

THE PLACE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN THE CHURCH

BEFORE the end of the twelfth century when the Universities came into existence, the intellectual life of Europe was centred in the monasteries. It was not an intellectual life of great vigour, breadth or profundity, for the Benedictine *lectio* was concerned more with devotion than with scholarship. Yet it served to keep at bay the barbarism and ignorance that threatened to engulf the Church, and contrived to make in its multiplication of manuscripts a small but precious contribution to Christian civilisation. It was insufficient, however, for the educational needs of the pastoral clergy, and for that reason the Church found herself obliged to erect Cathedral schools as training grounds for her own ministers. The immediate effect of this policy was to lessen the prestige of the monasteries as intellectual centres: and this, added to the changing economic conditions and the increasing prosperity of the towns, resulted in the final emergence of the Cathedral schools as the focal points of culture. From these schools, founded by Bishops and designed mainly as seminaries for their clergy, the universities took their rise.

Of all these Paris was by far the most celebrated. Whereas at Orleans, Bologna, Salerno and Toledo, studies were almost exclusively confined to arts, or law, or medicine or physics, at Paris no specialisation was attempted. Roman law and Canon law, Aristotle and Peter Lombard, the new Euclid and the new Ptolemy, the Greek and Arabic physicians, all these had their masters and their students. And as strict supervision over studies and scholars was very difficult, all this feverish intellectual activity, all this jostling of humanists, jurists and theologians, could only lead to extravagance and disorder. John de Hauteville has described in his *Architrenius* the resulting chaos, violence and squalor of student life in Paris. New movements in theology, scripture and law were undoubtedly initiated under pressure of this lively ferment, but without the Church's full control of both organisation and administration, they were doomed to issue in rationalism and infidelity. The new dialectic was having a disintegrating effect on men's minds, and unless it were soon harnessed to a sound philosophy, it might undermine the whole fabric of medieval civilisation. Already, at the end of the twelfth century, Stephen of Tournai was complaining that all the street corners and public squares were noisy with the arguments of students 'dissecting the indivisible Trinity.' The dangerous possibilities of this state of affairs was quickly grasped by Innocent III. and, by timely legislation, university

studies were placed on a sound educational basis. At the opening of the thirteenth century, therefore, the organisation and administration of university life was under the complete control of the Church.

What did the universities gain by this control? They gained more financial support, ample privileges, immunity from secular interference, and a wider sphere of influence. They gained by the establishment of colleges and hospices, by the foundation of libraries, by the accession of new masters and scholars, and particularly by their association with the new orders of Dominicans and Franciscans. The establishment of the Preachers at Toulouse had shown what results their powerful apologetic could produce on a stubborn heretical sect. The new avenues of approach to philosophy and theology, the more scientific analysis of problems, and clearer methods of exposition showed their immense contribution to University scholarship. But beyond this, they brought an atmosphere of prayer and discipline which had a sobering effect on the impressionable secular scholars.

What the Church gained was far greater still. Philosophy, for instance, which, without the guidance of religious minded men might have developed into unmitigated rationalism, became, under the direction of geniuses like Saints Thomas and Bonaventure, a potent weapon for the defence of Christian theology. Canon Law, which before the sifting and tabulating by Gratian, had been a mass of texts and conflicting authorities, now became a means of strengthening the discipline of the Church, and of confirming ecclesiastical authority. Scripture, which had long been fettered by the vagaries of allegorical interpretation, gained new power through the application to its texts of Aristotelian principles. And the Friars, taking up the unfinished labours of Origen and Jerome, consulted the original Hebrew scriptures, corrected the errors of the Latin versions, drew up biblical concordances and poured out commentaries in amazing numbers. Dogma, too, received attention. The colossal figure of Augustine had dominated for centuries the field of theology, to the complete paralysis of thought and enquiry. Too long had theological writings been mere compilations from the works of earlier Fathers. But under the new intellectual stimulus, which produced thinkers instead of readers, enquirers instead of copyists prodigious progress was made. The *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, which had defined the limits of theological discussion, yielded to new and original *Summae*, the best of which was produced by Saint Thomas, the most complete, the most original and the most profound philosophical and theological system that Christian thought has ever elaborated.

Corresponding to these advances in philosophy and theology was the increasing interest in Apologetics. By their contact with Moors

and Jews in Spain and the admission of converted Jews into their own ranks, the Dominicans had been led to establish schools of Oriental languages and literature at Barcelona, Murcia, Valencia and even at Tunis. Hebrew, Arabic and Chaldaic were studied side by side with the Talmud and the Koran; and apologetic works, of which the *Pugio Fidei* was the finest example, gave proof of the worth and the extent of their investigations. The success of these schools already noticed by Raymond Lull and the Franciscans, attracted the attention of the church authorities; and in 1311, at the Council of Vienne, the establishment of chairs of Oriental languages in university centres was decreed.

In spite of this prodigious intellectual activity, freedom of enquiry and expression of criticism, not a single heresy arose during this period. Here and there, an adventurous experimenter stepped over the narrow limits of orthodoxy, but there was no split in Christendom, such as the Church had known in the past and was to experience so painfully in the future. On the whole then both the Universities and the Church had profited by their association.

But did this cultivation of the intellect dry up the fountains of spirituality? It is evident that it did not. Outside the universities there was a remarkable flowering of mysticism, particularly among the Franciscans. Within the schools were to be found not only such saints as St. Albert, St. Thomas, St. Bonaventure and St. Yves, but also such outstanding mystics as Eckhart, Suso, Ruysbroeck and Richard Rolle, with many others who fostered in their writings, not a frigid rational approach to God, but a warm and loving attachment to the Saviour. This was the period of the *Stabat Mater* and the *Lode* of Jacopone da Todi, of the *Lauda Sion*, *Pange Lingua*, and other great dogmatic poems: and whether or not we accept the attribution of the *Adoro Te* to St. Thomas also, we must recognise in its author a poet bred in the schools, who was at once a scholar and a man of God. Of devotions so called, the establishment of the feast of Corpus Christi by Hugh of St. Cher, the cult of the Immaculate Conception by Scotus and the English scholars, and the growing vernacular literature on the wounds of Christ, provide sufficient evidence. The universities, then, were not a barren intellectual waste, but a fertile soil of scholarship and spirituality.

The presence of large numbers of learned and religious men encouraged the Popes to draw upon them increasingly for the government of the Church and for the direction of missionary enterprises. The Franciscan Dreux de Provins, a master of Paris, was despatched to Rumania and Dalmatia: Raymond Lull, likewise a master, to Africa and Armenia, Tartary and the frontiers of India; Dominicans

also played their part in Greenland, Hungary, Armenia and the Balkans. Never had the Church known such expansion and evangelisation.

But the immensity of the effort and the achievement of the universities in the thirteenth century was bound, in the end to defeat itself. Apart from the discouragement such phenomenal success would cause to a later generation the state of affairs of which St. Bonaventure's *Reductio artium liberalium ad Theologiam* was a symptom, could not fail to produce a violent reaction. This came, naturally enough, from the students of Roman Law.

Few avocations apart from diplomacy, chancery clerkships and teaching were open at this period to laymen. Only Roman law could open up immense possibilities for careerists. Hence, civilians sedulously cultivated it, and set themselves to oppose the domination of the theologians. The clerics, who during an earlier period had filled the posts of lawyers to kings, were conscious that the temporal was subordinate to the spiritual authority, and were always prepared to keep the power and ambition of the kings within bounds. But the new secular lawyers, holding the axiom that 'The Emperor is sole author and interpreter of the law within his kingdom,' were bent rather on flattering the absolutism of the monarchs. They encouraged rulers not only to secure unlimited authority over their rightful subjects, but also to gain control of ecclesiastical organisations, including universities: for they were not blind to the influence that centres of learning could exercise on public opinion. The exorbitant demands made on Boniface VIII. by Philip le Bel indicate that the jurists had already attained their aim. The growing spirit of nationalism and the waning power of the papacy, resulting in the Western Schism, are due to the spread of Gallican principles by the universities. The doctrine of the superiority of the council over the Pope, enunciated by William of Ockham and Marsilius of Padua, owed its general acceptance to the Rector of Paris University, and received its final confirmation, also through the universities, at Constance and Basle. For a time, it looked as if the universities would gain by their support of the temporal rulers, but the sequel was to show that they had everything to lose.

Whilst the Popes were pressing forward schemes for the amelioration of studies and encouraging students to attend the universities, the kings and lawyers were creating legislation to limit, if not to destroy, the papal power to grant benefices. In England and elsewhere this legislation triumphed: but experience soon proved that it operated to the depression of learning and the deterioration of the Universities. Oxford and Cambridge, for instance, accepted the king's

decision for a time : but in 1399 they presented a petition to Convocation in which they pointed out that, as long as the Popes were permitted to bestow benefices by provision, the preference had always been given to men of talent and industry, and this had resulted in quickened application and an increased number of students. But, since the passing of the *Statute of Provisors*, the universities had been neglected by the patrons of livings, the students had fallen off in numbers, and the schools were almost deserted. Not till sixteen years later did the House of Commons realise that a continuance of this suicidal policy would result in the complete destruction of the universities, and therefore it repealed the Act.

The steady decline in studies and religion, that marked the century of Wicliff, was attributed by many to the antiquated methods and outworn formulas of the schoolmen : and a movement was set on foot to change the whole educational system which the Church had founded and fostered.

As the fifteenth century advanced, and the spirit of the Renaissance gathered strength, the Humanists came more and more into conflict with the scholastic theologians. Had they been contented with advocating a return to classical studies, many clashes might have been avoided. But when they began to mingle Platonism with the Gospel and Cabalistic teachings with Catholic dogma, philosophers, and theologians alike were aroused to opposition. Hence the first movements of the renaissance, particularly in Italy and Germany, were encouraged, not by the universities, but by private academies, supported by powerful patrons, such as the Popes, the Medici and the Visconti.

It was in Germany that the final assault was made on the Scholastic system : and the result was decisive. Basle, Erfurt and Heidelberg had welcomed the humanists, and had even modified their curriculum in order to accomodate the new educational system. But, at Cologne, the humanists met with a blank refusal. Since Cologne had allied itself with Pfeffercorn against Reuchlin in urging the destruction of Talmudic literature, occasion was taken by Rubeanus and Von Hutten, two celebrated humanists, to attack both the University and the scholastic system in the *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum*. Its caricatures of scholastics and their outmoded methods, the ridicule it drew on theologians from both students and patrons of learning, together with its coarseness and vulgarity made a rejoinder impossible; and as result, a popular victory lay with the humanists. Scholasticism was everywhere discredited; and the Church began to lose her hold on the universities.

After the Council of Trent, when the Church practically withdrew

all her students from the universities into the newly established seminaries, the divorce between theology and philosophy became complete. This led to a wholesale breakdown in culture; and, besides the rise of scepticism, rationalism and the rejection of the supernatural, the spread of Gallicanism and Febronianism, there followed, too, a corresponding disintegration in the arts. Here and there, the Jesuits fought a brilliant rearguard action, but it was doomed to failure; and with their suppression and the advent of the French Revolution all hope of a recovery was lost.

One remarkable experiment, however, remains to be mentioned. At Salamanca, during the years that saw a breakdown in the rest of Europe, Francis de Vittoria founded a new school of theology. Its success was immediate and immense. Its influence spread in ever-widening circles until it embraced not only philosophy, scripture and law, but also the arts, and even mystical theology. Amongst its students Salamanca could boast of the theologians Soto, Melchior Cano, Suarez and de Lugo, of the mystics of St. John of Avila, Peter of Alcantara, and Alonso de Orozca, besides Luis de Leon, mystic and lyric poet, and Calderon de la Barca, whose *autos sacramentales* are numbered among the classics of Spanish literature. It was a wonderfully encouraging experiment, and it showed both the capabilities of the scholastic system when given a fair chance, and the recuperative power of the Church.

So, roughly, we can see:—In the 13th century, the church in complete control; theology supreme; the universities exercising a beneficent influence. In the 14th, the revolt of the jurists; the secular power struggling for control; and the universities misusing their influence. In the 15th, the revolt of the humanists: powerful private interests gaining domination; the universities aloof and suspicious. In the 16th, both humanists and jurists joining forces to evict the Church from the universities altogether. As a result, we see a complete disintegration of culture, a consequent state of chaos, and immense religious upheavals.

In conclusion, it would appear that as long as the universities submitted to the guidance and authority of the Church, they perfectly fulfilled their function, which was, essentially, to provide rulers for the Church, counsellors for the Popes, and teachers for the faithful. But when they gave their allegiance to a power whose sole interest was, not scholarship and religion, but domination, they fell into excesses which had baneful effects on the whole of Christendom. Universities exist for the discovery and dissemination of truth. Any less worthy purpose destroys both themselves and those they serve.

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