The Catholic University in the World and the World in the Catholic University: Community, Value, and Conversation

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This essay begins by asking especially about the nature of the Catholic "academy," or rather the Catholic "university" itself. We find that the world is already in the Catholic university, and that not all of the world is Catholic. This raises the question of what we have in common as we pursue our work. A Catholic university is committed to some sense of shared vision, and tries to promote that by projecting a transcendent value. The latter is not accepted by everyone at the university, and so we have disparity about who we are. The essay explores different conceptions of community, trying to show that a transcendent value goes hand in hand with a sense of solidarity. It then returns to the question of value, and settles on Christian love. A self-critical Christian theology must count among its tasks preserving the Christian experiences of love and community, including at the university. This does not mean that theology defines the mission, but does assign it a central place.

In our concern with the role of the university in the world, we are at risk of forgetting that the world itself is already in the university—in its students, its faculty, and the wide range of goals pursued by a diverse population. This does not mean that the university can address itself to the world solely in the form of reflecting on its inner constitution, but instead that if it wishes to look in any concerted way to the world beyond its gates

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or property lines it cannot pass over the effort of asking who and what make up its community. Only with this in view can there be a real chance of promoting values that define, unite, and perhaps motivate without suppression or exclusion.

One element of our thinking that stands in the way of these efforts is some confusion over the precise natures of "university" and "academy," which we tend to accept as interchangeable. Rather than pretending to settle an equivocation in ordinary speech, we might take a lesson from history. "Academy" predates "university," and has long had another meaning. The institution of the university is of medieval and generally Christian origin, and makes way for the reactions that produce the modern secular variants that remain prominent. These historical developments produce intellectual attitudes found in scholarship and teaching today.

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The root of the institution that is both fully Catholic and fully a university must be planted in a reflective and open theology—that is, a theology capable of maintaining open dialogue with the other fields without ceasing to promote values registered in revelation and tradition. If those values are entailed in the Incarnation and Resurrection, then the demands of Catholic university education are best understood as a call back to the principles of Catholic faith.

Let us consider these proposals more closely.

Academy and University as Intellectual Attitudes

The word "academy" is to my mind of uncertain meaning. Its origin and lineage are well known by classicists and philosophers. In the early fourth century BC, what had previously been only an olive grove dedicated to Athena, goddess of wisdom, became the site of a school whose head (*scholarchēs*) was Plato. Before there was a school, the place was already called *Akademia*, after a legendary hero, Akademos, who spared Athens by telling invaders where to find the wrongly abducted Helen—she who would later be found at the center of the Trojan war. When Akademos died, the grove was planted in his memory and dedicated to the goddess of wisdom, whereupon it became a likely place for Plato to form students in philosophy. It is to Socrates, of course, that we are indebted for the emergence of philosophy as a distinctive way of living and thinking, but it was his student Plato who set that down in writing and placed it at the center of a teaching that was conducted in a well-defined location. Academies of this Platonic inspiration persisted, or perhaps recurred, mainly in the eastern Mediterranean until at least the sixth century. According to one prominent scholar of Hellenistic culture, their influence may have extended even later, as remnants moved east into present-day Syria and Iraq,

where according to some a revival of Neoplatonic thought emerged by the ninth century.[1]

At least nominally, the institution, still with a Platonic inspiration, was revived in a situation of some uncertainty during the Italian Renaissance.[2] The fifteenth century academies were founded in reaction variously to dissatisfaction with the lack of cultured thinking on evidence at ecclesial councils, worry among Church authorities about the possible effects of studies pursued without careful coordination, or—no doubt covertly, in most cases—irritation at the degree to which learning was expected to remain coordinated with Church teaching.[3] Notably, the academies in Florence, Rome, and elsewhere during this period expanded the field of inquiry from philosophy to include the humanities as such, and in many instances undertook a retrieval of the insights and achievements of classical Greece and Rome. Moreover, they did so with a robust sense of history, and a willingness to adopt and adapt only selectively among the features of those cultures. The results lie at the origins of modern thought. Among the major figures of this Italian Renaissance humanism is Niccolò Machiavelli, whose political philosophy, developed with constant appeal to Greek and Roman texts, is an important source for modern thought. Machiavelli is interested in a politics founded exclusively on the nature and proclivities of the human, developed without significant reference to anything transcendent or ennobling.

All of this is to observe that in neither Hellenistic Greece nor the Italian Renaissance did what was called an "academy" aspire to the range of learning or face the accompanying challenge of integration that defines a "university" such as we find it today.[4] But it is not to say that the latter somehow emerged all at once as a preferred option. It is true, as is often said, that the root of our word "university" conveys a sense of capacious integration of parts within a whole, but historically this was at first only a matter of the community of scholar-teachers assembled or incorporated in a same place. Those who were thus assembled defined a particular guild whose range of competences was the sum of its members' competences, though no doubt—and this is more than incidental—enhanced by the unity of a shared purpose. It is interesting to consider that one basic feature ensuring this unity was legal: the guild was empowered by law to grant degrees, and the right to determine for itself the qualifications necessary in order to belong. This was the case already by the late twelfth century, when the recognizable

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1   R. Sorabji, *The Philosophy of the Commentators, 200-600 AD: A Sourcebook. Volume I. Psychology (with Ethics and Religion)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), especially p. 11. I am oversimplifying where Sorabji certainly does not.

2   See P.O Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 50-65.

3   The diversity of attitudes among Italian Renaissance thinkers is placed on evidence in P.O. Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1964).

4   Pursuit of natural science was hardly absent during the Italian Renaissance, but it had an impact on the Christian Platonism of the humanists of the academies. Marie Boas Hall finds Pico della Mirandola was content to oppose astrology on religious and moral grounds, but willing to anticipate its final destruction by an improved astronomy. M.B. Hall, *The Scientific Renaissance 1450-1630* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), pp. 42-43.

antecedents of the Western university were still fledgling. But this should not distract us from the fact that the great universities that did begin to appear at roughly that time— Bologna, Paris, Oxford—were in all instances Christian (with important antecedents, it scarcely needs observing, in the monastic and cathedral schools that had already pre- served higher learning for several centuries). And the Christian experience of the world as the whole of what is ordered by God's creative will, soon infused by an Aristotelian philosophy capable of attending to that ordered whole, provided the basis from which a university originally only of scholar-teachers with a common legal status became a university of study in which all aspects of higher learning might be pursued accord- ing to their own excellences while also admitting of rich integration. What became the standard course of study included the seven liberal arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric (the so-called *trivium* that was taught first), arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music theory; eventually, with the arrival of Aristotle, physics, metaphysics, and moral philoso- phy were added.[5] This of course contrasts with the focus on philosophy as a spiritualized pursuit of transcendent conditions in the academies of Platonic lineage, and even with the expanded humanism from which the Italian Renaissance thinkers attend to a range of interests and pursuits. It is also the evident precondition for the sorts of adjustments that define the modern secular university.

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The difference between the Platonic academy and even the Italian Renaissance aca- demy, on the one hand, and the medieval university, on the other, is not merely historical or cultural, and not only a matter of range. It is also a question of vision, or if one prefers, attitude. There is some truth in the caricatured account of this difference. To study in the medieval university was to commit oneself to a vital sense of the whole, to the operative notion that each of the arts speaks intelligibly about a world that is knowable and valu- able and that each of them can be expected to also speak to the others. To study as an academic in the special sense originally reserved for that word is to conduct oneself as if it is not of immediate importance to have contact with other arts, or perhaps even that some of them are relatively unimportant alongside the one or few that one does pursue. This difference of vision or attitude, and not the presence of any particular field of re- search and teaching, represents the real challenge to community at the university. When one compares the medieval university with the academies, what stands out in the former is the presence of what we now call the natural sciences, which in the meantime have

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5   All of this has become well known. Scholarly accounts can be found in the essays by W. Rüegg and J. Verger, in H. de Ridder-Symoens, *History of the University in Europe. Volume I. Universities in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 4-33, 35-64.

become capable of addressing a great deal of the world without need of philosophical or theological guidance. And in turn this helps us to see more easily that what had once, in the medieval context, underwritten the presence of the natural sciences at the university was an understanding of the world and of the life of the mind that informed learning of any kind. As that understanding has atrophied (and sometimes for reasons that one may wish to debate), it has had to make space for another one. Of course, one could give other examples, and would be right to nuance even this one, arguing that some people working in the natural sciences do still have that older vision about their teaching and research, just as some in theology and philosophy have surely become specialized in a manner that converges with modern secular scholarship. Still, it is enough to catch sight of a difference in how one might conduct oneself at the university—and to observe that this is inevitably also a difference of worldviews—to understand that the question of community and thus of a shared sense of purpose or will for concerted action is present in everything that we do.

These matters are decided by the modern secular university in a manner that institutions like our own should approach only cautiously, even as we try to open ourselves to their particular achievements. Whereas the medieval university was originally formulated according to a vision grounded in the Christian and Aristotelian commitments to the knowability of a world that is an ordered whole that seeks the good, the distinctly modern university emerges precisely as those commitments are marginalized or even abandoned. It would call for a lengthy and complicated investigation of its own to explore the manner in which developments in the natural sciences altered our very conceptions of world and knowledge, and in any case the important studies are well known.[6] We might instead pause to consider the significance of shifts by many great universities away from their earlier Christian affiliations. Examples come easily to mind, and the following two are more than symbolic: Harvard's Puritan Christian origins were once on record in its early motto, *Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae* (Truth for Christ and the Church), but both the origins and the motto itself have long been only a distant memory (the current motto is only *Veritas*), and indeed similar things may be observed at many other universities in the United States. Nor is the situation different in much of Europe. At the Catholic University of Leuven, where the question has arisen quite late, there is an ongoing debate over whether to retain the word "Catholic," and though no formal change has been made some faculty members now refer to their home institution only as the "University of Leuven." And while it is true that in Leuven the Catholic image of the *Sedes Sapientiae* has been kept on documents and banners, one truly wonders how many people at the university think much about the fact that this identifies the university, where wisdom is present, with the lap of Mary—and of course identifies the very possibility of wisdom with the Incarnation.[7] It is important to understand these developments correctly. Many

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6   For an account that engages and generally supersedes previous attempts, see R. Brague, *Wisdom of the World. The Human Experience of the Universe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

7   It is a point that Pope Francis appears intent on keeping in view. On a number of occasions, he has

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of these modern universities do still pursue the study of religion and a good number even have theology departments or divinity schools, but the latter are not at the center of the university mission. The shift is interesting. The thinking that is defined by a lived relation with God and Church is welcomed at the university specifically in the form of giving it a particular and no doubt important place, but the effect has been to settle that thinking into a single field among others, so that the presence of Christian identity that once grounded and organized the relations among the arts and sciences is now restricted to only one among them. This way of placing all of the fields on a same level or plane is a defining feature of the modern university. The modern university is not essentially anti-religious or anti-Christian, but it is functionally secular.

A few basic features of the modern secular university call for particular attention. The restriction of religious experience and thought to a single field, however important, has meant the loss of a unifying vision for the entire university that has been succeeded for the most part only by a general commitment to excellence. But this "excellence" is determined, evidently enough, by each field according to its own definition, principles, and standards. One can hardly expect otherwise, yet one also notices the near-absence of a transcendent horizon for the work. If the pursuits of anthropology, psychology, chemistry, and biology, whatever their great differences, are not united in the thought that each explores a facet of the world that is given by God, then what provides each of them, and all of them, with an elevated value that they may serve? One likely response might be that this can be found in a commitment to the service of humanity that is affirmed by a growing number of universities, recently in the expanded informal motto approved at Princeton: "In the Nation's Service and the Service of Humanity."[8] However, if one then wonders quite what is meant by "human," an answer proves elusive, since not only do different fields offer different definitions but some of them go so far as to resist the very notion that there is any such definable thing. There may be no more dramatic expression of the sort of multi-disciplinarity promoted by the modern secular university when it turns away from an attempt to integrate in view of principles enshrined, as it were, above. And it is no mere conundrum. A great deal is at stake, certainly for those scholar-teachers who desire consistency between the convictions they live by and the operative principles that they are to accept in their profession. Perhaps there is relatively

concluded addresses to Catholic educational institutions with a call for the intercession of Mary, *Sedes Sapientiae* (e.g., at the Gregorian in 2013 and to the Congregation for Catholic Education in 2017).

8   Previously, it was "In the Nation's Service and the Service of All Nations." The change was made on October 22, 2016. See www.princeton.edu/news/2016/10/24/princetons-informal-motto-recast-emphasize-service-humanity (retrieved on March 20, 2017).

little difficulty actually working within a field that has no need of a positive relation to the existence of God and the notion that the world is God's ordered creation. But as a matter of personal identity, and of the desire for a community that might share one's values, it may well be different. What will be the state of consciences in the secular university that projects no particular transcendent values such as belong to faith? And what will be the experience of community—what promise, and which limits—if something this fundamental is missing?

None of this is to suggest that modern secular universities are fully exclusive in a manner that religiously affiliated universities are not. In fact, the contrary argument is made much more frequently, and in many cases with good reason. But between the two possibilities is a tension that ought to be kept in view at least by religiously affiliated universities like our own that wish to retain a unifying Christian vision while also pursuing the excellences cultivated perhaps more vigorously at their secular counterparts. We may feel that tension in the form of a challenge to invite the non-religious and other-religious fully into the work of the university—or better, a challenge to articulate a mission that is both fully Christian and capable of affirming the worth of people and of fields that perhaps are not. But we may also hear in this an important question for our times: when we speak of our work, our mission, and our relation to the world—we scholars and teachers in a Catholic university—what is the nature of that "we"?

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Conceptions of "We"

One thing seems certain: the wider culture, at least in the modern North Atlantic, is poorly disposed to offer help with this question of "we." If we struggle today with building a sense of community that would admit differing values, this is surely in part because we allow the discourse of value to be absorbed into the discourse of rights. Too often and too easily, what starts out as a call for welcome and acceptance is heard only as a simple demand for respect. Yet the "we" of those who have equal rights (or should have equal rights) is not fully the "we" of those whose values and the way of life that pursues them would be esteemed. Alone and in itself, the "we" of rights is a "we" of an assembly or aggregate. It presupposes and actively promotes the individual as a bedrock of society. This is its great merit, but also its limit. Solidarity would require more—would recognize a person as somewhat more than a free being deserving of respect—but it would also presuppose something else: one is not prepared to welcome the values of others unless one first understands that members of a community belong to one another

in view of some transcendent principle or aim.[9] Needless to say, the more expansive this principle or aim, the more room there is for people who embrace differing values.[10] This observation enables me to improve upon an earlier remark: Christian universities are charged with exclusivity most often at the level of rights, as when moral clauses are imposed and enforced; secular universities may well claim to protect the rights of more people, but they are still found wanting at the level of values. And yet attempts at Christian universities to articulate a more expansive, welcoming statement of mission face the real possibility that until the language and principles of faith are dropped entirely this will nonetheless be interpreted as the reformulation of old restrictions.

The problem, then, is unmistakable. Modern culture—or if one prefers, modern consciousness—has assimilated a conception of social life that cannot accommodate the requirements for a form of community in which people of differing values might feel welcome—and not because of any resistance to this or that value so much as according to the thought that any unifying vision must necessarily be exclusive. When even the attempt to articulate a statement of university mission that would invite solidarity among people of differing values is frustrated by worries that it harbors a violation of rights, conditions at the university appear to mirror and repeat conditions in society at large. What we are most in need of is also what is most difficult to conceive—a vital motivating sense that a move beyond the conditions of individual respect is not therefore a move away from or beneath them. The ingrained conception of "we" as the aggregate of free subjects deserving of certain rights simply does not support any other reaction.

Our arrival at this modern "we" also has an instructive history. And though it would be a gross oversimplification to suppose that it is essentially the same history as that of the emergence of the modern secular university, it should not be overlooked that the two do emerge from some of the same sources and, indeed, in a readiness to turn away from some of the same medieval culture. What we now recognize as early figures of the modern subject appear in the political philosophies of Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, respectively in sixteenth century Italy and seventeenth century England, both largely in response to long-running civil unrest. In somewhat different ways, each rejects the classical sense that human nature seeks fulfillment in a virtuous life in common with others, and instead proposes to start from the thought that each of us pursues his or her own interests with an amoral persistence that extends all the way to the real possibility of violent aggression. Nature is unruly, in short, and individual natures must be given an overriding motive to limit self-indulgence in order to achieve the security of peace. Order must be imposed, and backed by compelling authority. That said, Machiavelli and Hobbes do have important differences, and much of distinctly modern political thought

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9   In this way of distinguishing respect and solidarity, I follow A. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), especially p. 92f.

10   This is not without its own difficulty. To the degree that a value is maximally inclusive, it must also be formulated in terms that at least appear quite general. The inclusive value is not necessarily the abstract and empty value, but it nonetheless may be difficult for people to embrace it if they cannot identify it with important elements of their own lives.

is taken up in debating them. Machiavelli's political philosophy proposes a top-down legitimation of that authority in the form of a ruthless and cunning leader who exercises sheer power, whereas Hobbes's legitimation is considerably more bottom-up insofar as the sovereign who is expected to enforce the social contracts that citizens agree to abide by is himself in a contract with the people he rules. But in both cases, a citizen is addressed as if fundamentally a single and solitary being who comes, whether freely or under some pressure, to life with others.

Now whatever the eventual impact of these early modern political philosophies, their atomistic conception of human being did not receive its deepest instantiation until some developments in the eighteenth century philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Without Rousseau, the new starting point taken by Machiavelli and Hobbes may have appeared only as precisely that: *a new starting point*, adopted to serve the strategic purpose of developing a theory of governance fully alert to the constant possibility of violence. But from Rousseau we receive indications of a self-relation that would be prior to any active move to relate to others—not according to some withdrawal from the exercise of our freedom but already in the natural movement of our being. What he calls *amour de soi* and distinguishes from the self-love that is mediated by the presence of other people (*amour-propre*) would be a pre-reflective love of self, or an invested interest in oneself that has not yet been interrupted by awareness and still less by moral conscience.[11] One affects oneself, has a feel for oneself, before any sense of others, and it is from this condition that one engages with others. Again, the effect of these notions is to shift claim for original individuality from its context in a political theory constructed in response to specific problems into a straightforward account of our nature. Moreover, Rousseau's conception of human nature also brought into view the idea that each of us is a profoundly individual and therefore *self*-legislating being—that is, one who comes freely to the principles and norms she or he lives by. From here, of course, it is only a short step to the thought that each person, so conceived, demands rights and respect: each of us is free, and it is the task of an enlightened governance to protect and cultivate that freedom in all citizens.

It would not be difficult to show that these propositions influence or at least are consonant with a great deal of subsequent social and political philosophy in the North Atlantic. It is there to be seen, for example, as a starting point for John Rawls's proposal that governance should maximize freedoms without generating inequality.[12] Nor would it be difficult to show that contemporary interest in the narrative context and commu-

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11   Rousseau's manner of addressing individual and social life in terms of distinct forms of self-love is familiar to any reader of his *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, which depicts an unavoidable competition for esteem that has all of the trappings of a loss of innocence. In J.-J. Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 166. It is only later that he pursues the notion of *amour de soi* all the way to an analysis of the particular enjoyment of immediacy to self that is experienced during moments of solitude in nature. In J.-J. Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), pp. 67-70.

12   The *locus classicus* is of course J. Rawls, *Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap, 1971).

nitarian horizon for the exercise of our freedom is meant in no small part to overcome the perceived weaknesses of that way of thinking. Here the attempt is to show that prior to the "we" of assembled freedoms is a "we" of common practices and responsibilities that are received from a tradition. In different ways, both Michael Walzer and Alasdair MacIntyre argue that the freedom of isolated, self-determining individuals is vain contradiction.[13] Between liberalism and communitarianism is the question of our relation as free individuals to whatever community we might belong to—or, in the simpler terms favored by phenomenology, the relation of our subjectivity to *inter*subjectivity. The line from Machiavelli and Hobbes through Rousseau to Rawls addresses us as if individual freedom—subjectivity—were our primary condition. The so-called communitarians argue that it is *community* that is primary, and in so doing they oppose themselves to a prominent feature of modern social theory.

We should not fail to observe the close resemblance of some features of this debate with some features of life at the university, where we are sometimes divided between a commitment to individual rights that does not reach all the way to affirming transcendent values, and a commitment to transcendent values that is sometimes felt to threaten basic rights (academic freedom, for example). What we may take from a review of the history of modern social theory is the thought that the promotion of individual freedom and rights not only emerges with good reason but also is deeply ingrained. What we may take from the liberal-communitarian debate that emerges late in that history is the thought that in order to project values that would promote solidarity, and not only equality, it will also be necessary to articulate a sense of community capable of defining them. Modern social theory was bound to fall short of this. After all, it is one and the same thing to promote freedom and rights as if their meaning would be independent of any community or tradition, and to find it all but impossible to promote a sense of solidarity that truly appeals to real people with distinct ways of life, goals, priorities, and contributions. So, what then? Is this call to solidarity, in our case at the university, therefore necessarily a return to the manner in which a Christian and Aristotelian vision once unified work among medieval scholar-teachers? At first sight, the transcendent value promoted by the medievals would appear to hold some promise for an expansive solidarity: the supreme good is love, and love embraces all. Yet in the medieval conception, this idea is worked out in terms of an innate ordering to an end that each thing seeks according to its nature (this being the very worldhood of the knowable world). Earlier, I alluded to the fact that the sciences no longer hold in view the conception of the world as an ordered whole such as the classical world virtually took for granted. Alongside this, we should now add the fact that the teleological conception of nature is no longer plausible to a large number of people, both within the university and elsewhere. It would be very difficult to argue in its

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13   E.g., M. Walzer, "Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," in *Essays in Political Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 105-106; and A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 23-35 *passim* (contextualizing "emotivism").

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favor when faced by the considerable suspicion our culture now harbors for the very idea that nature, let alone human nature, exhibits a uniformly ordered desire.

With this, we come to the verge of a concise understanding of what lies in the way of deep agreement about who we might be at a university that wishes to be unified by Christian values while also fully open to a plurality of lives and work. There is no reversing our sense of ourselves as free and self-responsible subjects, and probably no erasing our commitment to rights—not historically, not socially, and not in individual consciences. These elements of modern consciousness will have to be integrated by any viable conception of solidarity, not purged from it. The community of those who find fulfillment in serving at least some of the same values will necessarily also have to be a community that continues to recognize our commitment to individual rights, freedom, and responsibility. Yet it is precisely this way with love, in which respect for another person is maintained yet transcended by a desire for their personal fulfillment. In short, we need not worry that solidarity in love would somehow jettison equal rights, but should instead ask ourselves how to make the solidarity that goes by that name plausible to all. And so, the question of whether the Christian university is capable of truly welcoming the world into itself is dependent on the question of whether it is possible to promote love without turning one's back on essential features of our modern condition.[14]

Solidarity, Politics, and Theology[15]

If one wishes to know what this might look like, we might return briefly to the classical world, where teleology was not the only way to conceive of a good that transcends self-interest. In the classical world, one acts in an authentically human manner when one engages in conversation with others. In the fullest sense, this kind of conversation occurs when each interlocutor expresses the meaning of his or her interests in a manner that is in keeping with the rules and practices that prevail in the city, and with an effort to be

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14 I have proposed philosophical grounds for this application of Christian love to the identity of the university in my lecture "The Christian Critique of the University and the Metaphysics of Love," given at the American University of Beirut on March 31, 2016 (forthcoming in T. Nasrallah, ed.). That paper stops short of the central effort of this one: to bring the proposal of love into contact with the experience of solidarity.

15 The thoughts developed in this portion of my text are greatly indebted to a remarkable lecture by Frederick Lawrence, "New Fundamental Theology in a Political Mode."

as clear as possible. Under these conditions, human beings rise up from simple conflict between self-interest and self-interest toward the possibility of something that would be of greater worth than either, and that would unify them in their freedom and desire. From Socrates through Aquinas, this has been the linchpin of political life and the very possibility of an intelligible common good. Two things about it are especially striking: (1) it grounds the experience of community in the fact of language, and (2) it therefore presumes nothing that would belong only to a worldview that many may wish to say has been discredited and left behind. The experience of being with others in language, and of having language in common, is familiar to all of us and there is nothing distinctly pre-modern or modern about it. But there is something more important in it than this: the conversation that is not merely verbal combat among beings who are intent only on their own interests necessarily includes an element of listening. It may even be that real conversation is impossible unless one is capable of listening, since it is only to the degree that one first hears the other person well enough to understand who she really is that one can even attempt to express meaning that she may understand. It is not difficult to see where this leads us. It will be an important goal—virtually a regulative ideal—of the university to promote conversation of this sort, predicated on listening and thus grounded in at least the rudiments of community that is irreducible to mere assembly (we are together in language, not opposed, like beasts, in fear or hunger). In this way, the world that is already present within the university in the form of diverse persons with diverse ways of life and diverse intellectual interests can become the welcome ferment of growth, education, and outreach. And in turn, such a university can expect to find itself in a more productive relation with the rest of the world.

But Christian theology, too, has always recognized that human conversation founded in the practice of listening goes together with the elevation of a higher good.[16] Of course, we all know that Christian life, guided by love, includes a robust concern for the well-being of all of God's creatures, and we might add that this cannot be pursued without the exchange of ideas that would make genuinely concerted action possible. If there is a distinctly Christian approach to well-being, it must intervene in the interaction among lives lived in pursuit of different interests and ends, and raise the question of a good that would transcend the limited good of any one person. This is very like a minimal definition of what theology can be: a call to conversation of the sort that requires listening and thereby opens up the possibility of a transcendent good. Of course, in order to do this effectively—plausibly, and with motivating appeal—theology must itself listen to the world, and in its listening must invoke a good that no one possesses because it transcends everyone, including the theologian herself. Of course, this does not mean that no judgment is possible but rather that the measure for judgment is dispossession in order that the good be served. If we accept it as given that human beings are inclined to pursue their own interests or at least see the world with their own eyes, then

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16   See M. Buckley, *The Catholic University as Promise and Project* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007), p. 136f. Buckley's preferred term is "discussion."

the theological task is as endless as humankind itself. But it is difficult to think that the faith which welcomes a Word that comes into the world from beyond the world can ever have understand its task in any other way. What can it mean to believe in the God who is revealed as Love if not to hear that Word and respond to it, however haltingly and in one's own voice? This kind of theology, conversational rather than propositional, is the only kind that truly has a chance of animating solidarity among human beings whose interests and whose ways of life can vary greatly. This kind of theology would also have good reason to welcome suggestions that it sometimes loses sight of what it means to love. It is the essential function of theology, according to Nicholas Lash, to free us from our propensity for idols.[17] Not even theology is immune from the danger, and it may well be that a corrective will sometimes come from those who work outside the boundaries of its practice. It is one thing for theology to keep us attuned to the good that might bring all of us together, not least at the university, and in that sense one thing for theology to remain at the heart of our efforts. It would be quite another thing for theology to claim the whole of that task without possibility of critique, as if our modern culture and its disciplines could not offer important help. How might it begin to do so? By unfolding a dialectic in which each of us listens to the other and responds to the other as who she is, or how he thinks, but then intervening in that discussion to raise the question of a unifying value, and showing as often as possible that this is a matter not of authoritative dogma but of community and solidarity. In love, the oppositions are there to be seen, and often enough developed as impediments to solidarity. It is not impossible that they are in fact sources of enrichment.

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17   The definition is programmatic and recurrent in Lash's book, *The Beginning and the 'End' of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 21-22, 27, 65, etc.