

Learning and the Mind of God *

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Jesus said “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it”
(Matthew 21: 43).

Holy Scripture is often tough; indeed I cannot think of passages that simply tread water or offer bland affirmation. When God speaks, he calls us to attention, and generally to reform and renewal. Also, what sounds like condemnation is often a warning to relocate one’s heart, to shift from false to true goals and values, and to be aware that God and not man is the measure of all things.

One reading of God’s authority, of his being the *ruler*, is the familiar moral or legal one. The idea that duty derives from divine commands can be traced back through figures such as Calvin, to the medieval philosopher-theologian William of Ockham, and from there through an Augustinian tradition back to interpretations of scripture, particularly the books of the Old Testament such as Isaiah. But there is another sense in which God may be thought to be a ruler of reality and this is worth mentioning in connection with higher learning. In discussing *truth*, Ockham’s near contemporary, Thomas Aquinas, draws on the philosophy of the Greeks filtered through the commentaries of Arabs and Jews. What Aquinas arrives at is the idea that the human intellect is ‘measured’ by things and that things are ‘measured’ by God; so that, indirectly, God is the measure of our minds. What he means is that knowledge involves conforming our minds to the structure of reality—*grasping the way things are*—and that the way things are in the world is a reflection of God’s own mind. Our true thoughts are shaped by the world, the world is shaped by God; thus through *science* (in the original broad sense of the term, i.e. organised understanding), we come to know something of the mind of God. Our minds are *shaped and measured* by the Divine Mind.

This is a profound and inspiring account of knowledge. To some extent it has been rediscovered in writings about contemporary science; for both at the cosmological level and at that of the microphysical, some

investigators have come to think of their enquiries as engaging with the mind of God. Recently I took part in a meeting at the Royal Society of Edinburgh whose theme was one of religion and science. Such an event reflects a wider sense that, far from being hostile to religion, contemporary scientific theories are often congenial to, and indeed may be supportive of, theistic viewpoints.

If we are religious believers this should come as no surprise though it may still be welcome as an overdue return to right reason. What I would urge, however, is that scholars, researchers and students reflect upon Aquinas's account of truth as involving Divine measure, and try to see its implications for their own field of study, *whatever it may be*. For if Aquinas is right we should be able to recover something of the Divine order from each and every aspect of reality. If we also recall the idea that human kind is made in the image of God then study of human existence promises to be especially rewarding and important for discerning Divine purposes. Not only physics, but the other natural sciences, and not only those but the human sciences, and the humanities and the arts, *all* offer scope for communion between the mind of man and the mind of God mediated via *things*.

This vision of human knowledge, both theoretical and practical, as being all of a piece and directed towards God, animated the educational institutions of the middle ages from which Edinburgh and other universities inherited much of their form and function. The fifty mile journey from St Andrews to Edinburgh is in one sense a move from the religious and ecclesiastical middle ages to the humanist and civic renaissance. St Andrews (1412) was the first of Scotland's universities all of whose colleges were pre-reformation foundations, and it bears something of the appearance of this history to the present day. Edinburgh (1587), by contrast, was a foundation not of the church but of the civil society. Even so its founders conceived its ultimate purposes in very much the same terms as their medieval predecessors; those being the acquisition and integration of knowledge about the created order. In this fundamental respect, the continuity of purposes is much greater than any social change represented by the move from a religious to a civic foundation.

With that fact in mind allow me to reflect on the general ideal of a university or college. The term '*universitas*' was just used simply to mean a group of persons united by a common interest or activity. Medieval writers sometimes refer to the Church in the sense of the whole body of Christian believers, in this way. Likewise '*collegium*' simply meant a community and not necessarily an academic one. It is in this sense that we speak of the College of Cardinals in Rome, or of the

College of Heralds in London. Each is a community concerned with a common task. The academic use of the term 'college' is then a case of something more general. From the twelfth century there had been a revival of learning in Europe. One of the main influences on this was St Anselm who first integrated the knowledge represented by scripture, ancient philosophy, the Church Fathers and later Christian thinkers. The style and ambition of his work soon led to a renaissance of education and scholarship. Systematic study such as St Anselm proposed, generated populations of students and masters gathered together in places of study, *studia*.

The next step was to give precise definition and status to these academic communities. This was in part an issue of quality control but there was also 'duty dodging', for ecclesiastics were permitted to be absent from their churches if they were engaged in study, and many enrolled as students to avoid or delay the regime of the chapel and the cloister. I should add that the move from religious to civic foundations hardly eliminated the motive of work avoidance.

Out of this was born the *Studium Generale*, an academic community of masters and students, membership of which was not restricted by nationality. A true internationalism resulted and was handed on from Church to society. From the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries and beyond, a network of universities developed stretching from Poland to Scotland, from Italy to Scandinavia. The masters moved to and fro between these carrying old knowledge and new learning, and developing that synthesis of truth and reason which was the culture of the Latin West.

This is the common inheritance of all educated people; but it is that especially of those of us who are members of a University, an institution inspired by this ancient tradition and which seeks to continue it. In an age celebrated for being 'postmodern' and 'multi-cultural', places of traditional learning and value could seem marginal having little to offer the wider world. The truth is *exactly* the opposite of this. What passes for universalism in the contemporary world is largely an ever-expanding, repeating pattern of consumerism, and of media and advertising-driven life styles. Our world may be broader and more rapidly travelled than that of the founders of the ancient universities, but it lacks the cultural unity and spiritual depth of their world. Education then was much more selective and purposeful in its content than is general today.

As I mentioned in connection with Aquinas, the selection was based on Judaeo-Christian assumptions: that the world is created, intelligible, and indicative of its creator; that a covenant was struck between God

and human kind, first with the Jews and later with us all, that the Church and the Scripture it preserves are channels of grace, and that we are called to a supernatural destiny, life with God forever. For a Christian the purposes of education follow directly: to carry us to a proper understanding of what is implied by these assumptions, and to enable us to live and more importantly—to die— well, in the grace of God.

In the contemporary world these views are contested, but more often they are ignored. The Enlightenment sought to advance understanding without reference to God or to a purposeful creation. The results are at best uncertain, and I think we may say that the efforts of utopian ideologies to provide heaven without God have been more terrible than the misapplied evangelism—if it were that creditable—of Christians during the crusades against Islam, the persecution of the Jews and the religious wars of Europe. These were profoundly un-Christian deeds. They were sinful, objectively speaking they were mortally so. Christians should be ashamed of these events; but they may also feel merit in the fact that perhaps only Christianity has the resources to express eternal condemnation and sentence upon them.

In Isaiah 5 and then in Matthew 21 we are introduced to the idea of a vineyard, established by a benign designer, well prepared, and well planted. But the tenants fail to care for it and in one case produce only sour grapes and in another attack and kill the owner's son. The threat of expulsion follows: 'The Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruits.' In one reading the two passages concern the original covenant: the vineyard is the House of Israel, and what is forewarned is a turning away of God from his first chosen people to others who may be more responsive. But there is another historical and cultural reading which suggests that unless *we* cooperate with God then what has been given will be taken away. Who then might *we* be? I have spoken of the western tradition of enquiry and education. This began in Greece, moved in part to the Arab world and then West so that by the thirteenth century it could be located in Paris or Cologne; from there it spread throughout Europe and via the European empires to other parts of the world. No one who works in the universities can fail to be struck by the thought that in some sense higher-learning has now left the old world and is located in the new—particularly in the US.

The more important questions to ask are whether the Christian idea of knowledge as directed towards God has accompanied higher-learning on its travels, and whether we in the older universities have been faithful to the vision of the founders of Western Christian scholarship. The answers are I think mixed. As my daughter Kirsty used to say in answer

to most questions, 'a little bit yes, and a little bit no'. In America I see inspiring Christian scholars and in Britain also. The Royal Society of Edinburgh meeting I mentioned, was organised in part by the Science, Religion and Technology Project of the Church of Scotland and in part by the largely Anglican Society of Ordained Scientists.

But the philosophical and religious ideals associated with traditional conceptions of knowledge and education have to be rearticulated and the institutions of learning reanimated by them if the vineyards are not to prove barren and the tenants become corrupt. The corrective is provided by Paul's letter to the Philippians (4: 8–9)

"Finally brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard do, and the God of peace will be with you".

*The following draws upon the 1997 commencement address at St Anselm College, New Hampshire, and a sermon delivered at Greyfriars Kirk at the opening service of the University of Edinburgh 1997–8 academic year.

Why did the crowd think St Peter was drunk? An exercise in applied sociolinguistics

David Crystal

... And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans