–463. Available also on the internet: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=547>. I am quoting the internet source.

⁵ Cf. Schwehn, Mark R., A Christian University, Defining the Difference, *First Things*, Vol. 93, May 1999, 25–31. Also available on the internet: <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/a-Christian-universitydefining-the-difference-17>. I shall quote the internet version.

⁶ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae_en.html last visited on May 1st 2013.

Reformed clergymen who begin their careers as congregation pastors eventually end up as politicians in their hope that once they are in the arena of the public square, they would make it better.

The Kuyperian theology has been embraced by, for example, Calvin College, Michigan and this vision is basis of the American Calvinist Historian of Religion George M. Marsden's magisterial book *The Soul of the University. From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*, in which he first alerted the public concerning the negative effects of secularisation of originally church-founded institutions of higher education. He is right to regret the loss of Christian values of the once church-related colleges and universities and the marginalisation of "Christian scholarship".⁸ In reviewing the book a Jesuit scholar while hoping that Catholic universities and colleges will not likewise fall victim to this cultural process confirmed that

"most of the colleges and universities founded in the U. S. before the 20th century had a strongly religious, usually Protestant Christian, character and that virtually all of these institutions have no significant religious identity today. The best known example is Harvard, founded for the provision of learned ministry, whose motto for three centuries was *Christo et Ecclesiae*, but scores of other institutions – including Yale, Princeton, Chicago, Stanford, Duke, Boston University, and even the publicly founded state universities such as Michigan and California – had a pronounced Christian character in the early years of their existence and abandoned it in the 20th century."⁹

Marsden notes that within this process of secularisation theology became more liberal and religious sentiment was translated into commitment to patriotism and democracy; the concept of academic freedom was felt incompatible with dogmatic belief and by establishing "departments of religion", religion itself became merely an object of scientific study, religious tests for faculty hiring were abandoned and the principle norm became exclusively academic excellence. According to the Calvinist vision when universities are transformed "from Protestant establishment to established nonbelief", then the project of transforming this world into something better will necessarily become less and less feasible.

⁷ Marsden, George, *The Soul of American University, From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996.

⁸ Marsden, George, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997.

⁹ <http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/offices/mission/pdf1/ra2.pdf>, last visited on May 1st 2013.

The Lutheran Vision

The Lutheran Vision, argues the Reformation historian and the Lutheran St Olaf's College ex-President Mark U. Edwards, is characterised by the niebuhrian – ultimately Lutheran – model of “Christ and Culture in Paradox”. Luther made a distinction between the two kingdoms, the sacred and the secular; the world of Christ and the world of culture. Though both realms are ruled and governed by God; it is done in different ways. Luther said that it is the art of making distinctions that defines a theologian. He recognised the tension and the paradox between the worlds and deliberately avoided creating any “synthesis” between them. Education definitely belongs to the secular realm and, therefore, suggests Edwards, we should not lament the disappearance of “Christian scholarship”. For Edwards, both the Catholic and the Reformed visions or models opine for an ideal, normative view of what Christian education “should be” and they see every deviation from this ideal regrettable. Unlike them, the Lutheran Edwards sees the present situation not necessarily as the time of the “dying light” but, rather of a “new refraction”. His conclusion is worth quoting:

“We need to remember that the faithfulness of the church and of the church's institutions, including colleges, depends ultimately not on what we do for ourselves but what the Holy Spirit does for us. God has shown throughout the centuries, in the Bible stories and in church history, that God can accomplish God's purposes despite all the human weaknesses and foolishness that stand in the way. A sense of humility and, yes, an accompanying sense of humour are not out of place. We need to be able to laugh at our pretensions and shortcomings. And God can be trusted to preserve the colleges of the church in the form and way that God wills.”¹⁰

In fact, a very similar conclusion was drawn by a Valparasio Lutheran theologian Mark R. Schwehn. Though at first he also evokes Newman's *The Idea of the University* concerning the principles of “unity”, “universality” and “integrity”; towards the end of his essay, he comes to argue that the “Christian university is the one that is most at odds with Newman”.¹¹ With the philosopher Charles Taylor, Schwehn believed that “modern culture, in breaking with the structures and beliefs of Christendom, also carried certain facets of Christian life further than they ever were taken, or could have been taken, within Christendom.”¹²

¹⁰ Edwards, *op.cit.*

¹¹ Schwehn, *op.cit.*

¹² Schwehn, *op.cit.*

Similarly to Mark U. Edwards Jr, Schwehn also proposes “to be more sanguine about the present state of Christianity and higher education”. This Lutheran *hilaritas* is the underlying tone of the representative views of the third model.

“The Christian university can truly be itself only in a context of institutional pluralism, as one of several models, perhaps even a model on the margins, of university education. Christianity functions most truly and most effectively when it is disenthralled. And in this regard the life of the ideal Christian university is like unto the life of the individual Christian. Insofar as Christians relax their grip upon the reins of earthly dominion and contract the scope of their temporal ambitions, they so far increase the range of their spiritual influence and so the more steadily secure their hold upon eternity. This too should be a teaching of a Christian university.”¹³

Therefore, the three versions of a Christian vision of university can be summarised by the following three statements: the Catholic vision encourages an overarching conversation between a secular and a robust theological perspective; the Calvinist vision seeks to transform secular culture completely; the Lutheran vision is happy to accept a more modest role for the Christian voice in the cacophony of the pluralistic community of a university.

Acknowledging the insights of Marsden and others the Lutheran ethicist Robert Benne in his book *Quality with Soul. How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith in Their Religious Traditions* was able to uphold the examples of Calvin College (Christian Reformed Church), Wheaton College (Evangelical Tradition), Baylor University (Southern Baptist Convention), The University of Notre Dame (Roman Catholic Church), St Olaf College (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) and Valparaiso University (The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod).¹⁴ Benne thoroughly studied the original mission-statements (vision) and the present practice (ethos) of these colleges and universities which, while preserving academic excellence by successfully integrating faith and learning, were able to resist the pressure of culture to give up their Christian identity.

According to Benne, next to the vision it is the ethos that is a mark of a Christian university. Ethos is concerned with what is being done to achieve the identity of a Christian university. What are the characteristic contents of a Christian higher education? Schwehn in the above-mentioned article said that in a Christian institution of higher education there should be a department of theology,

¹³ Schwehn, *op.cit.*

¹⁴ Benne, *op cit.*

an active Chapel-ministry, a faculty “that carry in and among themselves the DNA of the school”¹⁵ and a curriculum including courses that articulate the vision.

Benne’s third mark of the Christian university is the people. In view of Schwehn’s categories this one is indeed problematic, namely, that faculty should “carry in and among themselves the DNA of the school”. At some American colleges (e. g. at Calvin College) where faculty is hired only if they are members of the sponsoring church and sign a statement that they would be committed to integrate faith and learning in their teaching, the Schwehn-criterion of the “DNA” might work.

However, for several church-related Christian schools (including the just 20-year-old Hungarian Pázmány Péter Catholic and Károli Gáspár Reformed universities) this model would not work, partly because these institutions are also sponsored by the state, and because it is only a minority of the faculty that come from the university’s respective church tradition. As suggested earlier, the situation is based on a compromise: the church-related universities need enough expertise (most professors have to be hired from “outside” their church) and, on the other hand, academics with PhDs are happy to be offered a job that they are qualified for. They are only requested to respect the church-related foundation of their institution. Thus within a Christian university it is usually a minority that belongs also to the faith-community, the majority is only a member of the community of learning. A Christian university is, using the term of St Augustine, is a *corpux mixtum* with a vengeance!

How can, or should, a Christian university which is both a community of faith and a community of knowledge, reconcile its inherent tensions? How far do these two communities overlap with each other? Or, are they the only communities at Christian universities?

My focus is now on the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. We had leaders, some of them better than others; new ideas, new structures have been introduced, some other structures have suddenly disappeared. We have wonderful colleagues and wonderful students, most of us are happy to teach within our walls, but unfortunately rarely, or hardly ever, do we stop to reflect on the mission (vision, ethos, people) of our church-affiliated university. Theoretically, a good innovation has been the introduction of the so-called biannual “training weeks” (short-term mandatory classes of great variety for students and leadership development workshops with entertaining programmes for faculty) at Károli University, but there has not been enough reflection on their effects.

¹⁵ Schwehn, *op.cit.*

How far can the community of faith define the profile of a Christian institution of higher education? Can the community of faith affect the community of knowledge? A Lutheran scholar Ned Wisnefsky offered an answer to this question:

“There are three principal ways in which a community of faith can affect a community of learning within Lutheran Colleges: by establishing a religious context within which learning takes place, by helping set the goal of learning; by influencing the content of what is learned.”¹⁶

It is significant that Wisnefsky’s focus is not only on the structure of such an institution or on the faculty but on the students for whom he insists on defining the context, the goal and the content of learning.

CONCLUSION: THE VISION OF A VIBRANT, OPEN-MINDED, FAITH-ORIENTED COMMUNITY

In conclusion, I am suggesting that the Christian University should really be concerned with trying to discuss, continuously define and again redefine; i.e. to “thematise” its Reformed/Protestant/Christian identity.

We should honestly raise such issues as, for example, how far should this identity be manifested in the personal commitment of faculty and the formation of the curriculum? At the Pázmány Péter Catholic University (where I taught between 1993–2007), the requirement was that at least 50 % of the faculty should be Roman Catholic and the rest could be anything. Frankly, I felt somewhat uncomfortable that as a Lutheran Christian, I found myself in the group of atheists, agnostics, i. e. “the anything”.

In my view the community of faith, especially in the age of ecumenism, should have more of a Christian rather than a rigid denominational identity however differently theological interpretations (models) determined the visions of the founding fathers. Ultimately, a Christian vision, including the input of Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Evangelical believers should be able to contribute to the making of the identity of a Christian university, whether Roman Catholic or Reformed.

¹⁶ Wisnefsky, Ned, *The Lutheran College, A Community of Learning and a Community of Faith, Papers and Proceedings of the 79th Annual Meeting, Lutheran Educational Conference of North America*, February 7–10, 1993, 6–13, Quotation is page 6.

The larger community of knowledge should respect the identity-forming efforts of the community of faith while the community of faith should respect academic excellence.

The third and so far undiscussed community is that of the administration. They interfere with both the community of faith and the community of knowledge. The professional aspect has to be emphasised here, too: you do not have to be necessarily a committed Christian to be a good manager. However, it is good to know that there are some excellent Christian managers too!

Both at the Catholic University and at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church (where I have been teaching since its foundation in 1993) my overall impression has been, among colleagues academically brilliant but not explicitly confessing Christians, that thematising the issue of our Christian identity is a rather non-desirable topic, perhaps even a sensitive taboo.

However, I believe, that raising such issues, even, for example, by organising such a conference, the first one in twenty years, we are breaking taboos. By making these borders visible, non-believing faculty members could honestly pursue their professional and educational efforts without being forced to hypocrisy or sycophancy. Such an openness would be mutually productive. A vivid and honest discussion of faith-issues would make a Christian university in a sense different from any other secular universities where faith-issues are assigned only to privacy, if not ridiculed. The faith-community can, of course, rejoice to notice when some of the faculty, though perhaps coming from an atheistic or agnostic background, are open to embrace its values. I have first-hand personal experience of colleagues who, during their tenure, were baptised and became very active members of their local congregations. Much to their credit, very wisely, I think, they remained discreet about it before their colleagues so that they did not irritate those only of the community of learning. True, at a Christian university, the direction of this process might also work the other way. In a secularised world, whether we like it or not, faith can also diminish and formerly committed Christians might start talking about their newly adopted "post-Christian" views. Is not it even harder to define the category of a "Christian" than the category of a "Christian university"?

Whatever the situation is, the open-minded church-related university I envision, would promote vibrant and honest discussions of faith-issues. How fruitful could it be to initiate "faith and learning" discussions for both faculty and students or organise "questions of faith" series for members of both communities of learning and communities of faith!

It cannot be emphasised enough, as Marlene Wall convincingly argued in her

lecture¹⁷ that the university is not a church, not even an extended hand of a church; and Mwenda Ntarangiwi was also right to quote Woltersdorff that “Christian education should not be conceived of as simply being distinctive for distinctiveness’s sake; neither should the act of teaching and learning be to blindly integrate faith and reason in a way that faith follows reason or vice versa... a Christian view of higher education should be *faithful* both to the central concepts of the Christian faith and to the practice of bringing social justice and human flourishing, ... *shalom*, to a broken world.”¹⁸

“Distinctiveness” is a result of an ideology, and ideology (and Christianity is not an ideology!) by its nature is, closed. Faithfulness, however, results in openness. By making a Christian university distinctively “Christian” it might be embarrassing, if not existentially threatening, to those “outside” the faith-community but without whom the university would not function as a university. Intellectuals and academics in our country have already experienced the threatening nature of Marxist ideology and they have learned the skills and techniques of survival and adaptation. A Christian university, however, should be able to uphold that it is different than an educational institution of an ideological or political power.

We Christians at a Christian university are not meant to make our non-Christian colleagues or students “Christian”. At the same time, however, it is also important to notice that good teachers, whatever convictions they have, apart from teaching their subjects, are usually concerned with transmitting their values to their students’ minds and personalities. Why should then “professing” (Christian) professors refrain also from doing that?

It is obvious that aggressive proselytisation is not to be permitted. However, by possessing what we believe a “treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor 4:7); i.e. the Gospel, we can articulate the voice, or noise of this treasure through the honest teaching of our discipline.

When Christians teach their disciplines with professional integrity, i.e. correctly, this voice might also be heard through what and how we teach.

The rest is not our work – it is grace.

¹⁷ Wall, Marlene, *The Lithuanian Christian University, Its Foundation and Twenty Years*, Lecture at Károli’s Conference on *Confessionality and University in the Modern World* in Budapest on October 15, 2013. See this lecture in the present volume.

¹⁸ Ntarangiwi, Mwenda, *Embracing Unity Within Diversity*, IAPCHE’s Work Around the World and Implications for the Future of Christian Higher Education, Lecture at Károli’s Conference on *Confessionality and University in the Modern World* in Budapest on October 15, 2013. See this lecture in the present volume.

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