

Andrzej SZOSTEK, MIC

## THE (Catholic) UNIVERSITY IN THE DEMOCRATIC STATE

*The university has been the place to search for truth, and it is also trying hard today to remain such a place. [...] If the ethos of truth disappears from among people, if the conviction that the search for truth for its own sake, as well as the necessary faithful obedience to truth – disappears, then the fundamental condition for the correct functioning of democracy will be lacking.*

The title of this lecture deserves a little commentary. If anyone were to interpret it as a suggestion that the state and its aims should be considered as the reason for the existence of the university, then I am ready to explain that supporting the state is not the main aim of the university. Of course, the university (also a Catholic one) may take on a vital role within the state (within a democratic state, too), but only on condition that it properly fulfills its other due tasks. So, as first in the course of this lecture, we should recall briefly the responsibilities resulting from the original idea of university (§1), and also the grounds which justify the creation of Catholic universities (§2). Only against this background will it be possible to recall some elements essential for the democratic state (§3), and to point to the particular role of the university in it, especially of the Catholic university (§4).

### 1. THE UNIVERSITY: A COMMUNITY OF THOSE SEARCHING FOR TRUTH

I need not remind my respected audience that the first universities originated on the initiative of the Catholic Church in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in the flourishing years of the Middle Ages. Since that time, they have undergone a considerable change, yet they have not only survived until the present times, but despite the manifold particular differences, they have also created a specific character which differentiates them from other institutions of higher learning. I would like to draw your attention to three features which contribute to this character.

Firstly, the fundamental reason for the existence of the university was and has been the search for truth: about God, about man, about the world. In this sense, one could say that from its very beginning, the character of the universi-

ty has been a theoretical one.<sup>1</sup> In their classical structure, which was comprised of four faculties: *artes liberales* (together with philosophy), medicine, law and theology, the universities also took up practical issues (medical, moral, political, etc.), but they put them in the theoretical – mainly philosophical and theological perspective. It is no wonder then that it was in the Middle Ages that those disciplines developed. Since that time, however, the nature of universities has changed so much, that it is difficult to speak about a uniform and clearly theoretical orientation of university studies in our day. Nonetheless, many universities are still making an effort to preserve their fundamental theoretical orientation and to educate experts in particular fields of knowledge, whereas in polytechnics, academies, or professional training colleges, science is pursued in order to prepare specific professionals: engineers, artists, etc.

Of course, every truth – even the most theoretical one – also has its practical significance; lofty philosophical ideas, as well as abstract mathematical analyses, have always exerted a substantial influence on the course of culture and civilization. The question is, however, whether the value of these ideas and analyses is measured only by their practical significance, or whether they are already considered valuable as an expression of the cognitive passion characteristic of man. In other words: whether truth is worth grasping, because it gives man power over the world, or whether it is worth pursuing and discovering for its own sake, which simultaneously gives man a chance to confirm and strengthen in himself the deepest essence of what he really is, namely of a rational being. It seems that the medieval scheme of university studies managed to propose the highest level of theoretical cognition, which universities today are still not eager to give up.

Secondly, from its very beginning, the university has cultivated the unity of science: *universitas omnium scientiarum*.<sup>2</sup> There were, and still are, numerous attempts to realize – in many different ways – the meanings inherent in this postulate. One of these ways has been the specific arrangement of faculties which once were tied closely together to form a structure which aspired to embrace all disciplines. That structure used to be a hierarchical one, with theology at the top. Today, no university can afford to embrace all the disciplines and all the fields of science, and the individual faculties have become more autonomous than before. Nevertheless, the university remains potentially open to all disciplines: if not all of them are present there, it is because of various kinds of limitations (e.g. lack of space or teaching staff), and for some funda-

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. W a w r z y n i a k, *Postowie. O filozofię uniwersytetu* (Epilogue. For a Philosophy of University), in: M.A. K r ą p i e c, *Człowiek – kultura – uniwersytet* (Man – Culture – University), Lublin 1982, pp. 479-481.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. A. K r ą p i e c, *Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski* (Catholic University of Lublin), in: M. A. K r ą p i e c, *Człowiek – kultura – uniwersytet, op. cit.*, pp. 384-386.

mental reasons which, for example, eliminate the possibility of studying Polish philology in a polytechnic. The tendency to embrace the widest possible spectrum of various intellectual disciplines which are nonetheless linked to one another also finds its expression in the creation of faculty or inter-faculty research institutes. Finally, the sign of unity of particular branches of science is the academic senate, in whose sessions representatives of all faculties and of other university departments meet. The senate of the university has traditionally exerted a significant influence on the range of the university's interests, on the directions of its development, as well as on other spheres of its activity.

It does not seem that the idea of the unity of science is an anachronism inherited from the times when one man was capable of grasping the whole of knowledge contemporary to him. The postulate of unity is rather an extension of the search for truth which I have mentioned before, and which – in a way – defines the university in its fundamental dimension. Particular elements and aspects of reality are interdependent and complementary, such that the one who does not respect these dependencies does not get to know the complete truth about this reality. It is rather difficult today to become an expert, even in a narrow scientific discipline, yet, it is symptomatic that the drift towards narrow specialization has reached an impasse, and that the significance of the so-called subsidiary disciplines and of interdisciplinary research has been growing. These disciplines help not only to solve the problems which do not fit within the scope of one particular line of specialization, but above all, they also help us to realize that reality, despite all its complexity, constitutes a oneness. In this sense, they show how important it is to see each truth concerning this reality in a context as broad and as deep as possible. The university emphasizes this context by its openness to all branches of human knowledge, by the mutual scientific and teaching exchange which connects particular faculties and institutes with one another, and finally, by offering the possibility of complementing the main line of study with participation in classes from other areas of study or specialization.

Thirdly, the university is both a research and a teaching unit; by that, it differs from research institutes on the one hand, and from teachers' colleges on the other. The deep union of the two functions – of the investigative and the didactic – is manifested by the unit typical of university, namely, the research seminar. The seminar creates a specific community of professors and students, and thus helps to give them a specific intellectual formation which, in turn, influences the character of science pursued thereby. The students, encouraged by partnership in the origin and growth of scientific ideas, receive a lesson in reasoning which cannot be replaced by books or lectures. For their part, they inspire their professors to a communicative transmission of their output, and also to a constant openness to the influx of new ideas and critical comments. And despite the fact that the results of scientific research have an objective,

factual character by nature, the very community of the research seminar helps one to see the truly humanistic dimension of all knowledge, namely the significance of all knowledge for a better understanding of man, and the influence of knowledge on the process of maturation. In this sense, the seminar – in its broad academic context – helps one to see the results of particular instances of research work in a wider and universal aspect.

## 2. THE ORIGIN AND THE BASIS OF CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES

The medieval model of the university did not survive the period of the Reformation. There were many reasons for this fact, e.g. the development of natural sciences, which were impossible to put among the *artes liberales*; controversies between scholastics and humanists, which made the latter leave universities and found academies of their own; and finally, the birth of the Protestant religion, which caused a split in the thus far homogenous theological doctrine.<sup>3</sup> The universities, however, did not lose the basis for their existence, and it was even possible for them to gain greater social significance, because of their “practical” orientation, namely, because of the adaptation of the studies and of their programme to social needs. Not only the rapidly developing mathematical and natural sciences, but also economy and administration, as well as teaching and pedagogical or even polytechnical studies found their way into the university. The universities started to take up mostly those issues for which there was strong social demand, and were educating a wide range of specialists according to the specific needs of a given country. However, the price of the pragmatic tendency was, among others, the disintegration of the universities and their growing dependence on the state. It was not a merely financial dependence; in a way it also concerned the research work, since in many countries the state authorities preserved the right to confer professorial titles. A clear manifestation of this process was the reorganization of the school system under Napoleon in France. The place known as *universitas studiorum* was replaced by a system of specialist schools, financially dependent on the state.

The French reform determined the fate of many European universities, including the ones in Cracow and Vilno, which were changed into “High Schools.” Although the reform was introduced authoritatively, it resulted from the spirit of the French Revolution and of the whole Age of Enlightenment. Overflowing with the worship of human reason, the people of the Enlighten-

---

<sup>3</sup> In this section I have drawn on Rev. M. R e c h o w i c z's article, *Uniwersytety katolickie* (Catholic Universities), in: *Księga jubileuszowa na 50-lecie KUL* (The Jubilee Book on the 50th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Catholic University of Lublin), Lublin 1969, pp. 13-19.

ment were ready to erect temples in its honour. Yet, it was also during that age that reason's ability to cognitively grasp the earthly reality which surrounds man was questioned (e.g. by Hume and Kant), and that human reason was deprived of its relation to the divine transcendence. As a result, domains of knowledge such as metaphysics and theology fell into disfavour, and reason was "left" with practical issues only, such as state reorganization (based on social contract, not on the idea of divine justice superior to it), and the improvement of everyday life by means of technical progress. It is no wonder, in this context, that such was the direction of the reforms taken up by Napoleon, and that making university studies "practical" was generally accepted in so many countries outside France.

It was then, in the nineteenth century, that Catholic universities started to spring up; the first one, as far as I can remember was founded in Louvain in 1833. Their origin also had a practical background. Modern universities became totally secular, so there was no longer the possibility for the Holy See to establish a university, or maintain the ecclesiastical post of Chancellor, or institute a hierarchical structure of university studies with theology at the top. Moreover, there was no longer any room for the ecclesiastical domains of knowledge within the university, so there was no longer the possibility of educating future priests, catechists, or curia clerks. Up until 1875, there was not even a single theological faculty in such a Catholic country as France. Spain was a similar case. However, founding exclusively ecclesiastical faculties did not suffice. The optimal educational institution needed to be put in the broad context of science, of both natural science and of the humanities. Thus, there started the growth of Catholic universities, where theological and ecclesiastical faculties existed side by side with secular ones.

Behind the Church's practical motivation to create Catholic universities, one can also trace an attempt to return to the original idea of the university, and to reshape this idea. Far-reaching specialization in science, resulting mainly from the development of the natural sciences, has taken place. Such an advance is simultaneously an expression of the naturalistic tendencies in science, which has been concentrating on the worldly reality (also on the worldly existence of man), and which has put aside – or even totally ignored – reflection on its ultimate sense, or on the fundamental relationship with God. The more we learn about the world, the less we understand it; the case is similar as far as man's self-knowledge is concerned. According to the project of some Enlightenment philosophers – and some of their successors (e.g. Marx) – man was to take the place of God. However, he got lost within the senseless world of objects. At this point I cannot help recalling A. Robin's poem with the telling title "The Programme of a Few Centuries," where the poet concludes:

The Faith will be destroyed in the name of Light, and then, the light will be destroyed. The Soul will be destroyed in the name of Reason, and

then reason will be destroyed. [...] For no reason man will be destroyed; man will be destroyed in the name of Man; there will be no other name. That is where we have just arrived.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, the restoration of the position of philosophy and theology within the academic structure, as well as the attempt to harmonize them with the so-called secular – humanistic and natural – sciences, has a deeper meaning, and cannot be accounted for by the immediate needs of the Church. What is meant here instead concerns an attempt to regain a deep, and even maximal, cognitive perspective, the necessity of which has also been acknowledged by some modern philosophers, starting with Hegel. After all, the point is not to destroy man, but to restore his right to grasp the truth which strengthens his personal humanity, the truth which – in the ultimate dimension – is the everlasting truth of God. From this stems the general humanistic orientation of Catholic universities: they develop a range of sciences about man which is as wide as possible, they show his unique rank in this world as well as the sense of his life which transcends his worldly existence.

### 3. DEMOCRACY – PARLIAMENT – MAN'S FREEDOM

One of the lasting consequences of the French Revolution, and of the whole Enlightenment proclamation of freedom, has been the advancement of democracy, which today – although perhaps it is not considered the ideal – is still the best possible social system. I am not going to describe the democratic system here in detail – it would be a separate and rather complex issue. However, I suggest we should dwell on its two important aspects, namely, on the importance attached to man's freedom in democracy, and on the role of the parliament. I believe that a special role of the university in general, and of the Catholic university in particular, is manifested by its close link to these features of democracy.

Some elements of the parliamentary system can be traced even in monarchy (e.g. the royal councils). Some appearances of this system were also kept up in some variants of totalitarianism (cf. the so-called People's Democratic States). What truly distinguishes the democratic societies from the undemocratic ones is not so much the will of the people (as the etymology of the word "democracy" would suggest), but rather the position of majority opinion, which in other systems has the significance of a pressure group at best, but which in the case of democracy plays the decisive role. The forum for majority opinion (usually expressed by the representatives) is the Parliament.

---

<sup>4</sup> A. R o b i n, *Program kilku wieków* (The Programme of a Few Centuries), "Znak" 1979 No. 6, pp. 605-606.

The foundation of a democratic parliamentary system does not merely mean having considered a given community (rather than any divine being) the only sovereign. A significant motive power of democracy is the conviction that man is a free being, and that freedom determines his outstanding dignity which obligates others to respect it. The motto of the French Revolution: "Freedom – Equality – Fraternity" is formulated in a particular sequence, which is not freely interchangeable. Freedom makes people equal and is the basis for their fraternal unity. However, although these lofty statements were already being cynically denied during the Revolution, the ideal which they represented has turned out to be more permanent than its original, cruelly perverted incarnation. Up to the present day, the democratic states have been particularly sensitive to human freedom, and they have considered the abuse of freedom a serious violation of human rights. The law regulates relationships among citizens so as to give everyone a chance of growth, and simultaneously not to let anyone threaten the freedom of others. Apart from this, it does not intervene in the private aspirations of particular people, even if they were to take up actions leading to self-destruction. Therefore, murder and drug-traffic are punishable offences, while taking drugs or suicide are not subject to punishment.

It is easy to notice that the parliamentary system of majority rule does not provide itself with a sufficient guarantee for the freedom of the individual. It is not impossible that the people, by the votes of the majority of citizens, introduce a radical law limiting the rights of certain other citizens. In such a case, by their use of a formal democratic instrument (i.e. voting), they impair a significant and "essential" element of democracy, namely, its respect for the freedom of man. Is democracy, then, respected in such a case, or is it violated?

This is by no means a so-called academic question. A number of events which have taken place recently have pointed to its topicality. It was not so long ago that the parliamentary elections in Algeria were won by the Moslem fundamentalists who are openly against the "democratic" equality of all citizens, regardless of religion or sex, and this case has placed the world powers in a difficult position. A little later, they expressed somewhat embarrassed approval of the actions taken by B. Yeltsin, since, yes – in order to strengthen democracy, – though by the use of military means, and allowing blood to shed, he dissolved the Parliament which, on the basis of its constitutional rights, deprived him of power. In Poland, we have in turn participated in the still unfinished parliamentary battle for the protection of conceived and as yet unborn babies, but the result attained last year did not satisfy anyone, so that on both sides there are opinions calling for its revision. One could say that the last example is not pertinent to the problem, since conceived but unborn babies can hardly be considered as citizens of the state. Indeed, but we must not forget that the basis of the rights for citizens – with the right to freedom at the forefront – as seen by the proponents of democracy lies in the very fact of being

a human, and not in the fact of having gained the status of being a citizen of a given state. Precisely for this reason, criminal law protects children, as well as those who cannot declare any citizenship. Why, then, should only the unborn be made outlaws?

#### 4. FREEDOM – TRUTH – THE (Catholic) UNIVERSITY

At this point, we approach the problem of the university and of its role within the democratic state. How do we know that man is a free being, that this freedom distinguishes him from other beings on this earth, and that it constitutes the basis for all his other rights? There is some truth about man which – as long as it is treated as obvious, and is acknowledged by the majority of people – guarantees the correct functioning of legal and social democratic structures. However, when this truth is ignored, these structures turn out equally efficient in the legalization and strengthening of the violence of some people against others: of the majority against the minority. The above examples show how real the danger of legal positivism is. This danger therefore means putting the “manner” of the formal law-making democratic procedure above the “spirit” of democracy, which is the real protection of freedom belonging to man as man.

I have already mentioned that from its very beginnings the university has been a place to search for truth, and that it is also trying hard today to remain such a place, despite conditions which are not always favourable. It is necessary, or even dramatically important, to preserve this character of the university so that the correct functioning of democracy may be rescued. If the ethos of truth disappears from among people, if the conviction that the truth should be sought for its own sake, as well as of the necessity of faithful obedience to truth, disappears, then the fundamental condition for the correct functioning of democracy will be lacking. I must stress that this condition cannot be replaced by any form of “reasonable egoism,” supported by regulations which reward pro-community actions, while punishing those in opposition. Although the system of privileges and punishments refers to the drive to pleasure and the fear of unpleasantness – deeply rooted in man’s nature – this system itself is also subject to parliamentary voting and can easily be overused to the advantage of the lobby with a sufficient parliamentary majority. Not long ago, we had a model example of such a situation in the Polish Parliament when, against all the factual arguments, the privileges of the former political and civic police were maintained, simply because the members of parliament who earlier had been closely connected with these organizations voted so.

There is no way of replacing the ethos of truth with any legal regulations. Parliament, which derives from the word *parlare*, that is “to speak,” has been conceived as an institution in which the people speak about themselves through

their representatives, in which they want to correctly recognize their own needs and to choose the right ways of satisfying these needs. Members of the parliament reason with one another, and to do that they must refer to some arguments, so finally they refer to truth – about which they are convinced, and about which they intend to convince others. And yet, they are ready to change their views if others succeed in convincing them about their arguments, that is about truth. If such a discussion is substituted by a play of powers calculated to increase the number of electoral votes, then this is a sign of corruption of the whole system, a corruption which is difficult to root out. Universities can do little to help this situation directly, even though they belong to the few circles in the contemporary “democratic civilization” which set such a high value on truth. Determined to search for truth in every area, not only in the ones which are socially beneficial, universities fulfill their fundamental didactic function, and they indirectly strengthen the ethos of truth among the people. “When I address you, dear Ladies and Gentlemen,” said Pope John Paul II in the Hall of the Catholic University of Lublin in June 1987, “I can see all those circles, all the communities where the service to knowledge – the service to Truth – becomes the foundation for shaping man.”<sup>5</sup>

From its very beginnings, the university has striven to grasp the whole truth about the whole of reality. Though the Catholic universities were founded not so long ago, they have returned to the former idea of the unity of science, and have tried to elucidate the reality of the world and God in it in every aspect, so as to show its transcendent divine dimension. Of course, no mortal is in possession of the monopoly on truth. Because of this, the ethos of truth is expressed by the readiness to enter into dialogue with those who have different opinions.<sup>6</sup> The identity of the Catholic university is expressed not only by the advancement of ecclesiastical doctrine, but also by its openness to dialogue with others.

As I have mentioned, this dialogue requires mutual openness, whose important element is the conviction of one’s own imperfection, and thus the readiness to correct the points which in the course of the discussion have proved to be false. The dialogue also requires honesty. The opposite stance would imply not only a lack of earnestness in presenting one’s own position, but also a taking advantage of the interlocutor’s weaknesses or of any loopholes which allow escape from the truth which one actually sees but finds inconvenient. Finally, it requires patience, because in spite of all appearances, we do not usually talk

---

<sup>5</sup> J a n P a w e ł II, *Do świata nauki* (To the Academic Community), “Ethos” 1988 Nos. 2-3, pp. 11-12.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. A. S z o s t e k, *Prawda a zasada pluralizmu w dialogu społecznym i organizacji państwa* (Truth and The Principle of Pluralism in the Social Dialogue and in the Organization of the State), “Ethos” 1992 Nos. 2-3, pp. 17-28.

the same language and cannot immediately know and feel into the world of our interlocutor's meanings. A research seminar, and all scientific discussions of this kind, should provide training in such a dialogue. In this respect, the university is the "school of life," even if the topic of the seminar debates seems to be far removed from real life.

Of course, the theoretical orientation of the university does not mean that the scholars (professors and students) do not care for matters vital to the people. This orientation is manifested by the way particular subjects are treated, not by the choice of subject. The contemporary university should be absorbed in the matters in which all people are engaged, and which are so vital to them. Yet, when the university merely prepares the cadre for different professions (teachers, tutors, clerks, etc.), it does not differ in any respect from all other schools of various professions. Preparing the cadre is very important, and in everyday life absorbs all the members of academic community; however, the material aspect of the academic training does not bring to light the specific character of the university. High education in general, and university education in particular should be distinguished by formal training, which consists in transmitting (or acquiring) the ability to think in an organized way, to distinguish between different aspects of a given issue, to make decisions, etc. A well-trained graduate (in the formal aspect) should also turn out to be efficient and useful in the field in which he was not actually educated. Another advantage of the theoretical profile of the university education comes to light here. A specialist trained in narrow fields is of little use in the community, which is flexible in its essence, and which shapes its character according to various factors and circumstances which are difficult to predict. This thesis is important for every society, especially the democratic one, which is distinguished from others by a much greater political and economic mobility.

Having put such strong emphasis on formal training, Catholic universities must also take care of preparing a well-educated Catholic intellectual élite. It is obvious that this task is very important for the Church, but we must also stress that this élite is necessary for society, also by the democratic one. Firstly, cultural reasons point to that. All the contemporary democratic states have grown in the Christian tradition (which is worth mentioning in this context, since it is repeated now and again that Christianity is, in principle, hostile to this form of government). This tradition comprises, among others, the conviction of the particular dignity attached to the rational and free human being, and we have already mentioned here the big role which this conviction has in strengthening the "democratic mentality." The educated Catholic élite is also needed by the democratically governed state for one more reason (and perhaps the chief one), namely because of the Catholic social teaching. This teaching encourages Catholics to cooperate with every form of government, provided that it does not violate basic human rights. The Catholic University of Lublin,

which for half a century of Communist domination in Poland, was an oasis of intellectual freedom and the symbol of resistance to the totalitarian government imposed from outside, gave a particularly clear expression of the social doctrine of the Church: it defended man from the system which turned out to be basically and incurably ill. The Church has, as a whole, taken a reserved attitude towards all forms of government in this world, since none of them embodies the full ideal of the Kingdom of God. Thus, the democratic form of government needs the cooperation of Catholics, as well as their criticism.

One more remark to conclude my presentation. We have talked about the place and the function of the university (especially the Catholic one), in the democratic state. So far, I have been talking rather about the tasks which universities have to face, than about the conditions which must be fulfilled if they are to meet these tasks. I would like to mention only the principal one, namely, the postulate of the autonomy of universities. Only if this autonomy is preserved, can the socially valuable research and teaching standard of particular universities be maintained. Only then can truth be sought for its own sake – freely and honestly, and only in this indirect way can the university be of service to the state. However, this autonomy can be, and has been violated in many respects: for reasons of financial policy, by limiting the number of students, by giving government officials the sole authority to fill academic positions, etc. Autonomy does not mean removing all control from the university, or the right to make excessive financial demands which the state often cannot afford. Instead, the control should be assumed and decisions made by professionals, which in this case does not mean officials, but scientists.

The university is not a democratic institution by nature. Its hierarchical structure can be justified not only historically, but also essentially: truth is not subject to voting. The university is autonomous in the sense that it serves what (or rather: who) the state is also supposed to serve – 'though in a different way. It serves man as it serves truth, and through this search, man – a rational being – finds his identity and strengthens it. Democracy refers to this relationship between man and truth in a different way: when the ethos of truth breaks down, the whole democratic system turns against man and his freedom. It happens even faster and more irrevocably in this system than anywhere else, since democracy has no other effective protection from legalizing violence than the majority vote.

Translated by *Dorota Chabrajska*