

J.J. Venter

Spectator

**TENSION IN THE
CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY**

“A university is a community involved in training potential scientists. They are guided in the direction of becoming independent scientists by participating in scientific endeavour so that ultimately they will be able to practise their own professions in responsible fashion”.

Although many philosophers hesitate nowadays to define a university, I feel that the above definition is justified on normative grounds and that it conveys the authentic historical tradition of the university accurately. In the late nineteenth century concepts became watered down to the point where great hesitation was felt about the whole matter of the definition of a university. These new concepts, totalitarian in character, should be unacceptable to the Christian thinker from a normative point of view. I feel that the problems outlined in the previous three essays represent areas of tension between the definitive characteristics of the university and those tendencies in contemporary society which tend to negate definition. It is no exaggeration to say that the intrinsic nature of the university is threatened and may be lost. Because these threatening forces are of necessity secular in nature, it is a fact that the Christian universities will be more susceptible to these threats. These threats will only show themselves more clearly once one has looked more closely at the logical consequences of this definition of the university. A cautionary word at this stage: we have to remember that this definition deals with a matter that falls firmly within the field of activity of man — thus it is automatically subject to man’s imperfection. The definition does not state what a university *is* but what any university *should strive to be*, if it should want to be a *good* university. Therefore this can be regarded as the formulation of a *norm* which should be seen as functioning in the

sense of judging, converting, guiding.

“A university is a community”. University work presupposes community-directed work from all its members, be they members of the council or first-year students. Everybody has to contribute towards attaining live and viable communication. If this were not to happen the activities would be reduced to perspectiveless specialization. This would mean that the university would merely be producing intellectual barbarians incapable of normative introspection. Intellectual barbarism emerges only too clearly if we are to look at what is happening to nature at the hands of technological society. Mere training without meaningful communication between scientists is empty.

“The university is involved in the training of potential scientists towards being independent scientists”. This task of guidance is the central concern of the university. It is impossible, however, to guide any student towards a full understanding of science unless we have a clear understanding of what the practice of science entails. The theory of science therefore should form an integral part of any scientific endeavour at the university. For our purpose it should suffice to say that the practitioner of science should be able to find and give expression to the relationship between reality, norm and law. This underlies the didactic purpose of the university. A student who is merely supplied with the necessary ‘facts’ has not become an independent scientist – his facts will very quickly become obsolescent and worthless and he is an actual danger to society as a result of his one-sidedness. Training in the fundamentals of the basic sciences best fulfils the demands of guidance towards responsible scientific endeavour.

“The university is involved in training potential scientists by involving them actively in the process of scientific endeavour”. The first question confronting the person involved in tertiary education is the one dealing with the nature of university train-

ing. University training is seen as functioning in the direction of systematic autodidacticism under the guidance of trained scientists. This follows logically from the very nature of science: logical precision, methodical precision, imagination, strategic ingenuity, clear formulation, precisely directed attention. These qualities can only be fully developed by meaningful participation in the process of scientific endeavour. There is, however, also an organizational side to science, and it remains a serious fault to send a student into the world without equipping him to cope with this side of his occupation as well. At the university the main emphasis is on the student: whoever denies the student the right to participate meaningfully in the training process does not acknowledge the student as a human being but reduces him to the status of malleable clay.

“The university trains students so that they can join the professional world as responsible scientists practising their chosen professions”. The university is not responsible for professional training – one can rather see its task as the guidance of students towards responsible action in those fields where scientific thought and endeavour can be seen as prerequisites. University training has to be relevant to the field that the student is going to enter, but in such a way that the student will be enabled to go on developing and applying acquired knowledge in a scientifically responsible fashion.

It is quite possible that the reader will feel at this stage that a normatively qualified definition of a university is merely an idealized picture, with reality being quite different. It is indeed true that reality is quite different. In fact, nothing is really *Christian* within the full sense that can be ascribed to the concept. The PU for CHE will in truth never be able to be more than merely a sign of our hope in Christ, so that we should not expect our idealistic salvation from it. But it remains our responsibility to see that it does not degenerate into becoming less than a sign of grace. It has to go on practising its principles while it has the

freedom to do so. The whole idea of the interfaculty lectures of 1977 in giving perspectives on the future of the university has been to underline this idea. To find the significance of this idea one has to look at the ideas of the speakers regarding the concrete, historical, university reality.

The professionalist university

For the past 100 years the American universities have been transformed into colleges for advanced professional training – institutions intended to supply the national economy with schooled workers and useful skills – all aimed at improving the gross national product. These same tendencies are to be observed more and more in our own country.

Of all the negative influences that can be attributed to this tendency, the training of professionals full of “useful facts” at the expense of training in the basic sciences is perhaps the worst. This tendency has completely destroyed community forming at the university and has dumped the university squarely into the conflict of interests raging around it (and for the time being it has landed on the side of the political and economic establishment).

If we view these results in the light of the definition of the university we are struck by the fact that the modern profession-oriented university is ignoring the traditional task of the university – the calm and judicious training in scientific endeavour has been forced to make place for a frenetic cramming with facts, knowledge which can be manipulated; professional specialization and mass production break up each effort to establish communities, and the objective and purely scientific institution envisioned by the German idealists of the early nineteenth century has been engulfed by a social service organization – “relevance” has been moved out in favour of “commitment”.

The foregoing should make it clear why certain problems have suddenly been magnified in dealing with three basic aspects of the university: its structure, university didactics and the relationships between the university corps and society.

The structure of the university

In the lecture by Professor Gerrit Viljoen the interpretation of the term *structure* is striking. It clearly does not designate that which some philosophers designate by the term *being* – rather it has to do with the very, concrete, coherence of elements and groupings within the university. This view enables one to make a valuable analysis on the one hand, of the often conflicting tendencies to which the university is inevitably subject, and also offers a clear basis on which to work at solving the practical problems besetting a university. Two of these problems will be looked at more closely viz. the problem of authority and the problem of society.

The traditional structure of authority at the university is hierarchic, and it is clear that Professor Viljoen is not an advocate of the democratized structure at Continental universities. He does suggest several means of making decision-forming and execution more stream-lined and efficient. It is quite clear, however, that he is conscious of making concessions to both sides. Perhaps we have become entangled in a scheme of reasoning that cannot be conclusive, as a result of the conflicts of power which can be encountered at a secular university. Perhaps one should rather begin at the idea of the *equal* responsibility of all, including the student, when the matter of the task of the university is being considered. Perhaps it would be desirable that the students, who often come to the university with the idea of having a “good time”, should participate meaningfully in the process of exercising authority, as this will equip them more meaningfully for their later careers. Perhaps the question one should answer

should ideally deal with the matter of the various *forms* of authority, rather than with the matter of how one could reconcile effectiveness with democracy. Should the possession of a high academic rank necessarily be a better qualification for admission to a council than enthusiastic and real participation?

Perhaps the diffusion of responsibility will result in more insight into the control of science and the attendant problems – which will perhaps then lessen resistance to “incomprehensible decisions”. Equally, it might be possible to persuade somebody who is going to be influenced by a decision to participate actively in the process of decision-making.

The problem of forming a community is intimately connected with the diffusion of authority. A university community is only really viable when all the members are in communication with each other and can give expression to the intrinsic task of the university. The gaps in the university society, as seen by Professor Viljoen, occur between academics and administration, and between specialized academics. In my opinion there are also chasms between professional academics and potential academics (students), and between higher authoritative bodies such as Council, Senate, and Faculty and the great majority of university members. In what way should these chasms be bridged? In the first place there is a clear break between academics and members of administrative staffs, resulting most probably from a complete lack of understanding of each other's work. Unity might be achieved by dissemination of information, meetings for planning together on intermediate levels and continual sensitization to each other's needs.

Secondly, Professor Viljoen gives some valuable pointers as to how interdisciplinary co-operation is to be achieved – which would help to eradicate specialistic subject loyalties. A question which persists is the one as to why the traditional subject and faculty divisions remain so tenaciously in our time. Why should

we regard it as absurd if a student should wish to take Physics and Afrikaans as majors? Why should Philosophy be locked up as it were in the Arts Faculty, and why is so little done to promote work on the theory of the sciences? Thirdly, if we do not succeed in letting the student assume real responsibility within society, the group for whom the university exists will remain on the fringes of society. For the Christian university this has the danger that the larger number of its members will for ever be excluded from the closed community of the "saints". In the fourth place, I find it encouraging that Professor Viljoen should feel that authority should be relegated to the level where it can function most effectively. It would be really encouraging for the majority of members of the university (who are at present excluded from the processes of decision-making) if the highest body involved in decision-making had the responsibility of reporting fully, so that dubious decisions could also be referred back to them for reconsideration.

As far as the community spirit at the university is concerned: we are a Christian university, after all, so why don't we pray together at least once a week?

University Didactics

It remains enigmatic why it should take us so long to notice obvious truths – it is equally enigmatic that we should take so long to respond to these truths. It took the university all the centuries from the Middle Ages until the eighteenth century to realize that university teachers needed training in teaching techniques. Now, one and three-quarters of a century later, Professor Preller has to state that very little research has as yet been done in this field.

Professor Preller points out the encyclopaedic place and content of didactics and eventually also of tertiary didactics, science and

techniques. There is relevance in the fact that he ties tertiary didactics to a consideration of the nature of the university. He also stresses the interdisciplinary nature of tertiary didactics. He further pleads that consideration of tertiary didactics should be the concern of the entire university.

It is far too seldom seen and realized that, because the university is a human institution, its nature should be found in its task. A university is a society with a very specific and special task. The unity of the direction of the university is implicit in this. Whoever has come to grasp the fact that the university has as its central task the training of potential scholars will no longer have to search for the link between research and teaching. A student, as a potential practitioner of science, will have to participate in the research going on, and research must therefore be directed towards this purpose. This supports Professor Preller's contention that whoever analyses the nature of the university correctly will be rewarded with insight into what the principle underlying tertiary didactics should be. We should be careful not to become too pretentious at this point, as Professor Viljoen has reminded us of the fact that the universities are not the only institutions offering tertiary education. These other institutions are also supposed to function within the framework of tertiary education. Because most of these are professionally slanted, we might learn much from them as far as the practical training of the student is concerned.

The interdisciplinary nature attributed to tertiary didactics by Professor Preller has the encouraging implication that the many faceted creature, man, may be approached from more than one angle in any particular study. Training models established in this fashion may finally contribute meaningfully towards developing a student as a scientist. The student is, after all, a complete human being even though only one facet of his entirety may be actively involved in the training process. Professor Preller's approach is an attempt to balance tertiary didactics between philosophical grounding and technical skill. This approach, this inte-

grated vision, can be of great significance in our efforts to establish integrated training programmes at the university.

Reflection on tertiary didactics should not be restricted to the department devoted to it at the university. This is not only because tertiary didactics has an interdisciplinary nature, but because training in the sciences differs from department to department. The philosopher, the historian and the mathematician do not have laboratories – the physicist does. For this reason each group of subjects should give rise to vivid reflection on this matter. In this reflection on the Christian nature of the didactics of the subject, the same integral character that Professor Preller claims for the subject in general should be preserved. A philosophical theory of science should be just as important as a psychological theory of science, or the uses of technological training aids. And not least important is the fact that the results of these reflections should be reported in some way to the researchers within the department of tertiary didactics. I hope that this will soon give rise to two conclusions: Firstly that the system in which the lecturer is a talking book and the student a passive tape recorder will be rejected. Secondly that university research topics should be determined by teaching and training needs.

Once we have brought this integral effort in teaching methods into being, we might easily succumb to the temptation of making the university a place where students can be guided towards full maturity. The university is not *in loco parentis*. Scientific training should involve man in his entirety. The cultivation of honesty in scientific endeavour should inculcate honesty in other spheres as well. The fact that the sexes mingle on the basis of being colleagues in science contributes to the normal development of relationships between the sexes. This happens incidentally – the university is not primarily intended to teach people to be honest in their income tax returns and to have constructive relationships with other people.

University and society

Professor W.P. Esterhuyse unravels the relationship between the academic corps and society by means of an analysis of two phenomena: the scientification of society and the socializing of science. These two phenomena constitute an increasing interdependence between the academic corps and society. This interdependence takes on form in the political uses and abuses of science, and the demand on the scientist to justify himself in the eyes of society and make himself intelligible to society. It also leads to the tendency to have politically instigated policy decisions as far as the development of the sciences is concerned. In future the meaning of the university lies in a moral preparedness to choose between as yet unrealized technical possibilities.

The most pressing part of the problems of the contemporary university is perhaps to be found in this very ethical futurological aspect. The university is in the powerful position of shaping the thoughts of an age group that is particularly receptive and susceptible to impressions, and irresponsible behaviour on the part of the university is inevitably only going to show its malevolent influence after twenty years or so. On the other hand the university is in a peculiarly helpless situation, since the people who make available the money to finance research demand a hand in the decisions involving the nature and type of the research to be undertaken. In this way the state, the commercial sector and professional groups obtain unheard-of power over the universities as time goes on. This is a real threat to the critical function of the university and to the preparation mentioned by Professor Esterhuyse.

The University will only be able to safeguard its autonomy if it (1) talks meaningfully to the donors, the state and the colleges for professional training, so that a clear formulation of mutual expectations can be arrived at; (2) sees to it that university training remains *relevant* even though it might not be specifically

directed at professional training and (3) clearly understands that the unity of science and life descends from God – and that the coherence sought by the scientist will be found only if the scientist keeps to this fundamental law in his practice of science.

The freedom of the university has never been entirely safe from threats. One can therefore expect of the future that this freedom will not be entirely safe, but will only change in degree. Some universities will join the establishment while others will rebel against it. The Christian university will feel itself to be more and more isolated in this context because it cannot be defined in opposition to the world. The Christian university does have sympathy with the *liberalistic* struggle for the freedom of the university, as well as for the *socialistic* effort to make the university more involved with society, but is not able to follow the golden mean, because Christianity is no mere golden mean between opposing poles but rather the narrow, lonely and totally different way of submission.

The Christian university finds itself confronted with a number of problems involving its conscience. These emerged from the discussion.

(a) Do the technically detailed subjects so often studied at post-graduate level really fit in with the real nature of the university, which should give an overview and perspective?

(b) Does not the exaggerated stress on sport and recreation which is seen as part of the function of the university rather negate the idea of sovereignty which at a Christian university should be accorded to everybody, especially as far as their spending of their free time is concerned?

(c) How can we justify the fact that discussion of dissertations and theses is relegated to secrecy, so that there can be no possibility of defence and/or appeal or even interdisciplinary criticism?

(d) Have we really reflected seriously on the implications that the fundamental tenets of the university pose as regards the structure of authority and didactics? The formal setup and spatial orientation at our university do not exactly subscribe to our being Christian – no more than any other university, in fact.

(e) Are we really fully involved in the agonizing problems facing us in these times? Are we being relevant? If this were so, why should it be so difficult to find a few periods on the timetable which could be devoted to serious reflection? Why cannot a course on the fundamental theory of knowledge be instituted as a full two-year course?

(f) Would one not be justified in thinking that the community character should be much stronger at a Christian university? Why would it seem that this university is unable to nurture a living community as a result of its size, the fragmentation of its activities, the establishment of authority, didactic assumptions and especially the lack of enthusiasm for community reflection on the meaning of the term “Christian university”?

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