

EDMUND OF ABINGDON¹

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Master, Fellows, Scholars and Friends of St Edmund's House:

It is customary on this annual occasion to delve into the scantily recorded life of St Edmund of Abingdon—in order to discover anachronistic references to the work of Newman or Newton upon which the speaker may hang his threadbare argument. In my own case the exploration did not, at first sight, augur well at all: I was indeed christened Edmund, but after the East Anglian Edmund, the patron saint of failed governors rather than of successful scholars; and perhaps even more ominously, one of Edmund of Abingdon's great quarrels was with my ancestor Maurice Fitzgerald, Justiciar of Ireland. However, as is so often so in such cases, my good wife came to my aid, for St Edmund's great academic contribution to Oxford, or so Roger Bacon assures us—was the introduction of the New Logic based on the Toledo Translation: in other words, the rendering into Latin of the Arabic versions of the Greek masters made in Cordoba by scholars such as Averroes, while in Europe only the dim Hibernian candle flickered fitfully in the night.

However, although I shall return to St Edmund's tenuous connexion with Islam at the end of this Address—for having hung one's garment on a somewhat insecure peg one must presumably take it off before it brings the whole wall down with it—I think it would be more useful to pursue the main practical concern of St Edmund's life: the relationship between Church, State and University. Specifically, I would like to draw some parallels between the role of Church and University in society in order to derive some implications for the future role of this College. After spending a number of years at Oxford teaching the New Logic, advancing scholarship and training the bureaucracy of the Church (and thus the civil service of government) Edmund was made Archbishop of Canterbury in 1233. But the relationship between Church and State was already under severe strain as the crown groped towards the establishment of the relative autonomy of the State from both Church and nobility and thus towards its own

¹ Address on the occasion of St Edmund's Feast at St Edmund's House, Cambridge.

role as the midwife of the transition from a feudal to a capitalist society, a task eventually fulfilled by the Tudor subjection of both religion and aristocracy to the State. In consequence, Edmund Rich was not the first choice of Henry III; on the contrary he was imposed by Rome as a figure who would stand for the Church's continued transnational independence from the nation state. Once in office, he came to regard the social commitment of the Church as being of paramount importance, despite his previously 'unworldly' track record: Edmund not only acted for the Crown in order to avert war on the Welsh Marches, he was also involved in serious disputes with the royal courts about their negation of canon law.

The relationship between Church and State in British history closely parallels those between University and State at a number of points. As we have noted, the medieval Church was the major source of civil servants for the government apparatus, of particular importance when the state itself was undergoing a major change of function. Half a millenium later, this was to become the task taken up by the universities—the provision of a new type of civil servant to administer an empire and later a welfare state. Similarly, as natural science replaced theology as the main field of intellectual endeavour in a bourgeois rather than feudal ideology, the University rather than the Church became guardian of the Holy Grail, the custody of which necessarily implies a certain conflict with any more directly social functions. Much more difficult than sustaining 'pure' research and teaching functions (or theological and pastoral ones, as the case may be) in the face of an ambiguous relationship with the state, made all the more opaque by government funding, is the maintenance of a truly critical role. It is here that in Britain—and indeed the Western World as a whole—one might venture to say that both Church and University have been at their weakest. In the apparently laudable effort to preserve their so-called 'independence' within the strains of late capitalism, they have avoided official criticism; and by abandoning their prophetic role in a time of evident social crisis are possibly in danger of losing the moral authority that permits other intellectual activities to be carried on at all. In this context, it is curious that in Britain at least it is the Church that is showing signs of coming to terms with this problem more rapidly than the University. This is not to say, of course, that individual academics have not been outspoken in their critiques of society—just as individual churchmen have been—but rather to underline the lack of intervention in the great debate of our age by the University as an institution.

This point can perhaps be seen that much more clearly in the context of the Third World— and all the more so in that of Latin America (it is a great sorrow to me that all my searching through

the *Life* by Matthew Paris reveals no Edmundian connexion with the New World, despite its previous discovery by Irish clerics), where the roles of University and Church under oppression have become strikingly similar and their fates often intertwined. Both have been involved in the critique of society and the state—particularly of the inequitable distribution of wealth and power—as local elites and multinational enterprise force an ever-increasing exploitation of the poor in order to maintain profits in a stagnating economy, and military intervention in order to contain the pressures for reform. This cohesion and common sense of prophetic mission has led to financial, legal and frequently physical harassment—the military occupation of church and campus, and the police torture of priests and professors, was almost unheard of a decade ago. This in turn has led to a paradoxical strengthening of the teaching and pastoral roles in an important way, precisely because both institutions are recognised as immediately relevant by the broader strata of society and have managed to become—or at least approach the status of—truly popular institutions. As part of this experience, crypts and lecture halls have become the fora for political and social debate precisely because there is no freedom to do so in the streets outside. Although it is undoubtedly true that the opening of matriculation to all comers and the penetration of politics have led to administrative chaos and a lowering of technical standards of learning in the universities—just as authority and observance have become weakened in the Church—it has also brought these two institutions alive in a way previously unknown. And this intensely practical experience has not been without its theoretical consequences too: the emergence of the so-called ‘theology of liberation’ is a good example. Thus out of the fire a phoenix may yet arise.

Returning to this side of the Atlantic, and walking up Mount Pleasant, we might well ask what the implications of my argument are for St Edmund’s House. No, I am not about to propose a revolutionary admissions policy, although it should be realised that the Tutorial Committee has been quite imaginative in this respect. Rather, I would like to suggest that the College, in its deliberations about its own future, take into account not only its evident teaching and research record but also its potential as a prophetic critic. Now I am not asking that the College take on the whole world, and still less that we preach barefoot in the Fens, but rather that as a body we should attempt to work towards a sustained critique of the current and future nature of the inter-relationship between Church, University and State, and thus hopefully contribute (albeit in a modest fashion) to the revival of purpose in both Church and University. The particular form that this revival has taken in Latin America would not be apposite here, of course, but the same spirit of questioning orthodox opinion might well be applied to

the philosophy of science or pastoral theology. From these bases, a critique might extend into a consideration of the moral basis of a technological society on the one hand, and the role of the Church in class conflict on the other. But the precise direction of such endeavours is not the key issue: the important thing is that the role should be a prophetic one: prophetic in the biblical sense of acting as a constant thorn in the flesh of orthodox opinion, reminding men of the fundamental truths to which they pay little more than lip service, and calling them to a renewal of their efforts.

This may seem an ambitious aim, perhaps even slightly absurd. But all I am suggesting is that this thought should be in our minds when we get down to the practical business of framing future policy for the College, and of a christian college this should not be too much to ask.

With this thought in mind, then, we can return to the good Saint Edmund, who is dying in Burgundian exile. Retracing with him his intellectual formation, as he probably did that November in 1240, we can reach back through the rebirth of the medieval university to Islam again, reminding ourselves that with the Moslems, along with the Jews, we are all 'People of the Book'. Perhaps the greatest *sura* of all in the Koran, the equivalent of the Lord's Prayer that we are about to recite, is the First; here is Burton's rendering of it:

Bismilaji 'rajmani 'rajim

(in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate)

Praise be to God, who the three worlds made,
The Merciful, the Compassionate,
The King of the Day of Fate,
Thee alone do we worship, of thee alone do we ask aid,
Guide us on the path that is straight—
The path of those on whom thy love is great,
Not on whom is hate,
Nor they that deviate,
Amen.

This should remind us that despite all our pretensions to academic progress, the only true knowledge is the knowledge of God. And there is no better way to sum this up than in the deathbed prayer of our scholarly patron saint:

Domine, Tu mihi testis es quod non quesivi in terra nisi Te.

(Lord, bear witness that I have sought nothing else on earth
but You.)