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The nexus of faith and reason in the post-modern university

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INTRODUCTION

This issue has been with me all my life, but brought into sharper focus during my nineteen years as a university chaplain. This can be quite a sticky matter on a university campus because it can be dealt with in a very naïve sort of way. There are many complex ways in which this issue can be approached and nuanced. The faith basis on which I am presenting these ideas is essentially Christian, but I hope that the reader can translate some of it into whatever faith/ worldview they might have. However, I think there is much in common between faiths when fundamental and broad issues of faith and reason are addressed.

My personal background in this area begins from the time I could think and challenge my religious teachers, which initially included Sunday School teachers and then my father, who was a pastor. I remember well the many discussions and questions that my sister and I fired at all and sundry over Sunday lunches and evening meals together. Equally important have been the discussions in youth group meetings, Christian university group meetings and conferences, along with the many challenging casual conversations with a wide variety of Christians and atheists over the decades.

THE THEORY OF THE NEXUS OF FAITH AND REASON

There are a number of reasons why I believe people of faith, in particular university chaplains, should take up and create the opportunities to engage in discussion and debate at all levels of our universities.

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The Office of Campus Ministry in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles has devised a much-used analysis of the many dimensions of university chaplaincy, suggesting that there are seven main ways in which a chaplain can operate within a university. They are as follows:

- Presence (availability on campus in many ways)
- Counselling (proactive and reactive pastoral care)
- Social Action/Advocacy (consciousness-raising of issues and needs)
- Sacramental (liturgical, pre-baptismal, pre-marriage catechesis)
- Educational/Academic (formal and informal teaching and discussion)
- Community (encouraging friendship and making links between people)
- Pastoral (visitation, spiritual direction, facilitating retreats)

Chaplain may carry out their roles through these seven ways, with varying degrees of emphasis and energy. The role of the chaplain addressing faith and reason is found under the fifth characteristic of a chaplain or chaplaincy team. It is only one of the seven areas, but I believe that in the academic arena people of faith should be able engage in discussion and debate of intellectual questions, especially those that relate to faith. There are many reasons why persons of faith (such as the chaplain) should engage at the intellectual level of reasoning with their faith in the context of the university. Firstly, universities have often been founded due to the connection between theology and knowledge or wisdom. This is true of most of the major faith groups including Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Christianity.

The following dates give us an idea of the founding of these centres of learning which grew out of their respective faith traditions:

Confucian: Nanjing learning institution (now university) 259 AD

Buddhist: Taxila Pakistan 5C BC; Nalanda NE India 427-1197 AD

Islam: Madrasah Fas, Morocco 859; al-Azhar University, Egypt 959

Hindu: Taxila Pakistan 5C BC

Christian: Cathedral/ monastic schools 6th Century AD, then more formally Bologna (1088), Paris (1150), Oxford (1167) Cambridge (1209)

Secondly, some argue that even though universities may have been founded by religious communities, since the Enlightenment the most progressive and more recently established universities have minimised or closed their theology faculties. They have declared the university to be a purely rational and religion-free environment in which any expressions of faith are meaningless or even damaging. However, the following realities should be noted in response to this more recent narrow and naïve ‘rational’ approach:

1. In order to teach comprehensively and understand the history of humans you need to describe and understand their religious beliefs, both in the past and in recent history.
2. The intersection and relationship between philosophy and religion is historically and intellectually intertwined and the two areas inevitably cross over into each other. This is obviously true of the issues such as ‘The existence of God’ and ‘Theodicy’ and the ‘Origins of evil’, but it is also true of the ethical and lifestyle questions discussed by philosophy.

3. In order to understand contemporary and past politics, theology and religion feature significantly, and this seems to be increasing at the moment. Current newspaper articles often have articles addressing the relationship between Christians and Muslims, Eastern and Western thought / beliefs and politics and the persecution of various religious minorities, often by a complicit political regime.

4. Many of the Arts subjects are based on theological and religious texts, images and writings. This ranges from books and paintings on specifically religious themes to allusions and metaphors that are used in passing or that underlie the text or image.

5. Anthropology, sociology and psychology all have to take account of matters of faith when attempting to understand the cultures and human beings whom they have under their academic ‘microscopes’.

6. These connections are not only confined to the Arts and Social Sciences. The recent area of Cosmology, within Physics departments, has in the last decade been increasingly engaging the concept of ‘the mind of God’ (a Creator or God) in the actual equation of how the world began, and also in an attempt to understand how the complexity of the world came about and is maintained. This is most recently seen more publicly in the writings of the militant atheists and the response to the atheists from leading scientists who incorporate faith and God in their scientific worldview.

7. The whole concept of a ‘university’ has behind it the idea that there is a common or universal truth towards which all academics are striving. If there is no concept of ‘truth’ or ‘genuineness’ or ‘credibility’, then why do we have academic discussions about a more accurate way of viewing certain historic events or the features of a molecule, or any such matter that is taught or researched?

8. Many cosmological physicists are attempting to find the ‘Grand Universal Theory’ in order to understand how the theories of light, matter and energy are related to each other. Behind this is the presumption that there is an underlying formula that holds them and the whole universe together.

9. The university often prides itself as a place for free, open and logical discussion and debate. This is one of the basic tenets when the universities were being established in the Western world. The university is a place of independence and refuge for those who might have controversial issues, which might go against the political or economic *status quo*. This includes new or controversial matters of faith such as occurred in the universities during the time of the Protestant Reformation and have always been present in academic environments to varying degrees of permissibility.

VARIOUS TYPES OF UNIVERSITIES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO MATTERS OF FAITH AND SPIRITUALITY.

The following four ‘types’ of university in Australia that are described below are not water-tight ‘groups’ and have a degree of overlap between them. But they are grouped to consider their specific features.

Fully secular universities founded as non-sectarian in the late 1800s.

These are primarily the ‘Sandstone’ universities in Australia, which form the ‘Group of Eight’ (the most academic universities). Even within these universities, though they might not have any formal avenues for academic theological / religious study, courses are offered in such things as ‘Religion and Politics in SE Asia’ ‘Science and Religion’ and ‘The Islamic Financial system’. Some also have specific Research Groups such as the one that Rev Dr Paul Babie has established in connection with the Law School at Adelaide University, called “Society, Law and Religion”.

Universities that have theological faculties attached to them that provide theological education. They are technically not a part of the university but the degree granting is done through the university and sometimes students at the university can do some of the theological subjects as extra non-core subjects as part of their degrees. These include Flinders University and the University of Melbourne.

Secular universities that have established a religious studies / theological faculty. This has often occurred in more recent years, often after the establishment of the university (e.g., the University of South Australia).

Faith-based universities for whom religion and theology are presumed in all areas of teaching. This would include universities such as the Australian Catholic University and Notre Dame. As part of this group could be included the many tertiary colleges of theology that operate independently of an actual university, but which have degree granting rights, the largest being the Melbourne College of Divinity.

THE CURRENTLY OPENING DOOR

I now wish to share two newspaper articles written by the Vice Chancellor of Macquarie University, Professor Stephen Schwartz, and one by Andrew Trounson introducing Cardinal Newman to the university scene in Australia. The complete text of these articles can be found on the web page of The Australian newspaper. Here are a few snippets that note how this larger question of the university is currently being debated:

1. ‘More than a burger joint’ May 07, 2008.

Some salient quotes from this article follow: ‘Universities are big places...One map was the victim of graffiti. Right under the orientation arrow and the words “You are here”, someone had written, “But why?”

...Hamburger University [in Chicago, USA] is the management training facility for the McDonald's restaurant chain...No one is likely to confuse it with a real university. But why not? How does it differ from a real university...?

... He then notes that the British inquiry into universities (Dearing) identified not just three purposes for universities (teaching, research and community engagement) but a fourth which is to “play a major role in shaping democratic, civilised, inclusive society”. A strong civil society cannot be taken for granted. It depends on a solid foundation of education. As Epictetus said: “only the educated are free”.

Real universities are the engines of economic growth without which civil societies would wither and social justice would be impossible. Hamburger U adds value to McDonald's employees. Why are we here? We are here to increase the freedom of everyone.

2. A second article was written (Oct 06, 2010) by Andrew Trounson at the time when three VCs attended a symposium to celebrate Cardinal John Henry Newman's beatification by the Pope. The three VCs made it clear that Newman's ideas were driving change. Melbourne vice-chancellor Glyn Davis said Newman's views were a timely challenge to what he saw as Australia's narrow definition of a university... Monash University's Ed Byrne invoked Newman's emphasis on education when he said that talented educators had been held back by the sector's reliance on research output as the measure of performance. Australian Catholic University Vice Chancellor, Greg Craven, drew on Newman's idea of a university based on a particular view, be it the Catholic faith or secular liberalism or something else, as a source for diversity. “All universities live within their own truths and value systems and the only question is which,” he said.

The Catholic notion of unity of faith and reason was becoming more popular without us realising it. Professor Craven noted Macquarie University Vice Chancellor Stephen Schwartz's plans to teach undergraduates ‘practical wisdom’ and Melbourne's model of broad undergraduate education. “Perhaps even the Melbourne model represents a whispering of Newman's soul in the heart of Glyn Davis,” he said.

3. The next article, a spoof written by Stephen Schwartz a week later (Oct 13, 2010) on Cardinal Newman, relates how Newman might attempt to change our current universities by means of a series of emails to various parts of the (fictitious) ‘Woolloomooloo University’. As a background to the spoof it should be at least known that Newman recommended that theology should be an integral part of university education. Additionally, knowledge for the sake of knowledge and learning should be a central part of a university. It need have no utilitarian purpose other than to educate the whole person.

And finally, before we look at Newman's ‘Idea of a University’, a selection of quotes from the second of the 2010 Boyer lectures which were given by the vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne, Professor Glyn Davis:

... There are values implicit in university mottos, in statements of graduate attributes, printed on the banners to fly on open days. In recent times the Australian Catholic University and Macquarie University, among others, have decided to make these values more visible, as they explore the moral dimension of higher education.

[Stephen Schwartz] argues that universities should do more than train people for the workforce and make their countries richer. People need jobs and students understandably worry about their career, but Professor Schwartz suggests that to be successful — in profession, in life — students need also to learn how to think, how to make decisions in difficult circumstances, how to be wise before and during the event. They need, in short, what Aristotle called ‘practical wisdom’. Macquarie has reshaped teaching so all students, whatever their major, are challenged to think about, and apply, moral and ethical decision-making.

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN’S ‘IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY’

John Henry Newman wrote his ‘Idea of a University’ in the middle of the nineteenth century and it has become one of the most quoted references when discussing the rationale of a modern day university. His ideas presume and actively promote both the love of knowledge for knowledge’s sake as well as the importance of theology within the academic environment. There is a great deal of literature on Newman and his ideas about what a university should look like and how it should function. But if you would like to get a scintillating summary of them you may find most helpful a book titled, ‘The Idea of a University’, by John Henry Newman. The book is edited by Frank M. Turner and includes responses by five academics. It is in a series by Yale University called “Rethinking the Western Tradition”, Yale University Press, 1996.

CONCLUSION

But how does this fit into the Post-modern university where, if we take post-modernism to its logical conclusion, we have only relativity and only what is true for each individual at a particular time and situation? There is no ‘ultimate truth’ or ‘common truth’ or ‘theoretical truth’ or Grand Unified Theory’ which holds the whole world, humanity, nature and universe together, let alone a *uni*-versity. Even if we will never fully have a complete understanding of the ‘big picture’, we at least are attempting to discover the jig-saw puzzle and see how it all relates. Otherwise we are only left with many *multi*-versities either in the one ‘educational institution’ or scattered across the globe. Is there such a thing as striving for what proves ‘true’ or ‘genuine’ or ‘real’?

Post-modernism has had a positive role to play in breaking the stranglehold that Modernism has had with its primary legacy from the Enlightenment where ‘Reason’ was supposedly supreme. But unfortunately Reason became the new ‘god’ as it rightly questioned the arrogance of the formalised and institutionalised ‘Christian West’. Post-modernism has come to push all the idols off their ‘thrones’ and to point out that the Emperor is wearing no clothes. But if Post-modernism takes its place either on the throne (or says that there is supposedly no ‘throne’), we are all left naked and isolated and without anything or anyone to connect with, except our solipsistic babble, all of which is true for ourselves. I believe that the current generation of young people, and gradually the wider community has seen through this gaping hole in Post-Modernism and is calling for a more realistic and open approach.

More of us are coming to the discussion table with a greater degree of humility and openness to ask both the big and everyday questions of life, from “Is there a God?” to “Do we need to be teaching courtesy and manners to the next generation?”

Post-modernism has broken everyone’s attempt to have a strangle-hold of power over life and to be aware of our human limitations. This includes the limitations of the university as well. The university does not have to be the fount of all wisdom and the new ‘God’ on the throne of our humanistic society. But it certainly is a major partner in the whole enterprise of asking the question: “What does it mean to be human?” and the further question: “In what ways can we facilitate our humanity and our roles as humans in the universe?” Post-Modernism has opened the door for all areas of enquiry and study to make a contribution to this process, including theology and astrology. It is only by open discussion that the truth and benefits of these old and new members at the table will be discovered. It is not by banning them from the discussion or by saying certain discussions are not ‘politically correct’. All should be given a hearing and should be analysed, researched and then become part of the education process.

As chaplains, I believe that we have a responsibility to nurture a more open appreciation for the relationship between faith and reason, spirituality and logic. Even if it is not our primary focus as a chaplain we can encourage others, and where possible, create opportunities for students and staff to consider this link between the two. The door at the moment is slightly ajar. How might you open it a bit further and encourage the intellectual dialogue between faith and the intellectual?