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# The Presuppositions of the University<sup>1</sup>

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IN THE INTRODUCTION to his great work on *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, Hastings Rashdall makes the striking statement that "Ideals pass into great historic forces by embodying themselves in institutions." He goes on to point out that "the University is distinctly a medieval institution."<sup>2</sup> It is entirely misleading, he says, to apply the name of the Schools of ancient Athens or Alexandria; nor is there anything really comparable with the University in other cultures.<sup>3</sup> The inspiration and the ideals that the University embodied at the outset were derived from medieval culture, and belonged especially to that flowering of the human spirit that occurred in western Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The original ideals that embodied themselves in the institution that we know as the University constituted what we are here calling the presuppositions upon which the idea of a University was based. What we are chiefly concerned with is the University today, but it is surely instructive in reflecting on the idea of the University to examine the cultural forces that brought it into being in the first place.

## I. THE MEDIEVAL UNIVERSITY

The three archetypal Universities were Paris, Bologna, and Oxford, all of which took their rise in the last quarter of the twelfth century. They developed out of the monastic and episcopal Schools, which had preserved the cultural history of Greece and Rome during the Dark Ages. The development was initiated at Paris by a great outburst of fresh theological speculation, inspired by the free-ranging mind of Peter Abelard. At Bologna, the revival of the study of Roman law led to an overmastering interest in jurisprudence. At Oxford, influenced by Paris, the theological revival led to the development of what we would describe as General Arts. Thus, in the early stages of the history of Universities, theology, law, and arts held the pre-eminent places.

However, theology at Paris and Oxford and law at Bologna were not thought of as Professional Faculties. The study of theology and law was not intended to provide professional training for the clergy and for lawyers.

1. This paper was originally presented on 20 January 1962 at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, at a Conference on Higher Education sponsored by the N.F.C.U.S. and the S.C.M.

2. H. Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (ed. by F. M. Powicke and A. B. Emden), 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), vol. I, p. 3.

3. Rashdall, vol. III, pp. 458-60.

"Theology," in Rashdall's words, played the role of "the architectonic science, whose office it was to receive the results of all other sciences and combine them into an organic whole, in so far as they had bearings on the supreme questions of the nature of God and of the universe, and the relation of man to both."<sup>4</sup> A similar place was occupied by law at Bologna. This did not mean that the Christian tradition was less powerful in Italy than in France or England. Rather, because of the history of the country and the peculiarities of the Italian mind, religious questions there assumed political rather than theological shape.

At all three of the great archetypal Universities in the thirteenth century, learning was pursued for its own sake. Everywhere there was the same intense intellectual enthusiasm, the same devotion to truth, the same appeal to reason. As Rashdall points out, this was all part of the Church's ideal: "The interests of learning became associated, if not identified, with the interests of the Church."<sup>4</sup> The great work of these medieval Christian foundations was the consecration of reason, of learning, and of the disinterested pursuit of truth.

There are two chief points that I want to emphasize in this brief historical excursus. First, the ideals that embodied themselves in the medieval University, that is to say the presuppositions upon which it was based, were those associated with the liberal idea of education, the aim of which was defined by John Henry Newman as "simply the cultivation of the intellect as such, and its object nothing more or less than intellectual excellence."<sup>5</sup> The second point to which I want to draw attention is the historical fact that the source of these liberal ideals and presuppositions was the medieval Christian Church.

## II. CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

The connection between education and the Church was maintained, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, from the twelfth century down to the nineteenth. Until very recent times, the vast majority of our Schools, Colleges, and Universities were Church foundations. Almost within living memory it was necessary to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles in order to be admitted to a college at Oxford, and all the Fellows of the Oxford and Cambridge colleges were in Holy Orders. In our own country, almost all the older Universities owe their beginnings to Church initiative. The system of public education and State Universities are developments of the last one hundred years only.

What lay behind the Church's interest in the things of the mind and in the ideals of liberal education? Can it be that the presuppositions of *liberal* education are theological *dogmas*? This seems paradoxical to us because we have come to think of "liberal" and "dogmatic" as contradictory terms. The

4. *Ibid.*, p. 442.

5. J. H. Newman, *The Nature and Scope of a University Education* (New York: Dutton, 1915), p. 100.

suggestion is less startling when we realize that the word "liberal" in this connection stands for the conviction that the pursuit of truth and the cultivation of the mind are good in themselves, and when, further, we recognize that the word "dogma" means simply a clear and definite belief. What I am suggesting, then, is that the presuppositions upon which the idea of liberal education was based historically were certain clear and definite beliefs. The conviction that the cultivation and enlargement of the mind is good in itself found its original justification within the framework of the set of beliefs that constitute Christian theology.

The Church has always been interested in education because it is interested in what happens in this world, and in the way in which human beings grow and develop to maturity. Behind this interest is the theological conviction, almost peculiar to Christianity among the great religions, that nature, history, and human life have intrinsic value and significance. Most of the great world religions are, in Schweitzer's phrase, "world-denying and world-escaping." Religion in general tends to regard the world, human history, and the earthly life of a human being as more or less unimportant, or even in themselves bad. The major religious endeavour is to escape from time and space, from matter and finitude, from history and from any kind of personal existence, into a realm of universal and timeless spirit. In sharp contrast to these world-denying tendencies of religion in general, Christianity asserts that God created the world, that he loves it and has a purpose for it, and that he is working his purpose out in history. Something is going on here that is of ultimate significance and importance.

In opposition to the religious urge to escape from personal existence, the Christian faith envisages the ultimate destiny of man in terms of personal fulfilment. In fact, Christianity interprets ultimate reality in terms of personal being. It believes that man is made in the image of God, and that therefore he can only achieve his true end through the development of the potentialities of his own personal being. Further, the true end of man is thought of in social and not in individual terms, because the notion of personal fulfilment involves the community of persons.

The Church's interest in education follows necessarily from the Christian view of the world, of history, and of man. God's purpose for human history and for us human beings cannot be accomplished apart from the growth and flowering of the seeds of personal being implanted in human nature. Taking the concept of mind in the very broad sense that was given to it in medieval thought, the divine purpose for man includes essentially the cultivation and general enlargement of the mind carried on by and within a community. This, of course, is the liberal idea of education, which is thus fundamentally Christian in its nature and origin.

### III. THE RENAISSANCE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN CULTURE

The Universities took their rise and tended for many centuries to exist under the general influence of this Christian world-view which, in the

Middle Ages, constituted the prevailing tradition of life and thought in western culture.

At the time of the Renaissance in the fifteenth century, certain far-reaching changes in the general intellectual atmosphere began to take place. In fact, the typical Renaissance man tended to think of the theological dogmas of the Christian tradition as shackles that restrained the freedom of the mind. Thus, the term "dogma" began to acquire pejorative connotations, and the word "liberal" began to change its meaning. The ideal of free enquiry, unprejudiced by any presuppositions, came into vogue. Intellectual integrity meant that the facts should be consulted simply as they present themselves to impartial investigation.

A second shift was the transfer of interest from theology to natural philosophy, from the things of God and the divine realm of being to the things of man and man's world. As we have seen, humanistic interests of this kind were always implicit in the Christian world-view and already had been made explicit in the twelfth century, but now they were given a major emphasis. This was the beginning of modern Humanism, which ever since has tended to repudiate any theological basis, although Renaissance Humanism clearly had Christian roots and was a flower that could only have sprung up, like its twelfth century precursor, in Christian soil. This new kind of Humanism, like the ideal of free enquiry, had an important role in changing the meaning of the phrase "liberal education."

A third change was represented by Bacon's famous dictum that "knowledge is power."<sup>6</sup> This Baconian principle entails the view that the only kind of knowledge worth pursuing is the knowledge that is useful. This view, in turn, produces the utilitarian conception of education as a rival of the liberal.

In the modern period, there are thus three philosophies of education that we may call respectively Christian Liberalism or Humanism, based on the clear and definite presuppositions of Christian theology, Renaissance Liberalism or Humanism, which wants to avoid any pre-commitments of any kind, and Utilitarianism, which assumes that the only justification of knowledge is the satisfaction of economic, political, and social needs.

The first two of these philosophies obviously have a good deal in common, and historically they have often joined forces to resist the encroachment of the third. But the general development of modern culture moved increasingly in the direction of utilitarianism, and therefore the utilitarian philosophy of education has steadily gained in strength until, at the present time, in spite of a good deal of lip-service paid the liberal ideal, it has undoubtedly become the dominant view. The theological justification of liberal education has gone into eclipse, along with the Christian world-view in general, while Renaissance Humanism, the inspiration of the secular version of the liberal philosophy, has tended to succumb to cultural forces that were too strong for it.

6. F. Bacon, *Novum Organum* (London: Colonial Press, 1899), p. 315.

First of all, the three great principles of the Renaissance—the ideal of unprejudiced observation of the facts, the shift of major interest from God to man and from heaven to earth, and the Baconian view that knowledge is power—all co-operated to bring about the birth of modern Science. Modern Science, in turn, has produced the scientific world-view which, in modern western culture, has largely replaced the Christian world-view as the prevailing tradition of life and thought. This new world-view or tradition, like any other, has its own dogmas or, if you like, presuppositions. As this tradition gained in power and importance, reaching a climax in the nineteenth century, these dogmas tended to become the more or less unconscious principles governing the western mind in all its pursuits.

Among the dogmas in question were the positivistic, which asserts that all knowledge is restricted to the phenomenal world, the deterministic, which assumes that all valid explanation is explanation in terms of predictable natural cause and effect, and the progressive, which supposes that all problems can be solved by the scientific method, and that the application of this method in all fields of enquiry will eventually lead to what Bacon, at the very beginning of the whole development, described as “the power and empire of mankind in general over the universe.”<sup>7</sup>

Under the influence of presuppositions of this kind, Renaissance Humanism was gradually transformed into Scientific Humanism. In the nineteenth century, the characteristic Anglo-Saxon philosophies were Mill’s Utilitarianism and Dewey’s Pragmatism, both strongly influenced by the inductive methods of science. At the same time the sciences of man were beginning to make their appearance. They were modelled at the outset on the physical sciences. Auguste Comte, the father of Sociology, described his science as “social physics,” and it is not surprising that we soon begin to hear of “social engineering.” Similarly, Sigmund Freud insisted that his aim was “to establish psycho-analysis on foundations similar to those of any other science, such as physics.” Thus, it was assumed that the mysteries of human nature could be answered in the same way that Newtonian physics had, it was thought, unravelled the mysteries of physical nature. All of man’s distinctive capacities, his responsible behaviour, his thinking, his history, and his culture could be explained in the same way as the rest of nature.

Within this naturalistic scheme of things, there is no place for the human spirit as that dimension of being by virtue of which man transcends the realm of observable phenomena, no place for human freedom as that capacity which makes it possible for man to direct the operation of natural causes in accordance with his own purposes, no place for human values as universal and objectively rooted criteria by reference to which the actions and purposes of man can be judged good or bad. The nineteenth-century sciences of man tended to treat him as an object or thing, like anything else in nature. Utilitarianism and Pragmatism dealt with his values in the same naturalistic way: an act is right and an idea is true if it works, if it is useful.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 366.

If we ask "useful for what," the answer is "useful for attaining those goals which, in any given society, are established as desirable."

Bertrand Russell has pointed out that Utilitarianism and Pragmatism are the philosophies appropriate to an industrial society. In nineteenth-century England and America, the Industrial Revolution was in full swing. The beginnings of technology already heralded the triumph of the machine. Potentially, of course, this fruit of science, like all the fruits of science, was a great step forward and, in fact, the Industrial Revolution conferred great boons on society. What happened, however, was that the machines were put to work, not in the true interests of human society, but chiefly for the purpose of making money. This was perfectly in accord with the teaching of Utilitarianism and Pragmatism, which held that there are no "true interests of human society" in the sense of objective values; there are only those ends that the particular society happens to be pursuing. Money and economic power was the most obvious social goal in the nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon world and, therefore, whatever contributed to the attainment of this goal was right.

#### IV. EDUCATION AND THE MODERN WORLD

Now, to return to our main subject, what was happening to education, and to the presuppositions of the University in this industrialized and commercialized culture? In the first place, of course, it was in the nineteenth century that responsibility for education began to be taken over by the State. As in the case of all historical developments, the causes of the secularization of education were manifold and complex. In the first place, it began to be recognized, quite rightly, that everyone, and not just the privileged few, had a right to at least a minimum amount of formal education. The idea of universal compulsory education began to take hold, and it was immediately obvious that the Church, which had formerly enjoyed a virtual monopoly, simply did not possess the resources necessary for this greatly enlarged task.

Secondly, a more melancholy factor is to be found in the quarrels that began to rage among the various Christian denominations. Here in Ontario, Bishop Strachan maintained that the Church of England, as the established Church, should have the right to preserve the educational monopoly. Egerton Ryerson and others challenged this claim, and ranged themselves on the side of the State in its efforts to make all education a public responsibility. Bishop Strachan attacked this position with all the fire and fury of his native Scottish temperament. Public education, he said, would be non-religious. A secular State would necessarily provide a secular education. Ryerson, for his part, asserted that this country was essentially Christian, and that therefore the public educational system would remain Christian in its basic point of view.

Strachan, of course, lost the fight but won the argument, for his prediction turned out to be more or less correct. The educational policies of the

State, like its other policies, naturally tended to reflect the characteristics of an industrialized and commercialized culture, the philosophical expression of which is Pragmatism.

I said earlier that there are three philosophies of education in the modern age—Christian Liberalism, Renaissance Humanism, and Utilitarianism—and that the second had a good deal in common with the first, from which it was historically derived. In the course of the centuries, however, this modern Humanism was more and more cut off from its Christian roots, and separated from any dogmatic basis. It therefore lacked a firm foundation of clear and definite beliefs. What has actually happened is that, under the influence of the scientific tradition and its more or less unconscious presuppositions, Renaissance Humanism eventually turned into Pragmatism, which is just another name for Utilitarianism; and the utilitarian philosophy of education is fundamentally different from the liberal and humanist philosophy.

The fate that can overtake the liberal concept when it is entirely divorced from its historical basis can be seen in the worst features of the American system. There the rigorous application of the principle of the separation of Church and State to the field of education meant that liberal ideals were divorced from their Christian origins and placed in a purely pragmatic, “democratic” context. The result was the curricular dissipation and distraction characteristic of American education at its worst. The basic disciplines are forced more and more into the background as the syllabus is filled up with all kinds of options, like courses in safe driving and teen-age dating problems. Here liberal education ends up as a programme in social adjustment, tempered by a vague humanitarian and democratic idealism.

In case I should be suspect as a biased witness, I quote the following words of Douglas Bush, an American professor:

During the past half-century the American public school, instead of opposing mass civilization, has to a large degree embraced it. In the name of democracy and adjustment to life, secondary education has been more or less drained of intellectual content and intellectual effort. It has been correspondingly drained of moral content, in spite of theoretical emphasis on character-building. One wonders how democracy and character are nourished in a system which demonstrates that something is to be had for nothing, that a diploma is a fitting reward for bodily attendance at school, that “the American way of life” means shallowness and shoddiness, and that intellectual and aesthetic cultivation is a mark of pernicious snobbery. The doctrine of education as social adjustment, with the anti-intellectualism that engenders and accompanies it, has also infected colleges. . . . The inner as well as the outer life is threatened by mechanization, by illiberal pragmatism and commercialism, by the religion of “democratic” commonness and conformity.<sup>8</sup>

Professor Bush illustrates what he has in mind by a reference to a well-known remark of Lionel Trilling: “A specter haunts our culture—it is that

8. J. Douglas Bush, “The Real Maladjustment,” *The Harvard Foundation for Advanced Study and Research Newsletter* (30 Sept. 1959), p. 2.

people will eventually be unable to say, 'They fell in love and married,' let alone understand the language of Romeo and Juliet, but will as a matter of course say, 'Their libidinal impulses being reciprocal, they activated their individual erotic drives and integrated them within the same frame of reference.'"

In recent years, the general public has first of all grown somewhat dissatisfied with education as social adjustment, and then become seriously alarmed by the scientific and technological triumphs of the Soviet Union. These successes are attributed largely to the Russian system of education, with its emphasis on applied sciences and technical training. Many are now suggesting that we should emulate the Soviet system. What they do not realize is that Soviet education is based on, and logically derived from, the clear and definite beliefs of the highly dogmatic Marxist world-view.

Marxism believes that the ultimate reality is matter in a continuous process of dialectical evolution. On the human scene, the all-determining causes of individual and social history are economic forces. The human being is defined as simply the focus of his social and economic relations. Society comes first, and the individual has significance only as he serves the interests of the whole. Quite simply, man is made by and for the State. This is mass man. The individual is primarily a member of the State, a citizen—anonymous, faceless, impersonal—a unit in a statistical table—an item to be subsumed under a general category. Russian education is to be understood within this context. This conception of man determines its objectives, its ends and goals. According to Murray Ross: "The end or goal [of Russian education] is the strengthening of the Soviet Union—economically, culturally, ideologically. Accordingly, education is primarily directed towards producing specialists in 'State-required' fields of knowledge . . . who are devoted to the development of the Soviet state." Dr. Ross, afraid that this estimate might be taken as just another example of anti-Communist propaganda, tells us that he "read it, therefore, to a Russian educator and asked if this were a correct statement. 'But, of course!' he said, as if surprised that I should doubt it."<sup>9</sup>

This definition of man, and the resulting utilitarian and technical conception of education, are typical of Communist countries, but they are by no means peculiar to Communism; they are found also in western society. They are not here as explicit and unambiguous, because our western attitude is much less dogmatic, much more empirical and pragmatic. We are afraid of doctrine, of official philosophy, of dogmas. Therefore, we are apt not to have any clear-cut definition of man, any well-defined goals and objectives either for our society, or for our educational system, or for anything else. This has its advantages, but also its perils. It means that we are apt to be at the mercy of the social and economic cultural forces that just happen

9. Murray G. Ross, *Education in the U.S.S.R.* (reprinted from *The Toronto Daily Star*, 1958), p. 5.

to exist at any given moment. We are apt to be borne along more or less unconsciously in the direction in which these winds blow.

These winds at present blow in the same direction as that which is consciously and deliberately taken by the Communist countries. We are apt to forget that Marxist Communism is itself a product of the western world, thrown up to a considerable extent by all the forces set loose in the Industrial Revolution, of which the contemporary advances in technology are simply an extension. The triumph of the Industrial Revolution and technology in our culture as a whole has meant that our society generally has become increasingly technical and mechanical. The methods of engineering, mechanics, and mass production tend to dominate our whole way of life.

These are the cultural forces, or should we say anti-cultural forces, that I mentioned earlier as threatening to overwhelm our secular educational system. Implicit in these forces is the view of man that sees him as nothing more than a socio-economic unit. The kind of education appropriate to the human being so conceived is the purely utilitarian. Here the objective is no longer the nurture and development of the human person. The purpose of education, on the contrary, is to produce well-made cogs of various shapes and sizes to fit into and play their role in the great machine of the collectivist society. While a considerable place is undoubtedly given in the Soviet system to the humanities, nevertheless it is certain that the purpose of the whole programme is to produce "specialists in State-required fields of knowledge." This is the utilitarian conception of education, which is at the opposite pole from the liberal ideal.

This is the direction in which we ourselves often seem to be moving. Fortunately, there are strong and influential voices being raised in the West against this development. These are the voices of those who understand that it would be short-sighted in the extreme to sacrifice the long-range benefits of a truly liberal education, with its stress on humane letters, and on the nurture of the human person, for the sake of the short-term profit to be derived from an emphasis on technical training.

It seems to me, however, highly questionable whether the ideal of a liberal education can be reinvigorated if it continues to be firmly planted in mid-air. I believe that a definition of the nature and purpose of education must be based on a clear understanding of the nature and destiny of man, on a comprehensive world-view, on a set of clear and definite beliefs. This takes us back to my earlier paradoxical suggestion that the necessary presuppositions of the liberal ideal of education are to be found in certain dogmas—that is to say, in certain firm beliefs about God, the world, man, and history. The lesson of the past seems to be that the liberal and humanist philosophy, if separated from such a foundation, cannot survive in the face of those forces that now seem to be driving us in the direction of the technological mass society.

At the time when the first Universities were founded, Christian theology was "the Queen of the Sciences"—that is to say, the architectonic science, or body of knowledge, that was able to integrate all the knowledge that came from other sources. It was thus able both to provide a basis for a liberal education, and at the same time to make the University a *University*. Today, the utilitarian philosophy of education in the Communist world has such an architectonic science, the name of which is Marxism. But this is just what the western world is lacking; at the most important place, there is a vacuum, and therefore the University becomes a *Multiversity*, in which the pursuit of truth is not so much diversified as distracted, and the liberal ideal is constantly in danger of degenerating into social adjustment.

What we need today is an architectonic science, a comprehensive, integrating world-view that will justify our vanishing faith in the human person over against the mass man, and in the human community over against the mass society. Only in such a context will the university continue to have as its main purpose the general enlargement of the mind.

If, on the other hand, as seems much more likely, the western world continues to move along its present lines, the function of the University will also become quite clear—namely, to produce "specialists in State-required fields of knowledge." In the mass society, the human person is abolished, and therefore there is no longer any place for liberal education.