

What is a University?

PETER MILWARD



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Foreword

Education should consist of a series of enchantments, each raising the individual to a higher level of awareness, understanding, and kinship with all living things.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

What is the essence of life? To serve others and do good.

ARISTOTLE

THIS BOOK – a meditation on the state of our souls and of our education – is written by a man who I am proud to call my mentor, friend and teacher. I first met Father Milward in the early 1990s in Tokyo, when I visited the Renaissance Centre at Sofia University. Since then I have been much inspired by his work and writings, too little known in the West.

As you will discover when you begin to read this book, he is a truly remarkable man. His charming innocence, universal compassion and thirst for true knowledge mark him out as a teacher in the great tradition of religious and philosophical sages who embrace the one universal truth. He is a giant among men, who truly deserves to be described as a Renaissance man, a friend to mankind and a bridge of reconciliation between cultures. It goes without saying that I was delighted and honoured when he asked me to write the Foreword to this book.

The world of knowledge and competence is in a constant state of flux. The same can be said for the universe of visions,

aspirations and dreams. Changes are occurring every day on a national and world scale – we are faced with economic globalisation, the revolutions in information technology and biotechnology, growing inequality and social exclusion (leading to a renewed struggle for citizens' rights), violence of all kinds, environmental pollution and climate change. All of these things are increasing the need for new knowledge and skills, for new scenarios for our global society. Love, courage, honesty, justice, spirituality, religion, altruism, vocation, creativity – life itself – are again becoming major issues.

In today's largely decadent, money-driven world, the teaching of virtue and building of character are no longer part of the curriculum at our universities. The pursuit of virtue has been replaced by moral neutrality – the idea that anything goes. For centuries it had been considered that universities were responsible for the moral and social development of students, and for bringing together diverse groups for the common good.

In the last few decades, however, and especially since the 1970s, a new generation of educational reformers has been intent on using places of learning, and in particular universities, to solve national and international economic problems. The economic justification for education – equipping students with marketable skills to help countries compete in a global, information-based workplace – has overwhelmed other historically important purposes of education.

The language of business management is now being applied to educational establishments: schools and universities are 'downsized' and 'restructured', and their staffing is 'outsourced'. But, if there is a shared national purpose for education, should it be oriented only towards enhancing this narrow vision of a country's economic success? Is everything public for sale? Should education be answerable only to the 'bottom line'? Are the interests of individuals and selective groups overwhelming the common good that the education system is meant to support?

I have been part of these changes and have witnessed their negative consequences for students and staff. An education system that has turned students into customers or clients,

pitted members of staff against each other, removed collegiality and turned classrooms into mass-production factories, financed by profits from the sale of alcohol, cigarettes, medical drugs and arms, has brought a bitter harvest and needs to be changed. Education has to be reunited with its roots in theology, philosophy and the virtues.

This treatment of students as customers, and courses as goods and services, disregards the truly important human values, and creates unhappy, purposeless and dysfunctional people who don't know who they are or where they are going. I should like to quote from the book I recently co-authored with the Rev Marcus Braybrooke:

From 1980 onwards, for the next twenty years, I taught economics in universities, enthusiastically demonstrating how economic theories provided answers to problems of all sorts. I got quite carried away by the beauty, the sophisticated elegance, of complicated mathematical models and theories. But gradually I started to have an empty feeling. I began to suspect that neo-liberal economics was an emperor with no clothes. What good were elegant theories which were unable to explain all the poverty, exclusion, racism, corruption, injustice and unhappiness that exist in the world?

I came to feel that my life as a lecturer was like a make-believe movie: sit and relax ... in the end models dreamt up by detached economists will sort out the world's ills! My classrooms were becoming unreal places. I began to ask fundamental questions of myself. Why did I never talk to my students about compassion, dignity, comradeship, solidarity, happiness, spirituality – about the meaning of life? We never debated the biggest questions. Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going?

I told them to create wealth, but I did not tell them for what reason. I told them about scarcity and competition, but not about abundance and co-operation. I told them about free trade, but not about fair trade; about GNP – Gross National Product – but not about GNH – Gross National Happiness. I told them about profit maximisation and cost minimisation, about the highest returns to the shareholders, but not about social consciousness, accountability to the community, sustainability and respect for creation and the creator. I did not tell them that, without humanity, economics is a house of cards built on shifting sands. Where was the economic theory that reflected my students' real lives? How could I carry on

believing in such an unreal world? I could not go on asking them to believe unbelievable theories in the name of economics.

Father Milward, in the chapter 'What is Religion?', puts the question, 'What ... has religion got to do with education?' A great deal, if not everything, he answers. I am delighted that he has highlighted this important but now rejected relationship. I leave you to read his wise words on this subject for yourself, but I would like to quote another passage from my co-authored book.

It was at this difficult time that I came to understand that I needed to bring spirituality, compassion, ethics and morality back into economics itself, to make this dismal science once again relevant to and concerned with the common good. It was now that I made the following discoveries, amongst others:

- Economics, from the time of Plato right through to Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, was as deeply concerned with issues of social justice, ethics and morality as it was with economic analysis. Most economics students today learn that Adam Smith was the 'father of modern economics' but not that he was also a moral philosopher. In 1759, sixteen years before his famous *Wealth of Nations*, he published *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which explored the self-interested nature of man and his ability nevertheless to make moral decisions based on factors other than selfishness. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith laid the early groundwork for economic analysis, but he embedded it in a broader discussion of social justice and the role of government. Students today know only of his analogy of the 'invisible hand' and refer to him as defending free markets. They ignore his insight that the pursuit of wealth should not take precedence over social and moral obligations, and his belief that a 'divine Being' gives us 'the greatest quantity of happiness'. They are taught that the free market as a 'way of life' appealed to Adam Smith but not that he distrusted the morality of the market as a morality for society at large. He neither envisioned nor prescribed a capitalist society, but rather a 'capitalist economy within society, a society held together by communities of non-capitalist and non-market morality'. That morality for Smith included neighbourly love, an obligation to practice justice, a norm of financial support for the government 'in proportion to [one's] revenue', and a tendency in human nature to derive pleasure from the good fortune and happiness of other people.

- The leading figure in the establishment of the American Economic Association (AEA) in 1885 was the progressive economist Richard T. Ely. He sought to combine economic theory with Christian ethics, especially the command to love one's neighbour (as did Adam Smith). He declared that the Church, the State and the individual must work together to fulfil the Kingdom of God on earth. Few economists or economics students today know much of this history: that, for example, twenty of the fifty founding members of the AEA were former or practising ministers. Ely himself was a leading member, in the 1880s, of the Social Gospel movement; he was better known to the American public in this capacity than as an economist. He believed that economics departments should be located in schools of theology because 'Christianity is primarily concerned with this world, and it is the mission of Christianity to bring to pass here a kingdom of righteousness.' As a 'religious subject', economics should provide the base for 'a never-ceasing attack on every wrong institution, until the earth becomes a new earth, and all its cities, cities of God.'

It is heartbreaking to realise that most students' own stated wish is to be engaged more fully with religion and spirituality but that this is ignored by university faculties. In a recent UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) study, researchers questioned 3,680 junior students from 46 colleges and universities across the United States about their religious commitment. While noting a high level of interest in spiritual matters among college students, the report concluded:

There is a sharp divide between students' interests and what happens in the classroom. More than half of the students say their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life. Similarly, nearly two-thirds say professors never encourage discussions of spiritual or religious matters... Nearly half (45%) report dissatisfaction with how their college experience has provided opportunities for religious/spiritual reflection.

Education is too important a field to be left to the adversarial politics of competing model-builders: all such models are limited and conditioned human constructions. A correct education system must be based on a metaphysics derived from a comprehensive and unifying vision rooted in theology, philosophy, ethics and spirituality.

There is an underlying unity between all branches of education and all aspects of learning and this unity needs to be reflected in an integrated, holistic and multi-disciplinary curriculum which does not draw artificial lines between different disciplines. Much of modern education is still based on a machine-age model of separate subject areas which encourages a fragmented view of learning. In the absence of a unifying spiritual perspective, inevitably little more than lip-service is paid to the need for cross-curricular links.

For all those searching for new perspectives on what education should and could be, Father Milward's book is a breath of fresh air, and essential reading which I can strongly recommend. He understands that, in days of spiritual hunger, education needs to do more than grope in the dark. It needs to point students to the light of the world.

KAMRAN MOFID

Coventry, November, 2005

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Introduction

THE IDEA of ‘university reform’ is very much in the air today. But before we speak about ‘reform’ for universities, it is surely necessary to go back to the ideal meaning of a ‘university’. This is something we have come to take for granted in the modern world. We all think we know what a university is, or what it should be, especially those of us who went to a university in our formative years. But what, I ask, do we really know about either the reality or the ideal of a university?

This is the question with which I begin this book; and I deal with it in two ways, which I present in two parts. First comes the more general question: what is a university? Then at each stage I ask particular questions about each aspect of university education, in an attempt to go back to the beginning, to the source and origin of each word that stands for this or that aspect. For it is necessary to ask question after question, like a little child taking its first lessons in language from its mother: ‘What is this?’ and ‘What is that?’ endlessly.

These are not merely adult questions of methodical doubt, in the manner of Descartes, who for this reason has come to stand at the head of modern philosophy. For myself I don’t want to doubt anything, least of all the value of university education, so long as it is really what it is said to be. I want to begin with a sense of wonder, according to the older ideal of Aristotle, who said that all philosophy springs out of just such a sense. It is a sense of wonder that opens our eyes to the world around us and elicits questions about the things we find in that world, in the spirit of a little child asking its mother. In this sense, we have to go back, like Wordsworth and Chesterton,

to the time of childhood, when all true education, truly universal education, begins.

And so I come to the second part of my discourse, when I look from the narrower world of 'university', in the human microcosm, to the wider world of everything outside, that in which we live and move and have our being, the divine macrocosm. Yet, though I speak of this wider world, I have perforce to remain within myself, microcosm as I am. Only, it is in relation to this outer world, which we neglect at our peril within the confines of the academic world, that the idea of a university comes both to reflect the reality of things and to look up to the ideal.

As I reflect on each aspect of this outer world, I may seem to be falling back on the particular department of 'philosophy' within what we think of as a university. But this is not so. It is a basic mistake of what we have come to think of as a university that philosophy is regarded as a 'department'. For philosophy cannot of its nature be special or departmental. It is universal, and all departments derive their meaning from it. As the mediaeval thinkers rightly maintained, philosophy is not one science among many. It is the queen of all sciences.

So now let me proceed to present the contents of this book, with the questions I propose to answer, however unsatisfactorily, one by one – according to the tested method of such great thinkers as Thomas Aquinas, with whom I cannot, of course, dare to compare myself.