

# Pluralism and the Christian Academy

GRAEME HUNTER

Let me begin with a question: Must universities today be pluralistic? Pluralism, as most people know, involves the claim that there is no supreme value which all must uphold, no single indisputable foundation of knowledge, no unassailable canon of achievement in the arts.

This deflationary attitude toward the absolute has consequences of considerable scope. Advocates of pluralism have seen it as a key to understanding the history of science, as a formula for relieving social tensions, as a way toward a more democratic future, and even as the prerequisite of polite ‘conversation’ in the multicultural millennium stretching before us. But although its admirers assert its importance in many domains, and although numerous institutions in Western democracies are struggling to recreate themselves in its image, it is only in the university that pluralism can be said to hold sway unopposed. Only among academics has pluralism been entrenched as the way, the truth, and the life.

But what do *we* say? – we who work in today’s universities but who also inhabit another and older story, hallowing the memory of an unfashionable Galilean who claimed himself to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life? What should we say about pluralism in the university and beyond?

NEWMAN

In this setting it will be polite to look first for an answer to John Henry Newman. But prudence might lead me there, even if politeness didn’t. Cardinal Newman was not only a Christian leader and distinguished university man in his age, but he also found a way to make his famous writings on the university timeless. Instead of

discussing the problems of some particular institution he took as his topic the very *idea* of the university.<sup>1</sup> And so his nine discourses on that idea, together with his lectures and essays on related topics, continue to guide serious inquirers and will do so as long as there are universities to engage our hopes or provoke our fears.

Universities have always been places in which people disagree. No one will question that. Neither, until recently, would anyone have denied that universities are places where, given enough time, disputes can be resolved or at least their false presuppositions unmasked. It is only in the last couple of decades that universities have begun to look at disagreement differently. Many now accept fundamental, incommensurable disagreement as an irreducible feature of life. Suddenly it has become normal, even fashionable, for the contending parties in a debate to expect neither vindication nor disproof. What only yesterday was a limiting case of argumentative dysfunction has today become education’s fashionable norm.

Not everyone welcomes the change. The faculty and students, for whom conversational indigestion is the daily routine, often accept it with the same queasy disrelish they show toward cafeteria cuisine. On the other hand administrators praise the new pluralism under the name of ‘diversity’. It is true that some administrators have candid moments in which they will admit that pluralism is far from good in itself. What they are more prepared to defend is its utility. They see in it the means by which today’s democratic university may naturalize the barbarians she cannot repel, and so build a new *modus vivendi* of inclusion.

Today's tense debate about pluralism would be quite foreign to Newman. He would be surprised at its passion, amused at its earnestness and puzzled by its shape. To him it would seem as if we were absurdly busy about inessential things. He would by no means say that differences of opinion are inimical to university life. Far from it, they are usually evidence of its vitality. But Newman thought the differing opinions of the learned were to the university what tumult and confusion are to a large city – permanent, but *accidental*. Noise may be an unfailing presence in urban life, without constituting its essence. The buzzing, teeming confusion of a city could in principle be stilled. In the same way, dispute may well be the academic's second nature, without also being his first. The plangent voices of the academy might fall silent, or, even better, they could be attuned to one another in harmony. And Newman says it is in the nature of universities (unlike cities) to make such harmony their *regulative ideal*.

'Regulative ideal' is not Newman's term; it comes from the philosopher Immanuel Kant. But it helps, I think, in understanding Newman's conception of the *idea* of the university. Regulative ideals are the goals we revere and live by, whether or not they are ever fully achieved; they are the standards we accept, knowing full well that in most cases we cannot live up to them. For example, economy of movement is one of the regulative ideals of sport and of dance. Equality of treatment is a regulative ideal of family and government alike. There can be no disciplined or even purposive practice of any kind that is not guided by some such ideal, however fitful and imperfect its realization may be. And for Newman one of the most important ideals regulating university practice, and therefore one of the main components of the university *idea*, is *resolution of conflict*. He expresses it very plainly in the essay "Christianity and Scientific

Investigation," with which he brings his great study of the university to a close:

If [the university man] has one cardinal maxim in his philosophy, it is that truth cannot be contrary to truth; if he has a second, it is that truth often *seems* contrary to truth; and if a third, it is the practical conclusion that we must be patient with such appearances, and not be hasty to pronounce them to be really of a more formidable character. (461)

The point Newman is making here is as solid as anything in logic and as old. One might call it 'the axiom of compatibility'. Logicians teach that if any statement (theory or doctrine) is true, then only false statements, theories, or doctrines can contradict it. In other words, every truth is compatible with every other. Even pluralists, who normally wish to be distinguished from relativists, do not contest the existence of truth. And therefore they cannot contest the axiom of compatibility either. Thus Newman's calm assurance that no truth can ultimately be threatened by any other rests on an axiom of thought which even pluralists will not wish to deny.

The reason this comforting axiom does not put an end to pluralism altogether is that in daily life false propositions, doctrines, and theories circulate incognito among true ones, and often it is unclear to many people which is which. Honest disagreement is possible more often and in more areas than dogmatic persons care to contemplate. Today, however, it is fashionable in university settings to take the first appearance of disagreement as a sure sign that irreducible opposition is at hand. The presence of a plurality of views is assumed to imply that only a pluralistic outlook can account for them. But that is just what Newman denies. To illustrate his

position, he draws an example from the faculty of theology:

[The man] who believes revelation with that absolute faith which is the prerogative of a Catholic is not the nervous creature who startles at every sudden sound and is fluttered by every strange or frightful appearance which meets his eyes.... He knows full well that there is no science but in the course of its extension runs the risk of infringing, without any meaning of offence on its own part, the path of other sciences; and he knows also that, if there be any one science which, from its sovereign and unassailable position, can calmly bear such unintentional collisions on the part of the children of earth, it is theology. He is sure, and nothing shall make him doubt, that, if anything seems to be proved by astronomer, or geologist, or chronologist, or antiquarian, or ethnologist, in contradiction to the dogmas of faith, that point will eventually turn out, first, *not* to be proved, or secondly, not *contradictory*, or thirdly, not contradictory to anything *really revealed*, but to something which has been confused with revelation. And if at the moment it appears to be contradictory, then he is content to wait, knowing that error is like other delinquents; give it rope enough, and it will be found to have a strong suicidal propensity. (466–67)

Newman's view is then the commonsensical one that the existence of disagreement does not preclude its being successfully resolved. On the contrary, he believes that, given time, a grain of truth may be sifted from the chaff of argument. In time, truth can be vindicated and error exposed.

Someone will be sure to reply that in ordinary life the swift, relentless business of living often

requires us to take sides before the truth is known. But that point, without damaging Newman's view about the possibility of resolving disputes, adds weight to his other contention, about where they should be resolved. Precisely because life is such a brisk and uncouth concern, society plainly needs a place set apart from its urgent affairs, a place where learned persons may take the time to scrutinize propositions, doctrines, and theories until their seductive glitter fades, until mercenary advocacy passes away and only solid, plain, humble truths remain. Newman's claim is that some ideas will survive that kind of prolonged, disinterested scrutiny and will be found at last to merit the name of knowledge. The place of quiet reflection in which knowledge is slowly sought and surely found, Newman calls 'university'. That is why conflict can be its daily experience and resolution still remain its regulative ideal.

#### PELIKAN

One hundred and fifty years have passed since Newman wrote the *Idea of the University*. And much has changed. Few universities today would pretend to be places where disputes are resolved, or even where the ideal of resolving them is upheld. Indeed, it is precisely on that point that one of Newman's most capable and best qualified commentators quietly demurs. Jaroslav Pelikan, in his homonymous study, *The Idea of the University*,<sup>2</sup> claims that the once honoured regulative ideal of resolution must now yield its place to a new ideal, that of *pluralism*.

Pelikan is a serious commentator. Not only do his high scholarly achievements equip him for the job, so also do a number of fortuitous parallels of experience which have led him, he says, into a "scholarly and theological dialogue with John Henry Newman that has been going on for my entire lifetime" (8). These parallels include a similar focus of research, teaching, and

publication, a mutual interest in the *development* of Christian doctrine, and even a comparable term passed in their respective universities' high administration. Finally, both men were guided in the task of evaluating university by long experience in one of the leading institutions of their day – Newman's Oxford, Pelikan's Yale.

There are further parallels too obvious or too self-flattering for Pelikan to mention. Both men are Christians; both are leading scholars; both are exceptionally learned. No serious reader could deny that what qualifies Pelikan as a critic also makes him worthy to be read with care. Moreover, unusual attention is needed here, because Pelikan is a writer who stresses continuities and downplays conflict, so that even his serious divergences from Newman are seldom flagged.

Yet however softly Pelikan may wish to walk, he has a duty to point out the weaknesses that time has revealed in Newman. For example, he had no choice but to take account of such things as the increased size of our universities, their new interconnectedness, the changed role of publication and research, and the growing public expectation that universities respond to questions of political or economic urgency. If nothing had changed in the last century and a half Newman's book would not be in need of commentary.

It is only in Pelikan's quiet assumption of the centrality of pluralism that he leaps suddenly beyond any such mild *aggiornamento*. To impute a pluralistic character to the university is, from Newman's perspective, to invert its very idea. Yet according to Pelikan: "The future of the university will depend on [its] acknowledgement of the fact of pluralism both between and within ideological positions" (60).

That is a statement, not an argument. Pelikan does not argue in favour of pluralism, because he presupposes it from the outset of his commentary on Newman. For example, Pelikan says in the

introductory chapter that he will not investigate whether Newman's assumptions are still "philosophically tenable or theologically defensible" (9), thus implicitly operating under the pluralistic assumption that dialogue can go on without raising the question of truth. In place of an examination of Newman's assumptions, Pelikan says he will attempt to learn "whether [they] can still contribute to conclusions about the idea of the university that are educationally justifiable *for those who do not accept the assumptions philosophically and theologically* as well as for those who do" (my emphasis, 10).

How would one have to think in order to find Newman's conclusions "educationally acceptable" even though derived from premises which were philosophically and theologically unacceptable? Though in theory it is possible to argue from false premises to important conclusions, only pluralists, I think, would be so generous (if that is the word) as to think it would happen much in practice. It is clear that Pelikan, though himself a Christian, wishes his book to be read by people who are not. He wants them to find useful things in Newman's Christian university, without necessarily accepting its Christianity. And so he builds pluralism in.

He takes a further and more disturbing step when he agrees to classify Christianity, as pluralists tend to do, among the ideologies (60). Pelikan then asserts that no university can allow any ideology to become its fundamental doctrine. One wonders in passing how he understands the first five hundred years of university life.

On the other hand it must also be pointed out that, however uncritical his assimilation of faith to ideology may be, what he says about the weakness of ideological dogmatism is very perceptive and clearly applicable even in the context of Christian institutions. When ideology becomes dogma, he writes, it accomplishes no

more than to drive pluralism “underground.” Persecuted dissenters will quickly resurface within the spectrum of ideological orthodoxy, contending for their legitimacy from beneath that thin disguise (60).

No observer of higher education will deny the solid dollop of wisdom and experience in that remark or its application to Christian education. For example, liberation theology, feminist theology, and so-called “body theology” are all found in Christian seminaries today as Trojan horses for Marxism, gender feminism, and homosexual activism respectively. They illustrate Pelikan’s important observation that divergent views cannot be kept out of university. But they do not prove the stronger point which Pelikan takes for granted, namely, that pluralism is the only principled response to them. The fact that there will always be discord does not prove that there is no such thing as resolution, any more than the fact that cities are always noisy proves that there is no such thing as quiet. No doubt there will never be a university without dissent. But that is far from implying that no dissenter is ever right, or that no position can ever be known to be right. We shall need more evidence before moving with Pelikan from the true observation that strife and disagreement are prominent features in university today to the contestable claim that only the assumption of pluralism can account for it.

But at least the lines of opposition are clear. Pelikan says that pluralistic disagreement is a permanent and necessary feature of university life. Newman holds that disagreement, though permanent, is not necessary. For Pelikan disagreement is the very stuff of university life; for Newman it is closer to being the fluff. Who is right?

## ST. PAUL

Like Newman, though on a much smaller scale, I have myself been involved in founding a college. Though still too small to be called a university, Augustine College, for such is its name, is based on principles which Newman would approve of, such as the importance of tradition, the hierarchy of the sciences, and the centrality of theology. But Newman was not our first guide in reflecting – as all would-be founders of colleges today must reflect – on the challenge of pluralism. Our thinking was shaped more directly by a writer whose importance both Pelikan and Newman would acknowledge and whose wisdom may be able to shed light on the apparent standoff between them. The epitome of our response to pluralism is expressed by St. Paul in his first letter to the church of Corinth.

There Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that they were all pluralists once, drawn apart by the idols of their several nations (12:2). But now, he tells them, their differences are to be reconciled in a new way, one they could not have foreseen when they were pagans. He does not predict an end to difference, but a new complementarity. For example, they continue to have a profusion of different gifts (*charismata*), but their source is a single Spirit (12:4). As before, they are called to diverse ministries (*diakoniai*), but each one now serves the same Lord (12:5). Their work and worship will continue to find many individual modes of expression (*energeimata*) but all their activity must be offered henceforward to the one jealous God (12:6).

It is at this point that Paul introduces in a figurative way Christianity’s famous and sublime alternative to pluralism: the figure of the body and its members. Our gifts, ministries and operations in the Church are many in same way the organs and limbs of the body are, but they are

also one as the body is one. They subserve one end which is the well-being of the whole; they share one good: the benefit of all the parts; and they employ one practice, namely, the cooperation of all with all.

As founders of Augustine College we saw in Paul's picture an ideal for the university, no less than a picture of the true Church. University disciplines must serve a common end, share a common good, embrace a common policy or there is no 'uni'-versity at all. Unity need not always entail any single point on which all the members agree, but it must involve the blending together of individual exertions into one coherent motion.

Then Paul adds an observation that scholarly bodies forget at their peril, one whose importance for universities is acknowledged both by Newman and Pelikan. Paul says:

those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness.  
(12:23)

Here Paul is showing a way forward from pagan pluralism into Christian unity, and providing an incentive to those who might have been reluctant to move. He challenges us to look not at the often disappointing angularities of individual believers but at the extraordinary wholeness of which we are capable when working together. He points to a hidden reality, the body of the Church, which resembles a living, organic body in its coordination and grace. The plurality of her gifts, ministries, and operations can flourish without prejudice to the unity that undergirds her, and to which each member contributes. Pauline Christianity acknowledges the instinctive human longing to be connected in an organic, harmonious whole, and shows how it can be

fulfilled without the imposition of any totalitarian uniformity.

The founders of Augustine College believed the same to hold for university. They thought that all disciplines gained in dignity by belonging to a properly-ordered totality, whether they played a great or humble part within it. Every member gains because the worth of the whole is greater than even the aggregate worth of the parts. In the Church this is obvious, because, in her, mere earthen vessels are called to become the body of Christ. The university has a different vocation, but one of comparable dignity. Her separate disciplines are called to be members of the one body of Truth.

Though every member gains by such union the least have most to gain, as Paul rightly points out. For example, in comparison with genetic theory or quantum physics today, Latin grammar is a humble thing. Yet traditionalism or nostalgia are not the only motives which entitle Latin grammar to be treated with a dignity equal to that of the most exciting of the natural sciences. Latin grammar deserves to be so treated because it is a key to two millennia of our history. Modest as it is in itself, it is a golden key, for it can lock or unlock our collective memory. Without it we would be amnesiacs: wanderers without a past, we would soon lack a future also.

Paul's prophetic vision of the universal Church eventually took the form of medieval Christendom. It was a bold, sweet dream of Europe as the body of the Church. Today we admit, gladly or ruefully, that Christendom, for all its splendour, was only a dream – an imperfect realization of the Pauline vision. But flawed as it was, it bequeathed its highest ideal of unity to its most lovely daughter, the university.

Why, then, does Pelikan, a Christian academic, find the idea of a Christian university

unacceptable today? He doesn't say. But would it be implausible to connect his embrace of academic pluralism with his awareness – and who cannot be aware – that Christendom has crumbled and that Western societies are all drifting into pluralism of some kind? If this is where post-Christian society is heading, then much of what Pelikan asserts is reasonable. Public universities will almost certainly be called upon to reflect the pluralism of the public that pays their bills.

In a recent paper, “Newman, God, and the Academy,” Daniel Cere is critical of Pelikan for his selective use of Newman.<sup>3</sup> He is puzzled by Pelikan's passing over in silence Newman's idea of the centrality of theology to a proper university. But pluralism explains Pelikan's omission, even though it may not excuse it. The downgrading of theology follows unavoidably, once pluralism is assumed, for pluralism refuses to recognize as unique or binding any proposed hierarchy of the sciences. Pelikan, with his eyes focused on the immediate future, sees no likelihood that theology will reign over the sciences in publicly funded universities.

On the other hand, Pelikan does not neglect the question of what aspects of the Christian university will be able to survive in the pluralistic future that is coming upon us. That is really what his book on Newman explores: that is why he finds Newman so congenial an interlocutor.

Probably Pelikan accepts the inevitability of pluralism too easily. But his relation to Newman and St. Paul remains closer than a first glance might detect. If Paul foresaw the way upward from pagan pluralism, the worst that can be said about Pelikan is that he uncritically joins the Gadarene rush back into it. Historically speaking, it is as if Newman were standing at the apex of a great pyramid with Paul at its foot pointing up, and Pelikan on the far side, sliding down.

The apex represents the ideal of Christian community to which, in different ways, both Paul and the original university, aspired. Newman's concept of the university as an “intercommunion of one and all” (Newman, 210) is not just a Pauline daydream; it is in a Platonic sense the very *Idea* of the university. Newman was no doubt lulled by his historical situation into thinking that the *idea* he delineated would remain forever a broadly recognized and influential *ideal*. Living as he did in the twilight of Christendom, Newman could not have guessed that a generation would soon arise that would doubt both whether this ideal was achievable and even whether it was worthwhile.

Newman is thus right about essentials, but unconscious of the social conditions of their intelligibility. Pelikan, on the other hand, is right to point out that public institutions today find Newman's idea unintelligible and are moving unswervingly toward pluralism. The question Pelikan fails to consider is whether, upon becoming as pluralistic as they intend, they will still be universities. Will they not be polytechnics at best, omniversities at worst?

The best answer to Pelikan, then, is perhaps a semantic one. If the future of universities is pluralistic, their future is no longer to be universities at all, but to degenerate into something much less significant. The founders of Augustine College believe that as Western universities cease to be Christian bodies they will cease to be bodies of any kind; that when they have finally abolished the unity and order that Christianity confers upon the sciences, they will find to their astonishment that liberal education has been abolished as well. Loose federations of technologically sophisticated activities may remain. Institutes that dispense profitable technical training may survive. But liberal education will be found nowhere within their

walls. They will become like abandoned houses, inhabited by moles and bats, which appear to be homes only to the casual glance of strangers passing on the road.

Pelikan is right that Western society is slouching toward pluralism, but he draws the wrong moral from the story. The *idea* of an institution does not change just because society views it with less enthusiasm. The idea of the university has not changed and will not change. Our altered attitudes mean only that the appetite for giving institutional form to the university idea is felt by a smaller and more scattered community.

At the end of his much-discussed book, *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre reminded the reader that there came a time in the twilight of antiquity when right-thinking people directed their attention away from the task of shoring up the old Roman imperium and toward the creation of alternative communities of civility and light. He suggested that a similar process of disenchantment is happening today.<sup>4</sup>

The founders of Augustine College agree. We saw signs of what MacIntyre meant in the exponential growth of homeschooling, in the rise of Christian institutes and publications of worth, in the way in which Pope John-Paul II's orthodoxy inspired Christians of all denominations, and in other indications of a fledgling solidarity among thinking Christians. To us these signs appeared as beacons of light and we desired to become another of their kind.

Christendom may be vanishing, but the Holy Catholic Church, the Body of Christ, is invincible. Corresponding to that Body is a Christian mind, whose features were first sketched by St. Paul, first actualized in universities, first described by Newman. In the measure that its modest beginnings and limited resources permit, this is the mind that Augustine College strives to cultivate and reflect.

Pelikan is not convincing when he implies that universities can travel on intact, even after losing the intellectual and moral direction they once had. Our prediction is different. We believe that they will break to pieces upon a rock and discover, some with horror, others, like Pelikan himself, with bewildered delight, that the stone over which they have stumbled is nothing other than the Church.

#### NOTES

1. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University* (London: Longmans, 1925).
2. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
3. Daniel Cere, "Newman, God, and the Academy," *Theological Studies* 55 (1994), 10.
4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), 263.

Graeme Hunter is a founder of Augustine College, at which he taught Philosophy and Literature; he currently teaches at the University of Ottawa.

This article was originally published in *The Newman Rambler* 4:2 (summer 2000).