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How to Reform the University?

A PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAY

Introduction

The aim of this article is to offer a philosophical reflection based on Thomistic thought and the Catholic faith, with a view to thinking about how to reform the university, and therefore research and works linked to knowledge, in order to get out of the rut in which knowledge at a global level, which is losing momentum and, it seems, caring less and less about truth, is stuck.

To do this, we have borrowed the method of the encyclicals of the 19th-century Popes in three stages: a reminder of the principles, a description of reality and its problems, and a proposal for remedies. So, after recalling the end of the university, we will begin by painting a portrait of the reality of research today, its merits and, above all, its shortcomings that need to be corrected, and then attempt to give some ideas for remedies. We cannot be exhaustive, and the idea is to give the philosophical outlines of a restoration of the university, which only need to be developed in detail.

We are basing ourselves on the Catholic faith, Thomistic thought, historical experience and our own practical experience of university and research in several countries—in this case

France and Japan. We have adopted the form of an essay, freer than the classic academic article, in order to allow philosophical reflection to develop. Everyone will easily be able to find the basis for their thinking. We will regularly take the example of historical science, our own field of research. Everyone will be able to apply this to their own field.

What Should a University Be, in the Light of its History and its Medieval Origins?

The university is normally the place par excellence for the search for truth, whatever the field, and in its intellectual dimension. The Middle Ages, which created the university under the patronage of the King and the Pope in France, made it the place par excellence for the intellectual search for truth, the better to illuminate the objects of knowledge in the light of divine Revelation, in other words the Bible and Tradition.

The truth sought is obviously objective knowledge. Let's recall the Thomistic definition of truth: 'the adequacy of an assertion with the designated reality'. It is therefore a question of a correct apprehension by human reason of reality as it is. Whether this reality is divine (theology), human (philosophy, with its pinnacle, metaphysics, also known as the science of principles), historical (past events), psychological (the functioning of the animal part of our soul), material (physics, chemistry, biology, and most of the so-called modern or natural sciences, and even mathematics, in the sense that mathematics is the work of pure abstraction based on physical observations), etc., all science has a precise reality as its object, which limits its knowledge, and therefore aspires to objective knowledge.

There are many fields whose truths are defined by their object, and whose knowledge is limited by our limits on the one hand, and the means of reaching this reality on the other (for example, in history, documents are the essential means of reaching the event of

the past, and therefore we are also limited by these same sources to reach the reality sought in the past; in physics, our capacity for observation and measurement are the means of reaching material reality, and we are limited by these means; in mathematics and metaphysics, in addition to observation, the means is reason itself, and we are therefore limited by our human reason).

In this sense, theology is clearly the queen of the sciences, both because of its object—God, the Truth par excellence, the most perfect object, the most lovable and therefore the most worthy of study—but also because of the excellence of the means given to us: to reach God, Revelation has been given to us by God himself, and therefore it is infallible and cannot be mistaken. We are limited only by our reason, which deduces consequences about God, about Providence, and about the truths of the Faith from what is revealed, and from the methods of interpretation and verification given by apostolic Tradition, and can be deceived by errors of human reasoning. Everything is in Revelation, but the good Lord has willed that we use our noblest power, reason, to draw the sometimes implicit or veiled consequences of what is revealed.

In short, the university is concerned with the sciences, and honours the noblest power of our soul, intelligence. This acquired truth makes us more lovable to the good Lord and his creation, since we only love what we know well, and thus enables us to better exercise our second noblest power of our soul, the will, in its act, love, or even charity. Knowledge also enables us to hate sin better, by better understanding the horror of its consequences.

And finally, knowledge enables us to work better for the glory of God by taking better care of Creation, and using it better for our own good or the common good. So, for example, history is both a way of better understanding our present and of honouring our ancestors, who ultimately link us to Adam and to God, but also of becoming aware of our role as means and of our political nature. Finally, history is a goldmine of lessons for those who govern at all levels of society, from the father of the family to the political leader, teaching through past practical experience what to do and what not to do, and helping to make prudent decisions, the queen virtue of politics.

The purpose of the university is thus knowledge, in other words the appropriation and clarification of truths. In this way, the university trains teachers who can then pass on the truths to others, so that they can shine in their place among all men. This whole economy of knowledge makes it possible to know God better in himself, and through his Creation, and thus to make him more lovable, and thus to help us practise charity better.

Historically, and from the outset, academics have systematically been clerics: not for nothing, the work of research is noble par excellence, and therefore requires the sacrifice of everything, a poor and regulated life, and great humility so as not to fall into the fatuity that knowledge appropriated as coming from oneself can provoke.

If the end of the university is truth, its means is method. Each discipline has its own method, just as judges have their procedures, or priests have the rubrics of the liturgy, so that researchers can, out of humility, take refuge behind a good method to protect themselves against our weaknesses, and to surely reach the goal, which is the truth.

Depending on the object of science and the means of accessing it, the method will vary. In philosophy, we reason by induction, in theology by deduction, in history by archival research, in physics by experiment and protocol, and so on.

What ensures that the method is applied correctly—a kind of liturgy for science, which, like the liturgy, allows the ministers of religion to take a back seat behind the fixed rubrics and prayers, supporting them in their ministry and easing their workload, avoiding falls and sacrileges—and that it is improved and perpetuated, is the organisation of researchers into a corporation. They form a society of peers who, through the experience of the prudent researcher, judge the work of their peers and train new doctors. In this way, knowledge deepens (more than it advances) and is protected by this corporation of professors, protected by political power and by the Church—and therefore, by this affiliation that is more independent of the political pressures that could hinder the search for truth for human reasons.

In this way, the university can claim to be able to produce living, reliable knowledge, within the limits of its validity (limits given by the object, by the means and by our reason). This is essentially what the university is. Let us now look at the current situation.

The Current Situation, and Consequences for the Principles

The picture painted below is by no means exhaustive of the reality of universities throughout the world, and depending on the place, we may come to slightly different conclusions. The main points below should be taken as general trends that we have personally observed in many places, and which often recur in conversations with colleagues.

IT HAS LOST ITS PURPOSE, NAMELY TRUTH

The modern university is the offspring of modernity, and so, by force we might say, it has lost its original purpose: it no longer seeks the truth.

Either it has become relativistic, and considers that everyone has their own truth, in which case the university no longer has any *raison d'être*, since its very purpose is to shed light on an objective truth, i.e. a statement in line with reality, which by definition does not change according to each subject or time.

Or it carefully avoids talking about truth, and thus forgets the goal it is pursuing. The revolutionary university forgot that a good researcher is one who comes to the right conclusions: today, we believe that a good researcher is one who is a good technician, one who respects the method and produces a lot of articles. But for what? Not many people know any more.

Hence the ills we see today: scientific production that is both plethoric and often uninteresting in its subjects and conclusions; the functionarisation of researchers, who, no longer seeking the truth, become bored, and so either lose themselves in almost

superstitious fantasies, or fear the truth, and systematically align themselves with the ideologies of the moment, in order to obtain funding and above all to have peace of mind, etc.

RESEARCHERS
ARE SUBJECT TO THE WORLD

The immediate consequence of this loss of the search for truth is no longer submission to objective truth, which no longer exists, but to the ideological truths of the moment. This is accentuated by the submission of researchers, who are no longer monks or nobles—who were independent and free in their research in relation to the world, because they were slaves only to the truth and much less subject to the pressures of the world, particularly in terms of funding, but also in terms of moral and political pressures. Today, it has become normal to choose one's research subject according to fashion, or worse, potential funding, and the positions to be acquired... Truth is increasingly becoming the least of our concerns.

Admittedly, in formerly Catholic countries, and thanks to the long Catholic history of certain countries, such as France, and therefore the competition from the Catholic university, the truth is forcibly reintroduced here and there, but this is in the process of disappearing, and when it does happen, it is often by chance, one might say, or by old Christian reflexes, but nothing more.

At this rate, we are going to reach the esoteric stage of science, of which the 'corona' episode gives us a frightening foretaste: everyone in their religious and superstitious delirium will try to use their reason not to find reality as it is, but to make reality fit their ideology, or the feeling of the moment, for interests as diverse as people and moments. Since it is impossible to make truth correspond to ideology, reason becomes blinded and lied to, and we end up with very well-crafted reflections that amount to magical thinking. This slow evolution of science began during the Renaissance, with these so-called intellectuals, who were just as much hermeticists, esotericists or practitioners of some magical science.

This evolution is in fact a return to the pre-Christian stage of science, where all science is also a superstitious doctrine with practices that are often esoteric, even shamanic, with a gnostic tinge and almost always involving initiation rites.

I work in Japan, and I can tell you that in the history of this country, everything that is 'erudite' is always superstitious, esoteric, initiatory, and justifies the worst doctrines, or the worst follies. When a truth is told, it is often by chance, or when, really, denying it amounts to founding a systematically disordered, and therefore unlivable, order...

SUBMISSION TO THE STATE

The corporate aspect of the university is also disappearing. It is true that in France, for example, because of its thousand-year-old history, there is still a certain customary corporatism, and so much the better, but this too is disappearing.

Working abroad, in a non-Catholic country, I can confirm that here in Japan, without a pre-modern, Christian university tradition, there is no corporation. Professors are salaried employees who are required to do more and more absurd tasks that have nothing to do with their profession. In France, I have the impression that these tasks are still, if not more limited, more easily refused: in practice, the teacher is above the administrators and can do as he likes; in Japan, the teacher is subject to the administrators and must submit not only to the administrators, but also to the students, who are his clients rather than his disciples...

Not to mention the increasingly absolute hold of the state, which is sticking its nose everywhere, in all curricula, and soon even in the work and methods of researchers... There is no longer a patron King to protect the universities, no longer a Pope to guarantee doctrine, just a leviathan with shifting but always totalitarian doctrines that wants to subject its clerics of the mind, the academics, to its temporary will, whereas on the contrary the King gave them privileges to ensure their independence and the means to fulfil their vocation, even against the King himself, even against the Pope himself. Let's not forget that the university

would not exist without the King of France (or other Catholic sovereigns) and without the Pope (and I stress, both).

FORGETTING
TO PASS ON KNOWLEDGE

Academics, no longer seeking the truth, do not want to pass it on to the outside world either (since there is nothing left to pass on), forgetting the second pillar of the university vocation (seeking the truth and passing it on). Forgetting the Triune God has incalculable consequences for university work.

At best, academics become complacent in their work, which is admittedly meticulous but useless, and all the more useless when it merely submits to the injunctions of the world (because great discoveries are always against the world, at least initially), or, worse still, their work can become embroiled in the promotion of noxious ideologies, or even fall into a kind of ‘peopolisation’ when they dare to go outside the hushed cenacle of the university and its colloquia.

ALL THAT REMAINS
IS THE METHOD AND PEER REVIEW

All that remains is the method, which originated in very Christian times and is the most difficult to eradicate. A world that has lost the Faith can still benefit from these excellent ‘recipes’, just as we benefit from good criminal procedures stemming from centuries of Christian justice. But without the root of faith and the Christian sap, it will not last... In the meantime, the method and peer review still have a certain effectiveness. In fact, this is one of the last areas where neither the state nor fashion has any say... but for how long? So don’t throw everything away!

AN EXAMPLE:
THE DISCIPLINE OF HISTORY

Let’s talk about my field of research by way of illustration, and then everyone can adapt it to their own field, and adjust it according to their practical reality. The aim should be to shed light on

the facts of the past, by establishing them, by knowing the events of the past, and to draw lessons from them for our time. This aim is no longer pursued, either officially or by most researchers. And when it is still pursued, it's 'by chance', because that's what's interesting (and so some researchers still want to know despite official injunctions, so natural is this desire for the truth).

So post-Christian history boils down to one method: the exploration of sources, which becomes the end. At the end of the day, it would be enough to say everything eruditely about a manuscript, without ever having talked about its content, to pass for an excellent researcher...

The other consequence is the tendency never to talk about the realities behind the sources, but to be content either with the subjective analysis attributed to the author (the author says that, but we don't talk about what he's talking about, or we imply that in any case this reality is described in a subjective way, so basically doesn't exist), or pure historiography (so you're going round in circles, making no contribution to the facts of the past), or focusing on absolutely boring details, to avoid talking about important realities on the one hand, and also to boast about being experts in insignificant details in a field so restricted that no one will compete with you in this 'speciality'...

The other consequence is the abandonment of the mission of transmitting knowledge outside the university, which is left to all the ideologues or charlatans of history spreading so many lies, a bit like a Lamothe who, paid by the line at the beginning of the 19th century, talked nonsense about the Inquisition in his day... and everyone believed him.

Another consequence: forgetting God and making the method sacred, researchers want to believe that we can do a perfect job, as if we were gods. This is obviously impossible, so what happens? As I said earlier, studies are limited to the minutiae of the subject, since in this area it is possible to achieve results that are as perfect as they are limited.

But there is another consequence: an obsession with previous research. It's as if, in an ideology of 'progress', each study com-

pletes the edifice of all research. And so we have to read all the previous literature.

In fact, this is absurd. It was certainly possible when the university was founded in the 19th century: the first generations had no one before them, so they only looked at the sources. And they set the tone. If the tone was good, so much the better; if it was bad, the researcher suffers today, because it becomes almost impossible to break out of it: everything has to be equal, good research as well as bad—the sacrosanct relativist principle, contrary to the traditional principle of authority. The second generation only had one generation to deal with, but after nearly 150 years of modern academic tradition, to read an entire literature, we have to limit the field of investigation (because our capacities remain limited). Another generation or two and we'll have a big problem: it's already starting. In fact, many valuable studies have already been forgotten, and the quality is deteriorating rapidly among the new ones, which are becoming the basis of the next ones. Believing in progress, the seeds of decadence are already evident. But since the criterion is just to have read everything, after that you can say anything... as long as it stays in the conclusion or the incipit: no more Catholic doctrine, no more referents, so anything becomes possible, even the most far-fetched conclusions (as long as the method is respected).

But in any case, the method remains solid: if we forget the introduction and conclusion of the papers, the facts quoted, apart from the express lie, are accurate. Perhaps without any vision, perhaps without drawing any conclusions, perhaps veiled or disconnected from reality, quoted in no particular order, but the information is often there. The contemporary historian often forgets that his or her role is to bring order to this disorder, in order to better understand the past. And, often, the information cited in the sources, put back in order, is contradictory to the alleged conclusion.

To survive in a non-Catholic university without betraying your vocation as a researcher, all you have to do is read and work in the light of Revelation—without saying so, otherwise you'll be thrown

out. And my generation (in its thirties) has the good fortune to come after very revolutionary and very atheistic generations (at least in the so-called Western countries): on the one hand, saying something very 'traditional' today, and absolutely not original in the light of tradition, is very original today, in this obscure world where nothing is obvious any more. Since our times love the 'new', it's a good thing, although the effect is very limited.

Another important point: the atheists and revolutionaries (in short, the moderns) thought they had won, so when they admit certain truths (e.g. that the Inquisition was a fair tribunal, perhaps the most serious and merciful in history), these conclusions are all the stronger, since they start from presuppositions opposed to the Catholic faith, and powerful prejudices against our religion. Which goes to show that, even in times of decadence, the devil still wears a stone.

The Remedies

This part will be very short, because basically everything is already in the first part. What needs to be done? Preserve what is left of today's tradition: the method and peer review, with the corporate operation of scientific journals, symposia, and so on.

Put the purpose of the university back at the centre: the search for truth in the light of Revelation, in order to get to know God and creation better, and thus deepen our love of truth on the one hand, but also to learn from it, for the common good and the transmission of truth to the outside world.

Reincorporate academics. And therefore the organisation of recruitment, training, and so on. And the privileges of professors, and perhaps their poverty (which is already the case in some countries and for some subjects...) This means putting an end to standardisation and centralisation, but also to the functionalisation of academics under the thumb of the State or similar institutions. Re-establish patronage (personal and not state patronage): the King, or other patron, decides on grants, donations, etc. The

Pope or other patrons may appear, under the King's supervision. Universities can finance themselves as they wish. Papal universities are independent. Instituting royal and/or Catholic awards, royal and/or Catholic academies, etc, to encourage good research. The other measures follow naturally from putting the university back in order for its purpose: the search for truth. So, for example, there will no longer be any need for a plethora of university students, which by definition is limited to those who will be doing research.

Vocational training institutes, not research institutes, are therefore another subject, to be coupled with the subject of trades (and the business and craft economy), but also institutions with a practical vocation, such as the history of the grandes écoles in France.

Conclusion

The reform of the university is therefore above all a question of restoring true Catholic universities, rediscovering their original vocation: the search for truth (the adequacy of a statement to reality) in the light of and based on Catholic revelation, within traditional corporate structures to allow the necessary independence of researchers and the transmission of knowledge. ■

How to Reform the University?

A Philosophical Essay

SUMMARY

The university is currently going through a major crisis in its history, against a backdrop of the weakening of Catholic teaching, various ideological pressures and the mechanisation and standardisation of university work. Everyone agrees that the university needs to be reformed, but what could it be? This philosophical essay seeks to pro-

pose a Catholic approach to the question, by first shedding light on the end of the university and then, on the basis of the current reality, outlining guidelines for university reform. The aim of this paper is to propose a Catholic philosophical framework, inspired by the method of the Popes in the encyclicals of the nineteenth century, for a sound reform, which amounts to reordering the university to its proper end, which is the search for and contemplation of truth.

Keywords: university, truth, reform, history, papal encyclicals, method, peers, corporation, Saint Thomas Aquinas