The Identity of a Catholic University in Post-Christian European Societies: Four Models

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Abstract. — This article reflects on four possible strategies for responding to the growing secularization that is threatening Catholic universities both from without and within. These include the abandonment of all claims to Catholic identity; the reassertion of a distinctively confessional identity; the promotion of the university as a place where so-called Christian values, and humanitarianism in particular, are promoted; and the option to promote Catholic identity in all its particularity by means of an ongoing dialogue with the contemporary pluralistic context. Each of these options say something about both the university's self-understanding and its perception of its relationship to the culture in which it finds itself. The fourth would seem to do more justice to the tradition, and offer more hope for the future of, Catholic universities in an increasingly pluralistic and post-secular context.

Introduction

In this essay I will attempt the difficult task of reflecting upon the specificity of what it means to be a Catholic University in a detraditionalising and religiously pluralising Europe. This exercise is urgent, not only because of the omnipresent and accelerating institutional dechristianisation of the old continent, but also because of growing marketisation in the public and individual spheres, a process whereby the logic of economy threatens to pervade education in universities completely (and also research). In part 1, I will sketch the current context of marketisation and the antidote that Catholic universities, drawing on their spiritual and ethical sources, could offer in response. There is more to education than the production of agents in the economic processes of production and consumption, supply and demand, etc. At the same time I will present the other threat which seems to endanger the profile of Catholic Universities. That is, that the progressive detraditionalisation of the society in which Catholic universities function, does not halt at the front door of the universities, but is mirrored in the religious, ethical and philosophical views and attitudes of staff and students.

Ultimately this process of internal detraditionalisation seems to undermine any resistance to the threat of marketisation. The questions run as follows: how can internally secularising and pluralising Catholic institutions still resist the clutches of the market? What kind of Catholic identity is supporting these efforts? What kind is not? Are drastic measures needed? In Part 2, I will offer four ways in which a Catholic university can answer the challenge of external and internal secularisation, detraditionalisation and pluralisation. Finally, I will argue that the fourth model may offer what is needed to resist the threat of the market.

I. Marketisation and Detraditionalisation: Challenges for Catholic Education

At the European forum one is repeatedly confronted with the complaint that Europe – in other words, the European Union with all its candidate members – should not be reduced to a mere unified market with a shared monetary system. The economic logic of unification ought rather to be embedded in a broader dynamic of political, social, cultural and even spiritual growth. The term ‘embedded’ in this instance means ‘to put into perspective’, or better still, ‘bring into relation with’. Unification is providing Europe with a unique chance to grow into a space in which individuals (and peoples) have the capacity to realise their deepest potential in the widest sense of what it means to be a human person. This is what we call ‘the European dream’.

The Marketisation of Europe

In reality, however, this dream is far from evident. The logic of the market continues to be the powerful driving force behind the unification process, a driving force that is also making its mark in a variety of different domains. This is not unique to Europe, since it also has its place within the more all-embracing globalisation movement that is in turn connected to the so-called postmodern and post-ideological climate. In an insidious manner, the logic of economics has taken the place of the ‘master narratives’ or the ideologies that have tended to inspire modern Europe up to the present. In arenas such as political and social issues, problems with human rights and world peace, cultural creativity and productivity, the calculus of economics has acquired a decisive voice. Many in Europe look upon this evolution with some degree of sadness and are calling for a Europe that is concerned with the entire person and with society as a whole; a political, social, cultural and spiritual Europe.

It has been suggested in this regard that a spiritual Europe ought to be a place in which reflection can be honoured with respect to the deepest questions of religion and other fundamental life options concerning the meaning of human life and social existence, history and the world.¹ Such reflection tends to go hand in hand with a number of particularly concrete concerns from our personal day to day lives (the meaning of life and death, for example, of long-term family relationships and even less-enduring encounters, etc.) and our social existence (such as economic development, the state of world peace after September 11th, 2001, etc.). All things considered, the most powerful source of resistance to all-embracing marketisation is to be found in the appeal for a spiritual Europe. The Catholic Church, among others, is convinced that it can offer direction in our response to these concerns and questions.²

The tension between marketisation and the European dream is also evident in the world of education. Indeed, education as such has become a theme in the negotiations of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), in the context of the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS).³ It goes without saying that this has consequences for our perception of things. Education would appear to have become a service to be located within the dynamic of supply and demand, producer and consumer, costs and benefits. The rectors and administrators of a number of universities and institutes of higher education (brought together under the European University Association) recently protested against the unadulterated economic evaluation of the availability of education.⁴ In the struggle for

1. See e.g. texts of the former Chair of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, such as: *Réunifier l'Europe: Notre mission historique* (Wallenberg Conference, Aspen Institute, November 14, 1999), published on the webpage of 'Groupement d'études et de recherches Notre Europe': <http://www.notre-europe.asso.fr/fichiers/DiscoursXI99.pdf>; and even more explicitly: *Esprit évangélique et construction européenne* (Conference in the Cathedral of Strasbourg, 07.12.1999), published on the webpage of 'Groupement d'études et de recherches Notre Europe': <http://www.notre-europe.asso.fr/fichiers/DiscoursXII99.pdf>.

2. See e.g. Pope John Paul II's post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* (d.d. 28.06.2003), written with reference to the Second Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations). See also the recent book of then Cardinal Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Crossroad, 2005).

3. See the World Trade Organisation's webpage on the current negotiations as regards 'educational services': http://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/serv_e/education_e/education_e.htm

4. More information on the website of the EUA: *GATS (WTO) and the implications for higher education in Europe* (<http://www.unige.ch/eua/>): "In September 2001, EUA signed a Joint Declaration with North American partners [...]. It stated that:

– Higher education is a public good and must continue to be regulated by legitimate public authorities.

Europe, an appropriate evaluation of education is of crucial importance since the large-scale diffusion of knowledge and attitudes has its primary source in the educational establishments. An educational system that is only concerned with the production of ready-made, market-oriented graduates would probably leave the European dream in tatters. The reverse, however, is also true. Education has the potential to play an important role in taking the necessary steps towards the ultimate fulfilment of the European dream by stimulating a broader perspective on the human person, society and the world, and by introducing young people to a set of values which go beyond the purely material. In order to achieve this goal, education can avail itself of the richness of Europe's humanistic and religious traditions that have their roots in a multiplicity of civilisations and historical periods. Likewise, the lessons learned by 'trial and error' in both past and present Europe are of great significance. In the midst of diversity, they give form to what can be called a rich, plural and multi-layered European identity.

Catholic education clearly has a contribution to make in this process. In the first instance of course, and in line with every other educational institution, Catholic education is primarily concerned with the more general task of forming children and young people in the best possible way. At the same time, however, Catholic education is aware of the demands introduced by its faith engagement. The Christian inheritance thus provides the additional foundation for its educational project. In addition to – and in the midst of – its general educational responsibilities, the spiritual dimension becomes a focal point. Does Catholic education have the capacity to succeed in such an endeavour? What, indeed, is the specific contribution of the Catholic university to the dream of a spiritual Europe?

The Detraditionalisation of Europe

Stemming the advancing tide of economic logic is clearly among the most important tasks in this regard, both within the educational system and outside it. As we have said, the promotion of a broad for-

- The GATS regime should not be applied indiscriminately to higher education without a clear understanding of its nature as a mix of public and commercial activities.
- The GATS could stifle the national development of higher education in developing countries.
- Given the internationalisation efforts of universities, there is a need to monitor and evaluate quality. These rules, however, must not emanate from the WTO but from the higher education sector itself."

mation of young people, one which includes the spiritual dimension, is of great significance. Reference to a fundamental Christian reflection on what it means to be human and to have a social existence, on history and the world, and on the engagement of men and women in the promotion of a fuller life both as individuals and as a society, are of primary importance. For the Catholic University, however, this task is hampered by an all-embracing process of detraditionalisation that is slowly but surely spreading throughout Europe as a whole. While religious sentiments may or may not have disappeared, and in some instances may even be enjoying something of a renaissance (a suggestion many sociologists would call into question), nevertheless the traditional, institutional religions have lost significant ground and in many places, at least among the younger generations, this has been reduced to a critical minimum. Affiliations with classical churches have diminished while new religious movements have emerged. As a result, many men and women have sought to fulfil their 'religious' needs on what one might call the new religious market. In many instances, the Catholic Church has found itself reduced to the role of one player among many in such a market. This has given rise to a number of curious paradoxes. I will take the situation in Flanders as an example in this regard since it is the one with which I am most familiar. It will also provide the background for the remainder of this article.

While more or less three quarters of young people in Flanders between the ages of 12 and 18 still attend Catholic schools, and more than half of the older ones are students at Catholic universities and high-schools, more and more Flemish people consider themselves as not really belonging to the Church in spite of the fact that they have been baptised. Research has shown that 54% of Flemish Catholics consider themselves to be on the margins of the Church, only calling upon its services at transitional moments in their lives. The figures concerning Sunday mass attendance are even more harrowing: only 4% of the youngest generation attend Sunday mass on a regular basis (the oldest generation 34 %). Even for the traditional rites of passage that have tended to enjoy reasonable success in Flanders (some argue that this is due to a lack of real alternatives) the trend is far from positive. In 1967, for example, statistics show that 96% of children were baptised; in 1999, the percentage had dropped to 73 (for Belgium as a whole 64%). The figures for Church marriages have fallen from 92% in 1967 to 51% in 1999. In terms of absolute figures, the Church has become a minority in what was once a traditionally Catholic country. If actual Christian engagement is anything to go by (certainly with respect to the younger generations), the figures can

hardly be described as encouraging: only 15% of Catholics can be considered 'engaged' believers.⁵

In concrete terms, this means that the Catholic schools, including the Catholic universities, which still tend to attract a large group of young people, have been forced to undergo an internal process of secularisation, or better still pluralisation, on account of the all-embracing detraditionalisation with which they have been confronted. Here too Catholics, and in particular those Catholics who consider themselves engaged believers, have become a minority. It is not without reason that the Catholic education system, together with many other Catholic organisations that in the past have shaped the Catholic 'pillar' in Flemish society (next to smaller socialist and liberal-atheist pillars),⁶ has been struggling for many years with its own identity. The foundations upon which these social pillars have been resting have succumbed to serious erosion. It is not surprising, therefore, that with the absence of Christian Democrats in the Belgian government – for the first time in decades – certain organisations have scrapped the 'C' (for Christian or Catholic) from their name. This identifying title had evidently become a hollow phrase without substance.

It is for this reason that the question of the contribution of Catholic universities in providing Europe with a potential to resist its marketisation, cannot be answered without an examination of the way in which Catholic education has the potential to fulfil such a task. What, for that matter, is a Catholic university? Do such institutions still have a future? Do they still have meaning in a detraditionalised Europe? How should they present themselves as in the service of Europe on behalf of the Church?

5. These statistics can be found in Karel Dobbelaere, Mark Elchardus, *et al.*, *Verloren zekerheid: De Belgen en hun waarden, overtuigingen en houdingen* (Tiel: Lannoo, 2000).

6. In Flanders, as well as in the Netherlands, Austria, etc., the Church reacted to the modernisation process by constructing an enormous Catholic web of organisations, services, unions and facilities that structured the lives of its own members – often the majority of the inhabitants – from birth to death and accorded them meaning. Hereby the logic of functional differentiation was respected while at the same time the Catholic religious horizon remained in place. This resulted in a very extensive network of Catholic pre-school centres, schools, hospitals and homes for the elderly, cultural, sports, trade, political, socio-economic unions and organisations. For an account of 'pillarisation', see Karel Dobbelaere, *Godsdienst en kerk in een geseculariseerde samenleving*, ed. Rudi Laermans (Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 1998) 85-167 (Part 2: 'Over secularisatie en verzuiling'); see also his "Secularisation, Pillarisation, Religious Involvement and Religious Change in the Low Countries," *World Catholicism in Transition*, ed. T. Gannon (New York: MacMillan, 1988) 80-115.

II. Reconceiving the Identity of Catholic Universities: Four Options

Introductory Remarks

Let me begin by briefly outlining two limitations of the exercise in which I will engage. *First*, the four options that I am about to sketch are related to the context with which I am most familiar: Flanders. I am acutely aware that the educational landscape and the place of the Catholic Church in Flanders may differ significantly from other regions and countries and from the situation of the Church and the Christian faith as a whole. Broadly considered, however, Europe as a whole tends to have been affected by the trend towards detraditionalisation, often referred to in the past as secularisation. *Secondly*, as will soon become evident, the four options upon which I am about to elaborate might be better described as conceptual ideals rather than concrete alternatives. Each takes its point of departure from a specific analysis of an actual situation and endeavours to propose an appropriate profile for a Catholic university in contemporary Europe.⁷ Taking both these limitations into consideration, I remain convinced that, *mutatis mutandis*, the four options provide the basis for a reflection on the (re)configuration of the Catholic identity of schools and universities in many contexts. In other words, I trust that the analyses and ideas I will offer concerning the Flemish context will provide points of comparison and stimulate further reflection, even though they may not be immediately applicable in every situation and context.

For the sake of clarity, it might be wise to briefly return to my outline of the situation of Catholic education in Flanders. First of all, we are dealing with educational institutions that find themselves confronted with an accelerated secularising and detraditionalising society in which they are still able to maintain their market share – at first sight in spite of secularisation. On closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that these institutions are engaged in secularisation and pluralisation from within, from the perspective of staff and students and even with respect to university governance. Nevertheless, the substantial market share remains intact and this would be in part due to the aura of quality and professionalism associated with Catholic education. In this arena Catholic

7. For this text I have made use of Lieven Boeve, “‘Katholieke’ universiteit: vier denkpistes,” *Ethische Perspectieven* 10 (2001) 250-258. For the broader context of this reflection, see also my *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, 30 (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2003).

institutions operate efficiently and in a client-oriented manner as well as taking care to ally themselves to non (or non practising) Christians. Many a time, however, this aura of quality also seems to imply another dimension that is far less evident, one which quite possibly has to do with the perception of an often implicit, underlying (personalistic) value-orientation that associates itself with Christian organisations. Whether the internal secularisation also affects (or has already affected) this continuing perception of value-orientation nowadays, is not obvious at this moment. Alternative educational systems, or so-called 'neutral' public education, have not profited to any significant extent from progressive detraditionalisation and its consequences for the Church. Finally, these organisations remain concerned in the debates between the advocates and opponents of (Catholic) pillarisation.⁸ Here it is not always clear whether recent pleas for de-pillarisation are not in fact disguised attempts to ban religions and worldviews from the public life. The formation of governments without the Christian Democrats has meanwhile placed this issue at the top of the agenda. Moreover similar pleas take advantage of the growing call for the rationalisation of institutions, people and resources. To an increasing degree a detraditionalised society hardly appears to divide people on the basis of different fundamental life options. Why then not drastically restructure society by eliminating the ideological divisions in the organisation of public life (health care, education, cultural, social and economic organisations, etc.)?

Each of the four options outlined here will propose elements of a response, both at the analytical and the normative levels, to the question concerning the fundamental profile being practised in the actual context, on the one hand, and the desired fundamental profile on the other.

The first two options would appear to be the most drastic: *institutional secularisation* versus *institutional reconfessionalisation*. In the first instance, the 'C' is officially dropped and the Catholic background and inspiration no longer plays an explicit role for the internal organisation, education, research and other services rendered. For example, the 'Catholic University of Leuven' then becomes 'University of Leuven', an institution in which Christians still may participate – but not necessarily so. On the other end of the spectrum an active reprofiling of the university as 'Catholic' is envisaged. This implies among other things the acknowledgement that an explicit and encompassing 'Catholic' identity of the university is in fact its *raison d'être* and the formation of Catholic intellectuals its chief aim. This naturally has consequences for the recruitment

8. For this concept, see note 6.

of staff members and students. Although it is often feared that such reconsecration would result in a ghetto-university, this need not necessarily be the case.

The remaining two options represent a qualified relationship between the Christian faith and culture: they either endeavour to establish a broad-based basic platform for Catholic education inspired by so-called Christian values or seek to establish a new profile for the Christian faith in a university in which a plurality of fundamental life options among students and staff is both recognised and respected. As regards the *first* of these two strategies: this option favours '*sensitivity to and education of values from a Christian perspective*' and is still being taken on a large scale in Flemish Christian public organisations. What is being sought after is a project that is still linked to Christian values – a kind of Christian humanism – in which non-believers can also engage. In fact, this option strives for an as large as possible consensus between belief and culture (which because of advancing detraditionalisation is becoming increasingly more generalised, less specifically Christian). As regards the *second* strategy mentioned, a shared consensus inspired by Christianity no longer constitutes the point of departure for establishing the profile of the Catholic university, but rather the recognition of both internal and external plurality at the level of fundamental life options on the one hand and the specific character of the Christian faith in such a context on the other. In other words, an effort is made to provide *the Christian faith with a recognisable presence in the midst of plurality* based on the conviction that it continues to offer meaning in a relevant way, even in the context of plurality. Students and personnel, whatever their convictions may be, are thus challenged to reflect on their fundamental life options in dialogue and/or confrontation with the Christian faith tradition.

For a proper understanding it is also necessary to remark in advance that now and then a distinction needs to be made, firstly, between what is institutionally held as the desired profile and what is actually practised by this institution, and secondly, what is intended institutionally and what is practised by individuals or groups from this institution. Further, these options are formulated as ideal-types, and function as models to engender further reflection, rather than accurately describing existing institutions, even if it remains true that these models can be repeatedly illustrated with concrete examples.

Finally, each option takes, *grosso modo*, a particular stand with respect to five variables – giving responses to five questions: (a) What is the desired fundamental profile at the institutional level? What influence does this have on the educational project? (b) What basic supports are

present and/or necessary for the establishment of such a profile and who is to maintain them? (c) What motives legitimate the acquired profile both from the cultural perspective and from that of the believer and theology? (d) What strategies should be followed in order to realise the establishment of this profile? What measures and signs, both in internally (*ad intra*) and with respect to society at large (*ad extra*), might help in this regard? At last (e): what are the primary difficulties that might tend to hamper the realisation of such an option today?

1. Institutional secularisation

Catholic universities transform themselves into pluralistic educational institutions in which the Christian faith has its place among other fundamental life options, and thus no longer enjoys any primacy or privilege.

(a) Our first option is to allow for *institutional secularisation* as a consequence of the secularisation and pluralisation process at work in society at large and within the Flemish Catholic university in particular. The establishment of such a profile tends to result in a neutral or neutral-pluralistic institution, an institution in which Christians are present although not necessarily so. Explicit reference to the Christian tradition out of which a particular institution has evolved (for example in the name it adopts) is then abandoned. This is comparable to the path which the former explicitly Christian organisation of small enterprises (NCMV), now the union of self-employed entrepreneurs (UNIZO), has taken; as well as the French-speaking Belgian Christian Democrats in changing their name into 'Centre Démocratique Humaniste'. Given the transformations at work in society as a whole, such a process of institutional secularisation would be far from unusual. One can expect that more organisations from the former Christian pillar will go in the same direction.

As a matter of fact, such a development would simply constitute an adaptation of the university's profile to reality, at least in such instances where the process of detraditionalisation is tangible at every level and has clearly had its effect on the necessary support systems of the Catholic university as such. This need not constitute an immediate problem for Christians. As is the case in other non-confessional organisations, the Christian faith can, in principle, have a role to play where Christians are sufficient in number and where they become involved in discussions concerning the direction the organisation desires to follow. An evident advantage of institutional secularisation is the fact that an organisation's *raison d'être* is no longer subject to frequent confrontation with mechanisms intent on limiting its scope. The latter consist of those who stubbornly

desire to uphold the strictly Catholic profile of the organisation (even though the support systems no longer exist) as well as those who take offence at such a profile because it reminds them of a period in which the Catholic Church had a monopoly in matters concerning personal fundamental life options.

(b) It is important, however, that we avoid potential misunderstandings in this regard. A neutral or pluralistic organisation, or in our case a no longer explicitly Christian organisation, continues to maintain a profile at the level of fundamental life options. Indeed, a distinction has to be made between the conscious refusal to uphold any profile (neutrality) on the one hand and the explicit acceptance of internal plurality (pluralism) on the other. Both are radically divergent fundamental options. Pluralistic organisations maintain, in principle, openness for debate on matters of faith and other fundamental life options and are expected to stimulate the establishment of a culture in which such debate can take place. Christians in such circumstances are free to introduce explicitly their particular perspective. In the case of explicit neutrality, however, the debate in question is silenced and neither Christians nor non-Christians have the freedom to make a difference. Neutrality in such instances is often far from neutral. Where it is claimed, there are often unexpressed fundamental life options at its foundations, stemming from positivistic motivations and/or naïve Enlightenment thinking. Neutrality, it would seem, is then only one among many of the fundamental life options, a participant in the debate rather than an uninvolved observer maintaining the capability to watch from a distance and judge independently.

(c) From the *cultural* perspective, such a movement can be motivated by insisting that the secularisation process has thus been effected at the institutional level: the logic of detraditionalisation is realised at the societal level. For Christians, however, this manoeuvre can also be motivated at the *theological* level. Institutions that are no longer *de facto* in the majority Christian, and in which many of those involved no longer confess themselves either explicitly or implicitly to be members of the Catholic Church, might be better advised to avoid the reference to Christian or Catholic in their identifying title. To neglect to change titles would be to encourage confusion with respect to the specificity of the Christian faith and to hinder the renewal of the profile and promotion of the faith and the church in a plural society and culture. In such a university a new, no longer exclusively Christian education project can head in a resolutely pluralistic direction (even taking into account its Christian roots if it chooses). Students then are formed as broad-trained intellectuals and experts, who are ready to participate actively in the contemporary

culture and society of radical plurality and difference as regards people's fundamental life options and religious affiliations.

(d) To follow this option is to recognise *ad intra* an already existing neglect and blurring of identity and to relieve the internal pressure from detraditionalisation. A number of symbols are likely to vanish in the process – the 'C', the official Eucharistic celebration at the beginning of the year and on the Patron's feast, and any general obligations regarding religious education. Probably the disciplines of religious studies and world religions would be more extensively developed at the faculty of theology and religious studies, or, next to a Catholic faculty, faculties of other denominations or religions would be added. Christians are nevertheless set free to organise themselves as Christians in a voluntary manner within the pluralistic institution. The option for Catholic religious education side by side with courses dealing with other fundamental life options might attract an interested public etc. The advantages *ad extra* are legion: the inheritance of the politics of 'pillarisation' is abandoned; religion is no longer a stumbling block in discussions concerning the rationalisation of the educational landscape or the recruitment of personnel and students. It would also facilitate the actions of the university in the political arena, e.g. to get supplementary funding.

(e) The question remains, however, as to whether the achievement of a genuinely pluralistic university is not a matter of biting off more than one can chew in the current Flemish context. Present day Flanders would still appear to be caught up in processes of identity blurring rather than in processes in which specifying one's identity and establishing a degree of respect for plurality and otherness at the level of fundamental life options is valued as crucial for the future of society. Moreover – and partly as a consequence of increasing marketisation – the space liberated by detraditionalisation for the play of multiple fundamental life options faces the danger of being unobtrusively filled by a sort of libertarian ideology of individual freedom. *Anything goes* – what is considered true, good and beautiful is actually arbitrary and dependent on individual preference. The demand for such an absolutised freedom limits every form of social regulation and stands open to being devoured by the process of marketisation. Freedom thus becomes the freedom of the consumer, dictated by supply and demand, by marketing and purchasing power.

2. Institutional Reconfessionalisation

Catholic education aims at the explicit expression of its Catholic identity and organises its educational system for Catholics and by Catholics.

(a) The option for institutional secularisation, which is the adaptation of one's profile to the reality of detraditionalisation, is not, however, the only plausible procedure. Equally conceivable, if at first sight more difficult to realise, is the option for *institutional reconversionalisation*. A reconversionalised Catholic university presents itself as an educational establishment intended for the formation of Catholic students. Its formation project is formulated and legitimised on the basis of its strong association with the Christian faith and the Catholic faith community in Flanders. In France, a country where detraditionalisation and pluralisation are more distinctly noticeable, such confessional institutions exist and are relatively successful (consider, for instance, the Institut Catholique in Paris).

(b) Concerning the necessary basis, reconversionalisation presumes that a substantial number of the students and personnel practise their Catholic faith and are actively engaged in the Catholic faith community. Given the fact of widespread secularisation, such universities will no longer be likely to enjoy the status of majority institutions. Nevertheless, if developments analogous to those in France persist here as well, they are not likely to fade away altogether. The Catholic profile of such an institution can vary from highly conservative and defensive to open and communicative. While the fear that such institutions will necessarily form closed ghettos is generally unfounded (and probably a residue of modern criticism of religion and Church) it remains a risk, nevertheless, and calls for a degree of ongoing caution. Catholic intellectuals, however, need not be viewed as narrow-minded cultural misfits. Rooted in a self-conscious familiarity with their own traditions and perspectives and embedded in the current plural context, they have the capacity to participate actively in society and culture and thus contribute to the formation of plurality as such. The same critical-loyal attitude is also to be expected of them within the Church. Catholic intellectuals stand at the forefront of the unremitting recontextualisation movement towards which Christian faith is challenged. After all, faith is not about a collection of other-worldly truths. As truth-to-live-by, Christian faith has time and again to be recontextualised due to changes in the surrounding contexts in which it is involved. Indeed recontextualisation is an ongoing task driven by the unceasing dialogue that exists between Christian truth claims and culture and society. Because of this there is a legitimate diversity also within Catholic belief and community life.

(c) While the feasibility of reconversionalisation in the current Flemish context would appear to be a matter of dispute, the plausibility of it is not. Open reconversionalisation can be legitimised on both cultural

and theological grounds. At the *cultural* level, there is no need to assume that the de-pillarisation of education will lead to overall 'sameness'. It can also facilitate legitimate plurality in terms of educational projects. This second option, therefore, can also be seen as a consequence of the logic of social detraditionalisation. From the *theological* perspective, it is a foregone conclusion that a Catholic educational project would be impossible without a substantial and active bond with the Christian faith and the Catholic faith community. Faith is not something one possesses, it is a dynamic reality made concrete in one's life, experienced in community and celebrated ritually.

(d) A project supported from within, in which the specificity of the Christian faith is given its proper place, calls for appropriate management, especially with respect to the recruitment of personnel. Side by side with quality and efficiency, religious matters will also have a significant role to play in the policies of such management. Identity is clearly more than the application of a label or the insistence on a particular name. Furthermore, reconfessionalisation demands that the institution ascribes to an unambiguous and public Christian identity via, among other things, an educational project that explicitly facilitates spirituality and faith formation in addition to its more classical educational objectives. In the external forum, reconfessionalisation has the right to appeal to a – at least in Belgium – constitutionally guaranteed 'freedom of education'.

(e) It goes without saying, however, that a (high) price will have to be paid in this regard. Fundamental life options thus acquire a more explicit role than ever before as an argument in the discussion surrounding the educational landscape. Whether society as such is ready to provide the necessary means for such a project – in Belgium all education is state-funded – remains open to question.

3. The modern Catholic educational project

Teaching values from a Christian perspective – a university for all those who share the Christian values

(a) Options one and two stand in significant contrast to option three. The profile subscribed to in the third option is that of the *teaching of values from a Christian perspective*. This option has tended to enjoy a degree of priority in the many organisations and institutes of the Flemish Catholic pillar in the last decades. Catholic schools and universities had become increasingly aware that both their public and their personnel had undergone a significant degree of secularisation, even though

they may have belonged to the Christian tradition that was ultimately responsible for guiding them through individual, family, social and cultural existence. Riding the waves of both external and internal secularisation, this option reformulates the Catholic teaching project into a conglomeration of so-called Christian values that have the potential to appeal to both non-Christians and post-Christians. The various identity profiles, charters, mission statements, brochures and congresses stemming from the 70's and 80's and surviving in some cases up to the present day are a good illustration of this tendency. In each instance, those responsible endeavoured to establish a still binding common basis that was then elaborated in Christian terms. The world of ethics tended to be the primary source in this regard. Christian inspiration was identified with the tradition of Christian values.⁹ To be a Christian was to be at the service of humanity as a whole, to be active in one's solidarity with the weak, the wounded, and the persecuted. While this was occasionally placed in the context of vague religious sentiment, it was rarely founded in a personal option for and explicit relationship with God. It remains a question as to whether one can presume that many such values were also practised and passed on in non-Catholic institutions staffed by dynamic and motivated personnel. According to those who support the second option (as well as the fourth) such a determination of a university's profile has led inevitably to an insidious secularisation of the Christian faith via ethics. For the supporters of the first option, both Christians and non-Christians, it has led to a concealed ideologisation.

(b) In broader terms, such determination of a university's profile endeavoured to achieve the best consensus possible between the prevailing culture and the Christian faith. It was presumed, in support of this procedure, that a substantial number of the institution's members considered the so-called Christian values to be at the very least important.

(c) From the *cultural* perspective this third option was motivated as follows. If one takes secularisation seriously, the Christian faith can only continue to have any kind of binding force if it is translated into a general and communicable core of values that even non-Christians recognise as worthwhile. The dynamic of secularisation itself is clearly recognisable

9. Enumerations taken from Maryleen Verhavert & Lieven Boeve, "Kiemkracht in het secundair onderwijs: Enige beschouwingen," A. De Wolf, *et al.*, *Kiemkracht: Verslagbundel van het bezinningscongres van het Vlaams Secretariaat van het Katholiek Onderwijs* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1998) 136-144. In this evaluation the authors report the wrestling of Catholic secondary education with internal pluralisation, balanced between what we here define as option 3 and 4, with rather naive steps in the direction of option 2.

here: the Christian faith is stripped of its mythological framework and presented in its human significance. *Theologically* speaking, it was argued that ethics formed the best point of contact in building a bridge (correlation) between the Christian faith and the prevailing culture. In addition, it was maintained that one could not distinguish between that which is 'genuinely Christian' and that which is 'genuinely human'. Christians in modern society work together with non-Christians towards greater humanity. From the perspective of the other options, however, it is not always clear whether modern society is recuperating the Christian faith or the other way round.

(d) This option was strategically important – and indeed successful – because it placed the plausibility and relevance of the Christian faith in the foreground. Co-existence between modern culture and the Christian faith was made possible both internally and externally. Christians and Christian organisations, moreover, were considered capable of playing a part in the formation of the aspirations of modernity. In other words, a Catholic university had the capacity to produce ethically formed and responsible subjects who could take on the role of pioneers in modern society. The Catholic university was thus far from 'dangerous' in terms of one's fundamental life options.

(e) Recent history has revealed, however, that such a search for the lowest common denominator has tended to overemphasise ethics and detach it *de facto* from the life of faith as a whole that ultimately has its roots in a commonly experienced relationship with the God of Jesus Christ. At the very least, many aspects and practices of the faith tended to be relativised and even functionalised. Many today are conscious of the fact that the 'Christian elaboration' of 'Christian values' without the spirituality of the believer is merely a reduplication of that which can be communicated and transmitted without a Christian label. The very specificity of the Christian faith as such is ultimately the first victim. As long as there was a sufficient overlap between Christian faith and modern culture such a strategy remained convincing, at least for some. This overlap, however, has been wiped out by the process of detraditionalisation. Today, those who too easily presume that the 'Christian faith' and 'prevailing culture' are part of the same continuum are likely not to take the plurality of 'fundamental life options' and religions, and the specific position of the Christian faith therein, seriously.¹⁰

10. Cf. my article "When Secularisation Turns into Detraditionalisation and Pluralisation: Faith in Search of Understanding," *ET-Bulletin* 12 (2001) 258-270.

4. Catholic universities at the service of identity formation in a plural context

Identity formation in a plural context, for Christians and non-Christians alike, based on the recognition of an internal and external plurality of fundamental life options and religions, and in dialogue with the Christian faith, which has become more conscious of its own particularity and seeks to profile itself again in this context of plurality.

(a) It is not so simple for the fourth option to find acceptance on a conceptual level. The balances striven for within it are so delicate that distortion or misrepresentation occurs easily. Nonetheless, this option is quite possibly the most fruitful, certainly in current circumstances (even if options one and two are by principle equally plausible). In line with the fourth option, the Catholic university retains its specific signature while recognising the increasing pluralisation and detraditionalisation at work among its students and personnel. As a service to society on behalf of the Catholic Church it takes this altered situation seriously and reconsiders its fundamental mission.

This option aims at a renewed Christian profile in a context of religious and non-religious plurality. It presumes (a) the internal detraditionalisation and pluralisation of its students and personnel, and (b) the specific identity of the Christian faith in the midst of such plurality. It no longer presumes the postulation of a broadly Christian and culturally plausible consensus.

The service of the Catholic university to both Church and society consists in the provision of a training ground for fundamental reflection in dialogue or confrontation with the Christian faith. Via its educational programmes, the university teaches its students, both Christian and non-Christian, to reflect on their own fundamental life options and to live side by side with religious and philosophical diversity. In so doing it prepares those in its charge for active participation in a pluralistic, multi- or inter-cultural society. It considers this to be its social vocation (and also, as we shall see, its theological project). Such a goal, however, does not only imply the formal recognition of plurality, it also implies the adoption of a specific position within this given plurality. This is expressed, for example, in the determination of the primary preconditions for dialogue and confrontation that are acquired through negotiation and dialogue itself rather than as presumed universal principles. The university engages itself in the societal debate, in an analogous manner, multi-voiced if need be, through its research and the services it renders. This option no longer presumes the postulation of continuity between culture and faith. It is aware, rather, of plurality and difference (discontinuity).

This vision of the relationship between plural society and the Christian faith, for the first time, formed the explicit background for the reorganisation of the Roman Catholic religious education programme in secondary schools (1998-2000) in Flanders.¹¹ One of the primary aims of the reform insists that pupils should be enabled “to account for their own fundamental life option (a) based on an insight into the plurality of fundamental life options characteristic of human speaking, thinking and action and (b) rooted in a dialogue with the meaning offered by the Christian faith in such a context.” Religious education is thus a service to ‘the achievement of full humanity’ of the pupils, both Christian and non-Christian. For the Christians among them, this clearly includes a compelling invitation to accept the challenge to deepen and reflectively clarify their own faith in dialogue with others, thereby themselves developing further the Christian narrative tradition in a contextually embedded manner. Non-Christians are challenged in such a dialogue to examine and reflect upon their own particular profile. The recognition of specificity and difference prevents them from reducing these to indifferent sameness in a broader, all-embracing consensus, and constitutes the specific avenue along which the very process of reflection is conducted.¹²

(b) Such a Catholic project evidently presupposes the presence of a recognisable group of self-aware Christians who are willing to enter into the debate concerning fundamental life options. It likewise calls for the increased visibility of religious plurality. The participants in the debate are not measured in the first instance along the axis between extreme ‘churched Christians’ and ‘secularised not-yet or no-longer Christians’ but are located in an arena in which Muslims, Jews, atheists, agnostics, new age adepts etc. also have a place, even though the post-Christian group might still tend to be the largest. This latter group, which stems from a extremely secularised Christian background, only maintains a fragmentary association with the faith and the faith community, expressed, for example, in their occasional (and decreasing) participation in Christian rites of passage and their poor and unintegrated knowledge of the

11. Cf. Lieven Boeve, “Beyond Correlation Strategies: Teaching Religion in a Detraditionalised and Pluralised Context,” *Hermeneutics and Religious Education*, ed. Didier Pollefeyt & Herman Lombaerts, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 180 (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2004) 233-254.

12. The first condition for this of course is that the Christian faith confronts itself as well with the plurality and learns to understand itself precisely in relation to the plurality of fundamental life options (only when the Christian narrative portrays itself – theologically – to be in a ready state to deal with diversity, it is a living path for today). This is the main idea of my monograph mentioned previously, *Interrupting Tradition*.

Christian tradition – in spite of years of religious education and (where appropriate) catechesis.

(c) First of all, this fourth option can be motivated on *cultural* grounds. In a plural context, the preparation of young people for reflection in matters related to religion and other fundamental life options is indispensable. In this broad plural arena, the Christian faith is, structurally speaking, only one option among many. Our society needs people who are able to deal with religious and cultural diversity, who do not consider otherness to be a threat but tend rather to see it as an opportunity for reflection and ultimate enrichment. From the *theological* perspective, the initial awareness emerges that the confrontation/dialogue with otherness will lead the Christian faith today into a confrontation with its own identity and force it to reconsider its attitude towards the other. The process of theological reflection no longer takes the postulation of continuity between faith and culture as its point of departure but rather the difference between the two. The actual context is thus no longer analysed exclusively in terms of secularisation but primarily in terms of pluralisation. The bridge established by the dialogue with culture is no longer intended to form an all-embracing consensus. Rather, it presents the unique contribution(s) that Christians have to offer with respect to identity formation, society and culture. At the same time, Christians today are becoming more and more aware of the fact that the option for Christian faith is no longer supported by a general Christian cultural sensibility, but that it demands a specific and personal engagement, explained as a response to a prior awareness of being called by the God of Jesus Christ.

(d) The implementation of such a strategy implies – *ad intra* – that both the recognition of plurality and the Christian identity are given a better profile. Of primary importance in this regard is the avoidance of the trap into which option three has the tendency to fall, namely the facile presupposition of a consensus elaborated as Christian that binds the entire university together. This provides the advantage that both Christians and non-Christians have the freedom to manifest themselves explicitly as such within the university context and enter into dialogue with one another rooted in their own strengths and insights. Christians are thus enabled to speak freely once again on the basis of their own identity, in the knowledge that what they say does not necessarily bind non-Christians. And of course the reverse is of equal importance.

The university thus remains 'Catholic' because it is, in the first instance, a Christian service – on behalf of the Church – to society, even though Christians may no longer be in the majority. The social project

maintained by such a service is recognised and financially supported by the society. This implies that society as such is conscious of the value of a project that is not rooted in a perspective of neutrality but one that takes an informed and active plurality at the level of fundamental life options as its point of departure.

It is possible that this fourth option is the only one capable of legitimising a Flemish majority Catholic university worthy of its name. Options one and two remain the only other alternatives, option three in my opinion no longer appearing plausible in this regard. The Catholic university, under option four, becomes a training ground for the Christian faith and the Church community as well as for society as a whole. The Church community is enabled in such a university to interact with the plural public forum that characterises today's society and the society of the future in an exercise both in humility and renewed identification. The Christian faith is likewise challenged to recontextualise its own identity and relevance. As a training ground for society, the university forms intellectuals and experts who are able to interact with the complex and plural world of religion and other fundamental life options, people for whom the plurality and otherness present in a multi-cultural society do not constitute a threat but rather a challenge to openness, depth and communication, in respect for the uniqueness of the other; people who are also aware of the threatening equalisation and disempowerment of the many and the other by the processes of globalisation and marketisation, people who are willing to resist such processes and to mobilise the critical potential of their own traditions in situations of both dialogue and conflict.

(e) A major difficulty facing the realisation of this fourth option is the change of attitude it calls for both in the internal and the external arena. Such a change of attitude requires a degree of maturity that may still be at the developmental stage. From the political perspective, the present day ruling political forces have not yet been able to sufficiently exorcise the ghosts of the old ideological differences. The socio-cultural order would appear to be in the grasp of identity blurring and consumptive libertinism. The transition from analysing the current context in terms of pluralisation rather than secularisation has not yet been fully realised.

Conclusion

First, I have argued in the present contribution that the Catholic Church has the capacity to render a service to a multi-faceted Europe, enabling it to rise above the process of marketisation by presenting it

with an all-embracing educational project in which the human person, society and the world are seen in their totality. Such a project has its roots in non-material values and explicitly provides a space for discussion of and reflection upon profound religious and philosophical questions. Europe can only become a community in the most meaningful sense of the term when it also becomes a spiritual Europe. Christians rooted in their own multi-faceted tradition also have something to offer in this regard.

Second, the question as to the capacity of the Catholic university to offer this service to society on behalf of the Church community has been thwarted to a degree by the increasing detraditionalisation that has led, at least in Flanders, to an internal pluralisation among both students and teachers. It remains possible that a Catholic university will be able to offer such a service where it is able to deal creatively with this internal tension and simultaneously respect plurality and the specificity of the Christian faith. Indeed, the Catholic university has the potential to provide a locus for dialogue between Christians and non-Christians, a locus for reflection on fundamental life options, a locus aimed at preparing young people to consciously participate in a plural, multi-cultural society in which plurality and difference are no longer a threat to one's own identity but rather an enrichment thereof. It is precisely this attitude that will provide the best resistance to the all-embracing grasp of marketisation and its tendency to subject everything to the unifying undifferentiating logic of the market and to reduce the most fundamental questions facing humanity to a matter of need and fulfilment, supply and demand.

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