

THE PROBLEM OF THE UNIVERSITY

LOVE of learning, or learning itself? Culture, or the acquisition of specialized knowledge? This is the great problem which faces every university in the modern age. Some, indeed, claim to have solved it to their own satisfaction. Others are still grappling with it.

The problem has been created by the passage of time and the opening up of fresh fields of thought and knowledge. Applying equally to both the old and the new worlds, it is of universal importance, inasmuch that on the solution of it depends the future, not merely of our educational systems, but of our civilization itself.

The university was essentially an invention of the Middle Ages, existing for one definite purpose. First and foremost it was a cultural institution; the acquisition of mere knowledge, as such, was of secondary and almost negligible importance. Colleges, founded under the auspices of the Church, grew up with the one idea of turning out cultured men, scholars in the real sense of the word.

To understand the present problem it is necessary to have a clear conception of these early universities. In the first place they existed for the benefit of the middle classes, who could not otherwise have acquired the culture necessary to equip them for the highest positions in the Church and the State. Without the universities culture would have been the prerogative of the wealthy—a state of affairs obviously contrary to the teaching of the Church.

Except for the Church's control over heresy, the medieval university was a free society. That this control was both necessary and effective was amply demonstrated in the case of John Wycliffe, founder of the Lollards. It is certainly not true, as many Protestant historians maintain, that the control of the universities by the Church was so rigid as to stultify their best work. The Church rightly insisted on orthodox thinking in religious matters, but no restrictions were placed in the way of pioneers in other fields of thought.

The subjects considered chiefly worthy of study by the

universities of the Middle Ages were Canon and Civil Law. The reason is not far to seek. All the early teaching was in the hands of Churchmen, and even after the Reformation the clerical tradition was carried on in the old-established colleges. The student was thus ensured of a thorough grounding in moral philosophy, and was far better equipped to face the world than the average undergraduate of to-day, whose learning lacks that solid foundation of morality which is so essential to the Christian life.

The highest form of this cultural education was seen in the great residential universities, and has survived, with certain modifications, at Oxford and Cambridge to this day. Students lived together in close proximity and harmony with themselves and with their tutors. Numbers in those days being comparatively small, the family system, as it might justly be called, presented no great difficulties of organization.

The Reformation brought about great changes in our university system. The dissolution of the monasteries struck at the financial stability of the colleges. No longer was it possible to cater for the middle classes—greatly reduced incomes did not permit it. The gaps thus created were filled by the upper classes, who could afford to pay for their education, and in a very short space of time the middle classes were completely ousted from the universities. This change, added to the stultification brought about by the numerous religious proscriptions of the post-Reformation era, resulted in the lethargy of the eighteenth century, when the teaching at the universities was not only poor in quality but was also lacking in quantity.

The Reformation was also responsible for a complete change in the curriculum and ideals of the universities. The Classics replaced Canon and Civil Law. Intellectual attainment was substituted for moral philosophy. Culture was still the predominant aim, but the conception of what constituted culture had altered. The religious aspect gradually disappeared; its basis was now to be the philosophy of the pagan age.

With the advent of politics into the intellectual arena, the

teaching of the universities became definitely immoral (in the real sense of the word). A knowledge of history was frequently necessary to enable a man to define his religious or political position with exactitude, and history became distorted to justify statements that were untrue. We thus get a tradition of history which, from its biased nature, is of little value, in so far as it presents only one side of the case.

It was not until the beginning of last century, when a university education became recognized as a suitable preparation for the Civil Services, that the universities recovered from their post-Reformation depression. Since then their progress has been phenomenal, due in no small measure to an epoch-making addition to the curriculum.

It is extremely doubtful if the university authorities, when they admitted Science as a subject of approved study, realized the millstone they were hanging round the necks of their successors. Science in its numerous branches had long been an unofficial subject of study, and some of the greatest scholars of the classical period had turned their attention to it with success. But the great strides made in this subject at the beginning of last century made it only a question of time before official recognition was given, and science took its place in the university curriculum.

Growing rapidly in importance, science soon outstripped all other subjects in practical value. Fresh universities sprang up, mainly concerned with the teaching of science, and with no pretence at culture. Culture, in fact, is impossible to combine with a specialized syllabus designed to impart the maximum amount of knowledge in the minimum of time. Accordingly the modern universities were able to dispense with the residential qualifications imposed by the old seats of learning, and were thus enabled to concentrate their whole energies on teaching. Larger classes becoming the order of the day, a new technique developed that tended still more to oust the cultural aspect.

How did the old universities react to the new movement? Essentially conservative in all things appertaining to education, they opposed the scientific desire for knowledge by every means in their power, giving way stubbornly and

grudgingly only when the weight of competition forced them to grant some additional concession.

"Science is opposed to culture." This was the early cry of the schoolmen, and to some extent they were right. Many aspects of science are definitely anti-cultural, and it is only by viewing the realm of science as a whole that its proper place in a scheme of cultural education can be assessed. This, unfortunately, the universities did not do—to their great discomfiture in after years.

Another factor in the problem, and one frequently lost sight of, is the modern system of primary and secondary education. The bad old days, when education was the prerogative of the wealthier classes, have gone, never to return. Education has been thrown open to all, and the whole system has been revolutionized as a result.

The working class child, possessed of a first class brain, and actuated by an insistent desire to get on in life, can enter the university to-day and compete with his wealthier brethren on favourable terms. Time is the vital factor in his case—the sooner he can obtain his degree, the sooner will he be able to support himself in the world. He has no time—in the majority of cases it is doubtful whether there is even the inclination—for cultural pursuits. The old leisurely method of cultural education has completely disappeared. The individual in search of culture finds himself stranded in the sluggish backwater of a swiftly moving stream.

What has been the reaction of the universities to these changed conditions? In the case of the modern universities, most of them came into being to meet the demand caused by the new conditions themselves. This applies to the universities of the Colonies and the United States as well as to those of our own country, which eliminated the cultural aspect from their curricula at their inception. But to the older universities of Europe the problem is real and vital. Are they to sacrifice the culture and tradition of centuries for what may (it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty) turn out to be a passing phase? Or stand firm by their traditions, and risk the avalanche that may envelop them?

To some extent Oxford and Cambridge have met the problem with a compromise. College accommodation being limited, they have accepted students who live in lodgings in the town. The authorities maintain, what is not true in effect, that they have the same control over students in lodgings as they have over those in college. The fact remains that some sacrifice of culture has been made.

The old cultural idea of the university remained until recent years in the Entrance Examinations, a knowledge of Latin and Greek being essential qualifications, without which no person could become a member of the university. But latterly this has been modified by the deletion of Greek, and the conditions of the examination itself have destroyed the last vestiges of culture it ever possessed. It is a rather curious fact that even the modern universities, with no pretence at a cultural ideal, also insist on this relic of classical times, which serves no useful purpose beyond keeping numbers within the limits of requirements of the university concerned!

As is only to be expected, the universities have always held leading places in our educational system, and have, by virtue of their general examinations, actually framed the curriculum of all our schools. The School Certificate and kindred examinations represent the last stand of the universities for a minimum amount of cultural instruction in the schools. Unfortunately they have themselves helped to destroy their ideal, by the continual lengthening of the syllabuses, with the result that the modern syllabus does not leave any time for culture—results are the only things that count in an examination, and can the teacher be blamed if he concentrates on cramming the growing mind with as much information as possible in the time at his disposal? The real meaning of this information, and how it is to be applied to life, is left for the pupil to discover for himself in after years!

Culture does not necessarily mean the accumulation of large quantities of uncorrelated knowledge. Any system of education that aims at being cultural must consider both sides of the question. The acquisition of a certain amount of knowledge may be, and is, important, but equally important

is the knowledge of how to use our leisure. Modern education makes no attempt to train the growing mind to use the time of leisure profitably—in fact, the student of to-day has no time left for mental leisure, so great is the demand and the necessity for the acquisition of more and still more knowledge. No provision is made for that wide reading which is so essential for a true conception of life.

This is the one great handicap that the university graduate has to overcome when he, or she, goes out into the world. The university man may have a far more extensive knowledge of his subject than his less fortunate brethren, but he lacks the experience necessary to apply it. Unfortunately his training has been such that he does not know how best to obtain this missing factor. Disillusioned, he finds he has to tread the bitter path of learning by experience—his years at the university have been wasted!

Contrast the self-educated man. He has learnt the essential facts of life at the age when he is most able to assimilate them. The specialized knowledge he has acquired in his leisure hours—often at considerable sacrifice to himself. But he has the foundations of culture. His learning is acquired because he wants it; the love of learning, and not learning for its own sake, has actuated him. He has learnt to use his leisure wisely, and because of this will always possess an advantage over the university man who does not know how to use his leisure. In the same way the hand-made article of industry will always be superior to the mass-production article of a machine.

Recent years have seen a growing dissatisfaction at the requirements of the school examinations, and business men, in particular, are demanding a school curriculum based on more practical lines. The solution would appear to be the realization, by the universities, that culture and the accumulation of specialized knowledge are things apart. A determined stand now will ensure at least some degree of culture to our children.

Simplification, and not extension, of syllabuses is the only way by which the genuine student can acquire the culture which is at present denied him. This step, entailing, as it

undoubtedly would, severe financial sacrifice to the universities themselves, would be a grand gesture to a world full of materialism and realism, and would give a fresh ideal to the thousands of weary souls who see only futility in life.

On the answer hangs the future of our civilization. The great civilizations of antiquity fell into ruin and decay when they neglected culture for materialism. Must we follow in their footsteps? Our civilization, potentially the greatest that the world has ever known, has reached the parting of the ways. Forgetful of the fact that culture has always been bound up with religion, the present laxity of genuine religious thought among the community has done much to foster the idea that culture is no longer necessary. Truth to tell, culture has been ousted by the cult of materialism. Idealism, the backbone of all culture, has been thrust to one side.

Whether this eclipse is to be temporary or permanent depends largely on the universities. They have a great burden to shoulder, but a great tradition to sustain them. They disseminated culture in a barbarous age, preserving it against all assaults. Can they meet the present challenge, which is one of brain and mind?

In one respect the universities are worse off to-day than they were in the Middle Ages—they lack the ideal that religion, as exemplified by the Catholic Church, used to give them. Religious thought at the modern university is in a state of chaos. It lacks co-ordination and unity. No attempt is made to link up education and religion. While admitting that a return to the old religious conditions of the universities is impossible, they could at least insist on a greater degree of religious instruction, based on fundamentals, and avoiding controverted dogma. Whatever the cost, the universities must regain those Christian principles and ideals on which our civilization is based.

Education without an ideal, without an aim. Whither can it lead? Too long the universities have been imbued with the spirit of the Church of England—the spirit of compromise. Now the time for compromise is past—a bold decision is necessary. Delay will simply mean the problem (already intensified by modern conditions of sex equality in educa-

tion) becoming so acute as to be incapable of solution.

The admission of girl students to the universities was, from the cultural point of view, a retrograde step. The average "undergradette" has no pretensions to culture; she ceases to be truly feminine; her outlook on life becomes hard and cynical. The consequences are far-reaching. More materialistic than the average youth of the same age, she creates a false impression on the mind of the undergraduate—an impression that he takes with him when he goes out into the world. Seldom do we find a young graduate with an idealistic conception of the opposite sex! To him, femininity has ceased to mean anything. Can we wonder, then, at the laxity of morals which exists among the younger members of the educated classes? When intellectual attainment is the only criterion, it is not surprising that the infinitely more important moral virtues are forced into the background.

While it is true to say that the devout Catholic is far better off than Protestant neighbours, it is a sad fact that many Catholics at all the universities lose the fine freshness of their Faith at the time when they need it most. This is more noticeable among the women than the men, but the conditions are the same for both sexes. Continual close contact with the forces of materialism dulls the idealism that the Faith alone can give, and this, combined with an almost complete divorce of university education from their religion, creates a state of mind that only the very strong can overcome.

The ideal solution, from a Catholic point of view, would be a Catholic University. This may sound fantastic and impracticable, but the time will come when we shall have to take the step, if we hope to triumph over the forces of decadence that even to-day are threatening to engulf the coming generation. The great struggle of the future, on the result of which the fate of our civilization will depend, is already defined; Catholicism *versus* Materialism. Admit this, and the need for a Catholic university becomes evident.

The world expects a higher standard from Catholics than from any other body. Here we have the chance of setting an example that a tired and jaded world will be only too

eager to copy. The masses are waiting for a definite lead. Since Protestantism has failed to provide education with an ideal, we must supply the deficiency. Courage of the highest order will be necessary, but the Faith that has nurtured and inspired men of courage in the past can still produce sons, and daughters too, capable of carrying out this great project.

The fate of civilization hangs in the balance. The time for compromise is past. Let us only admit, what is patently true, that Culture and the Catholic religion have always gone hand in hand, and our duty is clear. A bold decision is necessary, and the sooner it is taken, the sooner will the world be able to look ahead with equanimity to an era of real peace, based not on fear, but on the truest principles of culture and humanity.

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