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The Universities and Religious Studies

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Recently in Canada, several universities have established or extended departments of Religious Studies. In this article, the author explores the academic, rather than the theological, arguments in favour of such a process.

THE history of the relations between the University and the Church is long and intimate. Not only did the earliest Universities spring from the Church's concern for learning and the training of the young, but even today the character of the universities of the Western world is inexplicable without reference to the Christian Church. Innumerable ideas and forms in University thought and practice testify to the connection. The division of the University into different faculties, the organization of lectures, the system of examinations and the methods of conferring degrees, as well as such matters as academic dress, demonstrate the long tradition of associations by which History has linked the Church and the University together.

More profoundly, both the University and the Church have shared a common belief in the importance of the pursuit of truth and learning for their own sakes. This is as true in the earliest universities, founded under the Church's auspices, as in the newer foundations, sponsored by secular authorities. The resolute determination to defend and maintain freedom of enquiry and of teaching now unites all the universities of the Western World. Because of the particular importance of the University in modern society, it would seem especially necessary that these ideals should be an accepted and inherent part of the university life, and that the University should actively sponsor their recognition and dissemination. Despite the enormous pressure from added academic disciplines, and from ever larger enrolments, the University would be failing in its task if it were not concerned for the maintenance of the spiritual values it has inherited.

For these reasons, both historical and ideological, it is fitting that, as part of its wider responsibility for the appropriation, improvement and transmission of our intellectual and cultural heritage, the University should cherish its own Christian background and origins, caring as much for the ideas upon which it depends as for the buildings which enfold them. Ways and means should be found and encouraged for making the University aware of its own tradition and its *raison d'être*. Furthermore, the University has another entirely proper function, which is to bring alive for its members their own traditions. And since the students of Canadian universities are in the main brought up in the Judaic-Hellenistic-Christian traditions, the

University should seek to bring alive these traditions, and to give students a fuller awareness of the great inheritance into which they have entered.

For its part, the Church, as we were recently reminded in a report to the Canadian Council of Churches, "has an essential contribution to make to the undergirding of the intellectual life of the University. It will uphold the integrity of the University, its freedom to fulfil its own function, and its duty to contribute towards the building of a responsible and just social order. It will seek to contribute to the growth of those truly human relations in the University which are essential for the health and wholeness of any community."

In the early universities, no subject was held more deserving of study than that of God's dealings with Man, and for that reason they made theology the queen of sciences. If, in this secular age, other disciplines appear to take pre-eminence, this does not rule out the validity of the study of this part of man's thought and experience. Indeed, the twentieth century has seen a remarkable growth of discoveries and research in the field of Religious Studies, which has added greatly to the sum of human thought and knowledge, and which has been largely sponsored by universities. The academic reputation of such men as Schweitzer, Barth, Niebuhr, Buber, Tillich, Dodd, Aulen or Gilson, is world-wide. It may well be claimed, therefore, that a department of Religious Studies could offer a course of studies as deep and as penetrating as any other in the university. Such a department would be able to attract students beyond the undergraduate level, for there is a growing demand among graduate students for courses in Religious Studies to complement and complete their work in related fields, such as history, psychology or education. Furthermore, Extension Departments have found that there is a substantial enrolment in the field of Religious Studies, arising out of interest sparked by such events as the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Again, it may be pointed out that there is a serious lack of advanced study and research in Religious Studies throughout English-speaking Canada. It is surely not too much to claim that if this branch of learning were given a larger place in university curricula, and accorded a larger share of academic resources, notable contributions could be made.

In the past, difficulty has been experienced in drawing up syllabi for undergraduate courses, which, while giving a worth-while content, will not fall into the danger of stressing the contribution too strongly of any one denomination or faith. Yet it would appear that many universities have been able to solve this problem, by stressing the academic rather than the apologetic nature of such courses. The more detailed the course, the less likelihood there is of misunderstanding.

From the wider point of view of the desirability of strengthening the awareness of our spiritual inheritance, it should be stressed how important, often how crucial, is the experience of students while at University. It cannot be claimed that students come to the University with mature understanding of their faith, partly because of their own immaturity, partly

because of inadequate instruction. In this situation, the University should encourage or make available the facilities by which students may be shown the possibility of acquiring an intellectually mature understanding of their faith. This is a peculiar responsibility within the University because this is the place where students sometimes attempt to put their faith in a watertight compartment far removed from all intellectual activities, or drift into a state of indifference where religion loses its significance, or live in a state of unresolved tension and despair. To guard against such dangers, and, perhaps more importantly, to make adequate provision for the moral and mental equipment of the whole man, universities should strive to be places where men and women can find provision for such needs. If there is to be growth in the character as well as in the minds of students, then universities must be places where opportunities and facilities for growth exist. For example, universities should encourage the visit of important speakers to talk on subjects of religious interest, as they do for speakers on political or academic topics.

Above all, it is necessary that the University be a place where ultimate questions are taken seriously. What might be described as the prophetic function of the University should not be forgotten. Like the Church, the University has a responsibility to remind its members and its community of the values for which it stands. It can hardly do this unless the public discussion of such ideas is encouraged.

Rightly or wrongly, members of the academic community are apt to assess the importance of things by the amount of intellectual effort put into them. If the University does not consider Religious Studies intellectually important enough to be given a significant place on the academic scene, then there will always remain suspicions of the unintellectual or even anti-intellectual nature of religious belief. It is necessary to show the meaningfulness of spiritual values in terms which the academic community will take seriously, by demonstrating the validity of academic techniques in this field, and through them, the possibility of being both intellectually mature and a believer in religious faith. A department of Religious Studies, by its very existence, can do a great deal to show that religion is a matter, not merely of the emotions, but of the mind. A University ought to be particularly careful to take measures to prevent the growth of the assumption that religion is out-of-date and a matter to be discarded by the enlightened rationalism of modern intellectuals. No better way exists to prevent this than by the intellectual witness of a department of Religious Studies.

Objections will of course be raised. First, it will be argued that the University should not encourage the propagation of particular faiths. This objection may be refuted both by theory and practice. It should be carefully pointed out that the University does not teach Christianity because it is true; the truth of the Christian faith is a proposition to which the University is not in any way committed. The University seeks to enlighten the mind, not to influence the will of the student. It is here merely concerned to study an

area of experience and thought in man's life. Its jealous guardianship of the principle of free enquiry further protects it from teaching or reaching preconceived conclusions.

It may further be objected that such departments of Religious Studies would tend to become merely vocational training schools for the clergy. Such a development would be unwelcome from the points of view both of the Church and of the University. Theological colleges, of necessity, must stress practicality of training, and the individual nature and contribution of their own denomination. Universities should stress the academic approach to, and universal interest of, Religious Studies. Again, in other universities, it has been found that students have taken courses in Religious Studies, who would not be likely to make use of them professionally; for example, in Nottingham University, during the last year, of the thirty-two students reading Honours Theology, seventeen were women.

Finally, there is the question, admittedly difficult, of the personnel for such a department. While in theory it might be desirable to find persons who could teach Religious Studies with complete intellectual objectivity, yet this does not seem practicable. Religion is one of the subjects which cannot be fully comprehended from the outside, and therefore for reasons of academic competence, the possible inference of teaching being inclined to favour one or other denomination should be accepted. So long as the University retains control over the appointments of its own faculty members, and is persuaded of their academic qualifications, this difficulty can surely be resolved, as indeed it already has been at many universities.

The University is the place where the future leaders of society are trained. It may be claimed that a larger and richer concern for the mental and moral equipment of our students will in time be reflected in our society. The University has always maintained that the techniques of teaching and research are its proper methods, through which it contributes to the welfare of society. If such methods could be extended, through the instrumentality of departments of Religious Studies, to make society more aware of its inheritance, to examine the values and ideologies of the day, and to transmit the benefits of rigorous study and research, then Universities could play a still greater part in fashioning the intellectual and moral climate of the country.