In the *Graves* of Academe

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The Idea of the University: A Reexamination, by Jaroslav Jan Pelikan (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1992) x, 238 pages, index.

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When first I looked into Newman's *Idea of the University,* I knew I had stepped onto nearly sacred ground. For years I had been trying to shape the alliance of faith and reason into a happy marriage, but had not been able even to get them to the altar. I was unconvinced of the utter antimony of the two, if one could believe academics. And yet, what I had discovered in Bigg's *Christian Platonists* of Alexandria about Christian education had not been so far true of my experience; viz., that "so far as the Church differed from the rest of society it differed for the better". Bigg's contention was not that Christian schools were a *better* choice in the first and second centuries after the death of Christ. They had better everything, and both the spiritually convinced and unconvinced knew this to be true. We've come a long way, baby!

Almost no one, or no one in his right mind, would say that today. Even the very way we name the centuries, from B.C. to B.C.E. (Before the Common Era), has changed to remove the influence of Christianity from the face of the earth. Though the very form of the university owes its existence to Christianity, today, centuries after its formation, ever ything that can be done to remove its sphere of power over, not only the university, but all of culture, has just about been made complete.

But the routing of Christianity from the public square cannot be laid entirely on the shoulders of secular society. Christians have run screaming from the public square to their safe, hidebound havens. Witness the rise of those denominations whose calling card is an escape from reason, where celebrants may be found in an epiphora of tears, barking like dogs, or laughing like hyenas. Faith seasoned with reason has nearly vanished from the Christian sphere. Our churches are vacuous places where one can remain safe both from the world's taint and the hound of hell. Most Protestant churches are so ugly in appearance, and offer such a woebegone numinous atmosphere, that one is hard-pressed not to curse in them, let alone worship. Almost everything that we call Christian, with a few notable exceptions, is second or third rate: our art, music, culture, education and even

our Weltanschauung. To find a church that gives art and culture its place, one must necessarily give up doctrine; to find doctrine, one must necessarily give up any sense of art and culture. The spiritually convinced have either only been pretending to be convinced, or have been much too concerned about less important matters, such as whether or not the kingdom of heaven really does boil down to eating and drinking.

Christian education has fared a similar fate. Institutions concerned with doctrine tend to give short shrift to the intellect. Those that emphasize intellect and higher learning, academics as it were, pooh-pooh doctrine or any serious religious belief. Part of this has to do with America. The strand of anti-intellectualism abounds in American Christianity. From the First and Second Great Awakenings to the modern period, the bibliotaph and the clerisy have been at loggerheads. But even before this time, America and Christianity have been at odds. America may be a nation with the soul of a church, as Chesterton had it, but it is also a nation with a guilty conscience. Hamilton and Jefferson were uneasy about this business of faith. In Jefferson's case it may well have been unbelief in the historical Christ that made him jittery. But one should not ignore the patrician element in both Jefferson and Hamilton. There is something about religious faith that always smells of the commonplace, that makes the aristocracy uneasy. Good heavens, the hired help may well get in on this! So long as you can keep it separate from the hoi-polloi, you may well be able to control both it and them—exactly what Jefferson seems to have had in mind. It had to be controlled, otherwise these fanatics might get really serious about their faith and then where would we be?

It would seem that there is no way around this impasse between intellect and faith, between faith and reason. Academics have had a heyday at the expense of the truly faithful, while the truly faithful have, if truth be told, given them uproariously funny material from which to select effigies. At the same time, academics have given the truly faithful every reason to distrust them. Academics have done their level best to make of faith something lower than snake-handling, spider's legs, and vats of effervescent dry ice. Voodooism comes to mind when one thinks of the manner in which academics have handled those whose faith speaks of miracles and the salvific love of God. Academics will not cotton to anything that does not so sublimate the faith as to divorce it from its *fons et origio,* and leave it emcuate of meaning.

This is what makes a reexamination of Newman's Idea of the University such a profoundly important chapter in the annals of America's uneasy alliance with faith. Before launching into what Pelikan, Yale Sterling Professor of History, has done in his reexamination, it behooves us to turn to what Newman said in the first place.

Newman spoke at a time nearly identical with our own. The Idea of the University was written when the aristocracy of the intellect was nearly entirely on the side of unbelief. Not surprisingly, Newman epitomized this new trend, as evidenced by thinkers such a Thomas Carlyle and George Eliot, as a battle against “liberalism”, or the view that he described as viewing religion as holding or possessing no substantive truth. In an effort to overturn that wrongheaded notion—as wrong then as now—Newman delivered ten

lectures, the first five of which were Newman's response to Dr. Paul Cullen, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland. Cullen had asked for advice on how to set up a university for Catholics in Ireland. Newman responded with five lectures, to which he added five others, and thus was born the infant Idea. Over time, it matured into the sage it has now become.

Newman explains how all of knowledge is of one piece of cloth and where theology fits into this bolt. Summarizing his first three discourses, Newman writes,

> I have argued in Theology's behalf, first from the consideration that whereas it is the very profession of a University to teach all sciences, on this account it cannot exclude Theology without being untrue to its profession. Next I have said that, all sciences being connected together, and having bearings one on another, it is impossible to teach them thoroughly unless they are all taken into account, and Theology among them.

Newman saw religious knowledge, not simply as a code or a way to life, but as intimately connected with all knowledge, from its very beginnings to its most recent discoveries. Moreover, he saw theology not as another branch of knowledge, but as the esemplastic which held together all the rest. Indeed, to know all the rest without theology was, to Newman's mind, to teach undue bias. That Newman was right cannot be denied by anyone who has set foot on one of America's so-called elite institutions and suffered the displeasure of meeting one of its many thousand biased, ill-informed and prejudiced youth.

Newman, in later discourses, focuses on the importance of remembering what education can and cannot do. What it cannot do, Newman declares brazenly, is save. This one fact of Newman's Idea, should make it required reading for all academics. If ever an age needed to be reminded that education is not Messiah, it is this one. Newman writes that,

> Liberal Knowledge, together with the knowledge which effects it, may fitly be sought for its own sake; that it is, however, in addition, of great secular utility, as constituting the best and highest functions of the intellect for social and political life; and lastly, that, considered in a religious aspect, it concurs with Christianity a certain way, and then diverges from it; and consequently proves in the event, sometimes a serviceable ally, sometimes, from its very resemblance to it, an insidious and dangerous foe. (emphasis mine)

Newman understood that education has its place in the world, and has its place as the highest and best function for the intellect in culture. But Newman also understood something most moderns have forgotten: that education also diverges from Christianity, and as such becomes its "insidious and dangerous foe". That modern man has forgotten this, both the spiritually convinced and unconvinced, may be seen in how often we turn to Education-as-Messiah for both political and social ills. Drugs a problem? Educate. Guns a problem? Educate. Sex a problem? Educate. Of course the fact that it most dramatically

and unequivocally does not work makes little difference to the Education-as-Messiah proponents. They may always fall back on the notion that its failure is owing to the amount of education supplied. If it fails, too little education was proffered.

All of this and more made up Newman's Idea, not the least of that more was Newman's magisterial use of language. We come now to that rechauffe put out by Pelikan. What may be said of it? Pelikan's own preliminary words are instructive:

> [The book] could almost well have taken another of [Newman's] books as a model and called itself *Apologia pro Vita Sua,* for it is in some ways a personal essay about how I define my vocation as well as a book about how I define the university.

Pelikan sees the need for such a book because "... there is a storm breaking upon the university again, and this time from the north, south, east, and west." So far, so good. But Pelikan diverges almost immediately from Newman by taking as metaphor, the university as church. Drawing parallels from the occasion of storms against the church as identical to those against the university today, Pelikan runs through a brief *catalogue raisonne,* citing those books like Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind,* and books by D'Souza, Page, Sykes, Kimball and others. Pelikan doesn't discount these critics exactly, but he makes it clear that he does not want to be included in their number. "University-bashing seems to have become a favorite sport", he writes, as if this mere sport grew up out of a vacuum of academics who had little to do. He even cites Newman's charge against them as "sore, suspicious and resentful" (a charge Newman leveled against critics of the *church*), as if their charges arose out of pituitary-envy. But he does not discount them entirely. And here he cites Luther as his locus classicus, for he, Pelikan, is too doing what he "never wanted to [do] and [does] not want to do...now." Pelikan, like Luther, is "forced and driven into this position in the first place when I had to become a Doctor of Holy Scripture against my will."

Now here is a matter of curiosity at the very least. Pelikan does not discount the critics of the university, though he does not want to be included in their number, or at least, wishes to distance himself from them. Moreover, he sees the danger in his colleges hiding behind parietal walls, failing to account for the infection that is, definitely present. All of this could be counted a gain in the effort to bridle the university—liberal education—into the barn of good sense if Pelikan had ended it there. But his constant use of imagery from the church, from the Reformers and, for heaven's sake, from the Apocalypse (pp.15ff), does make one wonder if he has forgotten Newman's injunction that Education Isn't Messiah. To couch the university, even metaphorically, in scriptural language, seems to play right into the hands of the enemy. It even forgets Luther's marvelous line, or the one attributed to him, that the "intellect is the devil's whore". But let this pass.

The church as university has been through the four horsemen, says Pelikan, and has survived, albeit, barely: war, famine, disease and death, or "wild beasts of the earth". Pelikan goes on to argue that "knowledge and virtue are not identical, and the expulsion

of ignorance by knowledge will not be enough to deal with spiritual realities and moral challenges of the future. No one has to be literate to be trampled underfoot by any of the Four Horsemen, who often tend to be indifferent to the educational level of their victims." This is sound advice, and on that should be applauded. What would have strengthened it more, however, would have been if Pelikan had written: "No one has to be literate to be trampled by any of the Four Horsemen. It's just their job is so much easier if you are."

Pelikan spends one chapter discussing "first principles" and brings to bear upon this theme his voluminous and expansive learning. Indeed, it is not said hyperbolically that Pelikan may be the most informed individual writing on this matter today. But being well informed does not automatically equate to being well-reasoned, just as wide wit does not mean you'll be rich. On the contrary, Pelikan, when writing about science and faith, defers rather to science. Pelikan writes,

> [t]he first principles which Newman and Maritain spoke seemed to be uncomfortably close to the dogma that had, according to Newman's own words, been the fundamental principle of his religion from the age of fifteen.... If as Newman said in his lecture of 1855... "the Church has a sovereign authority, and, when it speaks ex cathedra, must be obeyed" ..has made it seem better to disdain the entire quest for first principles...than to jeopardize the university at its very heart, which was freedom of inquiry.

The allegiance is, then declared. And while Pelikan is not myrmidonically affixed to the university above all else, he heartily believes that "the modern university is not as bereft of positive resources for an inquiry into its first principles as many critics would have us believe." Despite colossal failures of education to the contrary, hope springs eternal.

Though the chapter on the sciences comes off sounding as if Pelikan and Newman agree, there runs through it a nervous concinnity. Pelikan quotes mostly those parts of Newman's work that prove him "open-minded", such as Newman's declaration that "Great minds need elbow room". Pelikan even understands this "elbow room" to be within the authority of the church. But he then overturns the tables in a kind of intellectual bouleveresment to argue that universities should be places where wide diversity reigns; he has, after all, made the metaphorical transition of making the church, the university. This is a clear instance of fence dismantling without a clear indication that there is fertile understanding of why the fence was put up to begin with. In an astonishing instance of self-assessment and revelation, Pelikan asserts:

> Because I have been disappointed so often in institutional Christendom and because, by contrast, the university has been for almost half a century the chief repository of truth and the community of wisdom to me personally, and is (in a metaphor that is eminently applicable both to the church and to the university) my spiritual mother who has reared and nourished me, my "Alma Mater"...I have sometimes been in danger of regarding it as the embodiment of the One Holy and Apostolic Church affirmed in the Nicene Creed. (p. 66)

Though he immediately adds that the university is “*not*”that, he nowhere reveals that he really believes it isn't. How any modern could be disappointed in Christendom and *not* even more disappointed in education is beyond comprehension. (Incidentally, the quote is representative of the marathon race Pelikan's style often imitates. It isn't that there are passages that are longer; individual sentences are.)

In the remaining chapters, Newman deals with the business of the university, how knowledge is advanced through it, its dissemination (and diffusion) through publishing, its duties to society, and more. What we have is a clear picture of Education, or Liberal Knowledge-as-Messiah. University learning, when properly executed, can save society—all of it—including its professoriate. The piacular professoriate could not be in more need of a message of salvation. But what brought it to this need cannot be the very thing that saves it.

Pelikan seems unwilling to realize that when education worked well, it worked best in the confines of religious walls. The how of education is the easy part; it's the why that really bugs us. Only religious instruction can teach both. Granted, it fails, and miserably at times, but only because its opponents are too impatient to hear its claims. Modern society is a longitudinal study of the (correct) claims made by Christian praxis.

Pelikan falls victim to the same delusion as Carlyle, Eliot and others of the same period, viz., that there is such a thing as Secular Christianity and that it will establish as moral and as free a world as Christianity itself. What Pelikan, and Carlyle before him, failed to anticipate is that virtue, as well as evil, unbridled by the constraints of faith, devolves into a kind of devil gone mad. Both weapons kill, but in different ways. The university without being accompanied and constrained by faith is like Hazel Motes's Church Without Christ. The end result is madness and an all-overish feeling of, “What's the point?”

Does this mean, then, that Pelikan's *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* is inutile? It depends. If the book is read as a guide of a modern examination of the university and the good that can come of it, it is a useful tool. If the book is read merely for its expansive and impressive erudition, here again it will not disappoint. But if it is read as a guide to the construction of the modern university, a kind of paradigmatic *vade mecum* for future reform, it is valueless. What we will get from a reconstruction of the university along Pelikan's guide will be the university precisely as is it is today. If what is called for is reform, one will need the refiner's fire, and for that one must turn to one of the Master's smithies, Newman's *Idea of a University.*