

RELIGION AND THE UNIVERSITY

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Universities have become the milieu in which certain types of people live, yet these milieus shift from epoch to epoch, and culture to culture. Indeed, the same can be said for religion, as the term ‘religion’ can mean vastly different things in different cultural contexts: think of the different connotations to the term ‘religion’ in Europe and in the United States. Or the insistence of Muslim apologists that Islam is not a “religion” but a “way of life”—an obviously polemical response to the privatization of religion in the west. Or the ways in which religion was employed in Ottoman polity as an identity marker, as the empire was subdivided according to the dominant religious groups: Jews, varieties of Christians, and Muslims. So given the diverse ways in which universities have been structured to expedite intellectual inquiry, one could well imagine a variety of combinations of university and religion to elicit different forms of synergy. But not after Max Weber’s influential delineation of the mode of intellectual inquiry proper to a university, which gave to university pursuits a quasi-religious character. That is, their autonomy was so jealously depicted as to render any other influence alien to such pursuits. No discipline could possibly countenance any authority other than that internal to the inquiry itself, and since *religion* in his cultural context was conceived primarily in terms of *authority*, religion had to be alien to the university. And that remains the cultural ethos of the American university, even after religion has been shorn of any external authority.

Yet that very fact should allow us to conceive things differently, so as to

entertain some of those synergistic scenarios to which we have just alluded. Yet to do so will require that we underscore the *faith*-dimension of religion, and (in a post-modern fashion) begin to deconstruct the hard and fast separation of *reason* from *faith*. One way to do this would be to focus on the intellectual discipline proper to faith: theology; another would be to consider the informal yet decisive ways in which faith may inform any intellectual inquiry by providing a context that is nourishing—by contrast, let us say, to the global market. This latter approach reminds us that all intellectual inquiry operates within an embracing context, even Weber’s touted *Wissenschaft*; indeed Nicholas Boyle reminds us how the global market embraces us all.¹ Writing as I do in the wake of teaching more than forty years in a professedly Catholic university, I can speak more freely and confidently of faith and of theology than my colleagues in universities intent on preserving their Weberian “neutrality.” Indeed, I often tweak colleagues who are ensconced in “religious studies” faculties, reminding them that as a Catholic priest (and so a “professionally religious” person), I usually find religion quite boring, whereas I find God infinitely interesting, so much prefer a home in a Theology rather than Religious Studies department. For similar reasons, I put the accent on *faith* rather than on *religion*, which also introduces us into a properly “post-modern” environment. Allow me a brief digression to place that term in a richer context, offering a benign reading of “postmodern” traceable to John Henry Newman and Georg Gadamer.

Regularly teaching a course in ancient and medieval philosophy has led me to identify the difference between these two periods—ancient, medieval—quite clearly: the presence of a free creator. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers converged in their efforts to find place for a free creator in the apparently seamless Hellenic philosophy they inherited. (Josef Pieper’s observation that “creation is the hidden element in the philosophy of St. Thomas” should have alerted us decades ago to this operative difference from Aristotle, yet many Thomists managed to overlook it in their anxiety to demarcate philosophy from theology).² Yet if we can say, schematically, that the presence of a free creator divides medieval from ancient philosophy, what marks the subsequent transition to modern philosophy? Many things, of course, but to continue speaking schematically, modern philosophy wanted to distinguish itself by eliminating the theological overtones of the “scholastics,” so proceeded by avoiding reference to a creator. Yet the creator is a bit large to overlook, so the gradual tendency was to deny its relevance, as evidenced in Enlightenment fascination with “the Greeks,” even though they seemed more a construct than an historical refer-

ence. Aristotle, after all, had managed quite well without a creator. Now if that be the case—again, speaking quite schematically—we can characterize modern philosophy as “post-medieval,” where the ‘post-’ prefix carries a note of denial—in this case, of a creator, either directly or implicitly. A cursory look at the strategies whereby modern philosophers compensated for the absence of a creator, however, shows them to lead inescapably to foundational grounds, be they “self-evident” propositions or “sense-data” or whatever. Once these proved illusory, we cannot but enter a “post-modern” world. And if our presumptions regarding “philosophy” itself (à la Rorty) are inherently linked to such strategies, then we will inevitably regard a postmodern context as one in which “anything goes.”

Yet here is where our schema can help: if modern philosophy can be seen as “post-medieval,” then “post-modern” philosophy will have to be read as “post (post-medieval).” And while the “post-” prefixes may not connote the same sort of denials, we will be directed to a sense of “post-modern” which bears affinities with medieval inquiry. Put more positively and less schematically, both medieval and post-modern inquiries are more at ease with Gadamer’s contention that any inquiry whatsoever rests on fiduciary premises. In practice, this means that faith may be regarded as a way of knowing, though like any other way of knowing, never uncritically; however startling such a contention would prove to Descartes! And if there can be no viable epistemology without metaphysics, a postmodern ethos can be shown to direct us (albeit negatively) to see that there is no way to move to the level of metaphysics without a critical faith.

The final statement requires more argument than is possible here, but the previous sketch suggests why a theology which is explicitly grounded in faith yet pursued with the critical tools of reason (as Aquinas did so masterfully) qualifies as a university inquiry—*pace* Max Weber. Yet the modernist heritage of American universities would hardly permit that argument to prevail structurally; introducing a faculty of theology would inevitably shipwreck; “are we a divinity school.” Yet that is precisely what a Catholic university can do: fund and promote a department of Theology within an Arts and Sciences college. And what is more, it can require all students, in whatever disciplines, to take (in our case) two courses in theology. So ironically, such colleges and universities prove to be more in synch with a postmodern ethos than their ostensibly neutral peers. If a critical faith can be accepted as a “mode of knowing,” then pursuing it qualifies for university attention, yet that imprecisely what my benign rendition of “postmodern” implies. So much for the intellectual dimension; what of the contextual?

I have reminded us how every university inquiry presupposes a context, and one beyond the standard arena of “one’s peers,” whether it be the global market (which all too evidently drives the contemporary university in the United States, and increasingly in the West) or, in this case, the church. Now the fact that historically “the church” has referred more palpably to an authority to be reckoned with than to a sustaining community of faith went a long way to making Max Weber’s thesis palatable: the university providing its own context as a substitute for *church* as it functioned in the medieval centers of learning. Anyone familiar with their history, however, will find fewer hints of inquisitorial intrusion—that came later, yet a great deal of dialectical tension and interaction. Universities, in that sense, have always been fractious places, for that is the nature of unfettered inquiry. So when the context of church effectively connoted fetters, one could hardly countenance it as an appropriate context for a university. In that sense, the comportment of church itself could be seen as partially responsible for the animus with which Max Weber eschews any larger context for university life and work. Yet we have seen that such a context is inevitable. So it is not a matter of removing any overarching context from university life and work, but finding the most propitious, or at least, the least restrictive one. Here I would argue that alliance with a faith community can prove to be some protection against the inertial pull of the global market.

And the reference to *church* is strategic, for it is broader than the discipline of theology, yet proper theology cannot be carried on outside of such a community. Moreover, if the university milieu as such does not provide for the practices endemic to a faith community, all sorts of groups will begin to vie for students’ allegiance, as they sense the students’ need for a nourishing context for integrating their studies into their young adult development. And from what I know of such groups, it is not always clear that they complement a life of study; in fact, they often they often present their variety of “religion” as opposed to any sustained inquiry. And if the university pretends to be its own context; that is, “neutral,” it has no way of countering this subtle undermining of its primary mission. So as unwelcome as it may sound in our American context, church—properly enacted—may provide a liberating context for inquiry itself. (That is indeed the thesis of John Paul II’s *Fides et ratio* [“Faith and reason”].) Yet given how unwelcome such an argument in fact is in the current American university scene, there will be a need for church-related colleges and universities to offer a counter-witness. Yet it is also a fact that such a witness needs to be bolstered by churches faithful to their mission, and not themselves afraid of inquiry. So it

is not enough simply to invoke “church;” churches themselves must be called to a robust witness of faith, and in that too their colleges and universities may be useful gadflies. So the medieval tension will remain, yet the hope can be strong!

A word as well about the contribution which healthy faith contexts can make to purportedly neutral universities. Centers for ministry to students, intelligently staffed now often in an ecumenical and even inter-faith manner, can bring faculty and students together in a milieu nicely removed from classroom interaction, to explore issues which may be less approachable there. My own experience with More House at Yale during graduate studies (and subsequently) offers a sterling example, and I suspect that one could elicit testimony from many academic milieus which shows how such centers have risen to meet the issues peculiar to each milieu, and do so in a way which enhance the critical and sustaining reach of faith in students’ learning.

Notes

1. *Who are we Now?* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), especially ch. 2: “After Thatcherism: Who are we now?”
2. Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas: Three Essays* (New York: Pantheon, 1957): “The Negative element in the Philosophy of St. Thomas,” pp. 47-67; re-issued: South Bend IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002.