

The Christian University: An Oxymoron or a Community of Faith and Knowledge?¹

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“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

The paper has four sections. In ‘Section I’ I expose and problematize the idea of a Christian university by asking whether the term is an oxymoron and by giving a short historical perspective; in ‘Section II’ I approach the question from my personal Hungarian post-Communist context; in ‘Section III’ I discuss the role of vision in the conception of the Christian university; in ‘Section IV’ I conclude with the (perhaps utopian) vision of the Christian university as a vibrant, open-minded community of faith and the community of knowledge.

1. This is a work-in-progress, reflecting mainly the personal experience of the author. Its purpose is to raise and articulate issues based on this experience. A shorter version of the paper was read at the Langham International Conference in Berekfürdő, Hungary, on 11 May 2013. Responses and critiques are most appreciated.

The Problem: Is There a 'Christian University'?

Let us start our train of thought with a reflection on the nature and mission of a Christian university.

An Oxymoron?

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 seem to be incompatible or irreconcilable. The language of faith is declarative, assertive and revelatory and this cannot be said of the language used at the university either by the sciences or the humanities. The language of science is accurate, exact, referential, denotative; the language of the humanities, especially that of literature, is ambiguous, non-referential, metaphorical, connotative.

Neither the language of science nor that of the humanities conforms 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 refuses to acknowledge such an *apriori* authority; however, it recognizes *aposteriori* 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 theologians 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 the academic communities. They were members both of the community of faith and the community of knowledge. Nevertheless, while this double citizenship may work smoothly at the level of the individual, I doubt it can function without conflicts within the structure of church-related institutions.

In order to understand the present situation let us give a short historical perspective.

A Short Historical Perspective

In the past centuries the churches have functioned also as educators. In the Middle Ages knowledge was disseminated by the Roman Catholic Church. However, it not only disseminated but monopolized and controlled knowledge. The *universitas* was usually founded by the *ecclesia* and thus it was subordinate to it.

This relationship was radically changed in the time of the Reformation. Luther's reform meant that the *universitas* severed itself from the *ecclesia*, (i.e. Wittenberg from Rome). The Roman Church was seen as a corrupt institution whose theological and spiritual inertia could only be redeemed by the university. The university has triumphed over the church. The church's prestige has diminished while the university's prestige has spectacularly increased.²

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Protestant churches, especially across the Atlantic, were keen on establishing colleges and universities. However, in the United States we see examples of gradual secularization of originally 'sectarian' institutions of higher education. Princeton, Harvard, Yale and Duke Universities were originally founded by the Presbyterian or Methodist churches. In the process of secularization there has been a shift of priority from the founding vision to autonomy of the subjects taught and thus Christian faith has become marginalized. While the well-known Jonathan Edwards was one of the first presidents of the College of New Jersey (founded in 1746, now Princeton University), when the Presbyterian church leaders found that their College had come under secular influence, they founded Princeton Theological Seminary in 1812 which has flourished as one of the best theological institutions in the United States ever since. In other cases as at Yale, Harvard or Duke, the Divinity School remained a faculty of the University. Thus, the university has

2. Cf. John Van Engen, "Christianity and the University: The Medieval and Reformation Legacies", in Joel A. Carpenter and Kenneth W. Shipps, *Making Higher Education Christian: The History and Mission of Evangelical Colleges in America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans and Christian University Press, Christian College, 1987). pp.19-37.

