

UNIVERSITY: OLD AND NEW HUMANISM*

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The end of an eventful period – a century or a millennium – makes all of us reconsider the state of the society and, particularly, the role and character of its basic institutions: church, government, media, educational system, etc. As I am deeply concerned about the importance of education and especially the university in its historical contribution to the development of Western civilisation in the creation of a spiritual climate, but, above all, in the shaping of our common future; I believe that much more attention should be paid to the status and further development of the university system, for the well being of our societies and the democratic future of Europe. I shall argue that just now we have a specific opportunity but also a responsibility for such an action!

University and Christian Heritage

Almost nine centuries ago, a perennial dialogue between theology and philosophy (later science), i.e. between faith and reason, between these two modes in which humanity seeks to comprehend the truth, gave birth to a new type of institution, unique to the civilisation usually called European, Western or Christian, unique in its origin, character and structure, and essential in its role.

University is a flexible institution that unites scholars (teachers), students (and recently administration) in a complex activity of preserving and disseminating existing knowledge (i.e. teaching) and creating new knowledge (called science or scientific research).

This type of institution depends on certain essentially humanistic underlying assumptions, along them:

- belief in the existence of truth and our human capacity to discover it gradually and systematically;
- respect for authority based on established records and arguments;
- freedom to doubt and question this same authority, and to modify or eliminate established beliefs through a systematic set of rational procedures.

Of course, the existing social and spiritual environment should not only accept the belief in the existence of truth, but also provide a strong metaphysical motivation to search for it and glorify it as part of a wider existential framework.

The university, therefore, could and did start and flourish only in the framework of our (Western) Christian civilisation which provided enough motivation, but also enough social and spiritual freedom for its basic activity. The motivation – apart from the natural human curiosity – came from the religious teaching of the Catholic Church, where truth and beauty and rational comprehension of the world – among others – all contribute to celebrate the Creator. No wonder then that universities were

* Presented at the International Congress “University and Global Society”, Rome, September 7-9, 2000.

first organised, promoted and for centuries existed as institutions of the Catholic Church, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.

This space of freedom was possible due to the intrinsic separation of church and state, of spiritual and temporal, which sometimes led to conflicts and tensions, but nevertheless provided neutral control mechanisms, intellectual “competition”, and certainly removed (or at least weakened) the possibility of a monopoly of power, truth, etc. In contrast, in most Eastern civilisations and societies, identification of religious institutions and leadership with secular powers (“*caesaropapism*”) limits this freedom, and thus sacrifices the search for truth for the sake of pragmatism.

University and the Future

Universities produce the most valuable and limited commodity – qualified people who will run and advance our countries in the future. Human resources are limited; they are not easily renewable but are destructible, as we in Central and Eastern Europe, unfortunately, are aware. It is in our common interest – national, regional and global – to establish efficient institutions to run this process of education and creation of experts, and the university is the only institution capable of this. Apart from the damage to spiritual and humanistic basis of our civilization and our individual existence, the collapse or decline of the university system would also create economic problems, destroy emerging institutions of civil and democratic society, which provide, health, education, government, etc., thus leading to further political instabilities in every region and globally.

Further discussion should certainly consider separately the particular positions and responsibilities of state or public universities, private schools, and especially Catholic institutions, in various countries.

Complexity, Flexibility and Change

It is necessary to observe the complex character and multiple role of a university, which connects teaching and research, i.e. creation, dissemination and conservation of knowledge, but also has a dual role in education – professional training and personal formation, because it usually represents the final stage in the personal development of an individual student. These combined features gave a university its importance, strength and purpose, but also required flexibility, and which will be needed for its survival in the coming century. The changes throughout the centuries were necessary and mostly useful. Let me mention some: development of sciences, especially “hard”, led to more emphasis on research with respect to teaching, and to useful specialisation into many disciplines, but recently also to a damaging fragmentation of knowledge; the massification of student enrollment gave a more prominent social role to the university, but brought problems in organisation, financing, and especially in “academic autonomy”; research-generated new technologies brought more research money, but introduced problems of scientific ethics and loyalty, and the basic equilibrium between the original goals of a university; efficient training for a specific – often narrowly-defined – professional career, became a profitable business for many higher education institutions, but led to divisions in the academic community (sciences, humanities, engineering, etc.) – so that recently even employers became unhappy with the “product” of such a mechanical process.

The evolution of science and its great advances were accompanied by increasing diversification and excessive specialisation, often useful, but ultimately leading also to negative fragmentation. Separation of teaching from research, education from

professional training, also contributed to the dehumanisation of sciences. Scientists and students were gradually getting absorbed by the details of their scientific research, losing broader perspective, including ethical and moral aspects of their work. Recent trends in massification often contributed to the loss of identity and elitist spirit, as well as the research component of the university.

A special consideration should be given to the process of globalisation (and universities were always “global” in many respects!). Together with the introduction of informatic technology, it created what seemed to some to be a “revolution”, a panacea, but for others, it could also mean the end of a university.

Obviously, while keeping its original character and structure, the university has to adapt once more to the changes, inside and outside. This is a threat, a challenge, but also a golden opportunity for a university to recover its mission in the framework of a “new humanism”.

Let me also briefly mention the situation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which have many old and new problems in this field, with some advantages and many common disadvantages. To a large extent we share a common history and cultural background, with many links in the past, thus enabling better cooperation, understanding and sharing of experiences. However, common problems are even more impressive after decades of totalitarian regimes – or just bureaucratic neglect in some countries. Let me enumerate: the low status and position of the academic community (in science, research and education, both for individuals and institutions) in social, economic and other respects, the long-term damage to university structure/organisation by (mis) management, separation of research and teaching, all this leading often to negative selection and brain-drain from universities, then also centralised bureaucratic rule unsuitable for a complex academic institution, etc. etc.

Unfortunately, after decades these and similar aberrations became “normal” and accepted by many people inside and outside the university as the only possible solutions, which produced mental barriers to all attempts for improvement.

Challenge of the New Century

If universities want to survive, i.e. perform successfully and responsibly their role in the beginning of the 21st century, they have to change, not conforming blindly to the past, with the structure of existing European universities, but anticipating changes arising from our common experience, from the modified environment in which we shall operate, and from the new *mission*. This environment generally will include a reduced demographic base (student applications), limited financial resources, new teaching technologies (arising from the revolution in informatics), and especially the effects of globalisation. The process of globalisation now includes not only the movement of capital, goods, political transformations, etc. but also the mobility of people – students and staff, which may have both positive and negative consequences for the universities.

The survival and progress of our universities will require better definition of their *mission* and its acceptance by the academic community and all real *stakeholders* – all partners in the life and work of the university. These partners are not only the state (or ministry) but, in the first place, the students, their parents and future employers in all sectors of the society, as well as the local community. But this mission has to be understood and accepted internally, by all professors, university leadership, by all who have to accept responsibility arising from this mission.

The mission, defined in a *mission statement* or an equivalent document, has to include excellence in scientific research in certain fields, teaching and social impact (local, regional, national), but each university has to include and elaborate its own priorities, depending on its history, location, size, finances, human resources, local and national needs, etc. Only a realistic (or realistically ambitious) mission statement can provide a basis for development strategy and its implementation.

One of the basic duties of any university is to contribute in its mission to the preservation and advancement of our individual cultural and national identities, based on our common heritage, European culture and civilisation. This is the place where its humanistic origin and Christian character should be firmly and clearly stated. Awareness of its mission leads to the strength of an institution, internally and externally, and defines its internal structure and external relations.

University autonomy is just a term (often politically misused) which is operationally defined as such a structure, organisation and legal position of the university which enables it to fulfil its mission in the best way. Mission, the term not often used in European universities, makes possible institutional and individual evaluation, because it provides criteria for success or failure, otherwise impossible.

University autonomy – even as an operational set of principles and practices – is not absolute; the university is strongly linked with its partners/stakeholders and embedded in the society, which limits and focuses its activities (not only for financial reasons!). However, the autonomy enables the mission statement to give strong impetus to the creation of appropriate university organisation/structure which will optimise the achievement of the accepted goals. These include all aspects of the university – financing, personal affairs (“hiring and firing”), management of resources, planning and evaluation of research and teaching, etc. In fact, a university is such a strongly integrated organism that it is impossible to change and optimise one sector without influencing all the others.

Need for New Humanism

Several new and exciting trends are becoming obvious as we approach the new century. The fragmentation of knowledge (and institutions), usually into three groups: (natural) sciences, humanities and engineering, is becoming damaging both for scientific research, but even more for university education. Employers and society in general are expecting university graduates with broader knowledge of several disciplines, often crossing barriers of science, humanities and engineering, and open to a more flexible type of curricula. They insist on personal qualities, previously neglected, like the ability to communicate and cooperate, speak foreign languages, broader culture, leadership, etc. There is obviously a dramatic change in the direction of the original university based on “old” humanism, but in the new circumstances.

It is not enough to train experts to know “how” to do things, but also “why”, “what” and especially “what not”, which immediately requires inclusion of professional ethics into the academic curricula.

Gradually we see that the process of reintegration – not only institutional, but also spiritual – of the university is taking place, and will have to accelerate, this time (also) due to “market conditions”. The reintegration of science and humanities and engineering, of learning (skills) and personal formation, of technology and ethics

(defining its limitations) – all this certainly means that we need the new humanism in the university!

As the conclusion, after almost nine centuries of development, we have reached another exciting period in the evolution of a university, adapting to the new challenges. It is then not surprising that in this Jubilee Year, the Jubilee of Universities was organised with the motto “The University for a New Humanism”. It is striking to observe that the initiative for this re-humanisation and, indeed, re-Christianisation, which should be the primary responsibility of Catholic intellectuals, is often provided by the pragmatic and financially driven market conditions. This certainly makes all of us reconsider our priorities and perspectives, and our contributions to this important process.