Faith in the university*

Rowan Williams

Introduction

Working in universities these days is not comfortable. Academics are being told, in effect, that they have never really understood the nature of efficiency or accountability, and are consequently being forced to put their house in order – that is, in the ‘order’ prescribed by governmental paymasters. There is pressure to justify oneself in terms of the quantity of our production – whether that is seen in terms of publications, contracts for research, or graduates suitably equipped to join the productive economic life of our society. And there is, simultaneously, pressure to reduce and rationalise staffing, to streamline teaching methods and so forth. National initiatives have been developed to bring more people into higher education; and at the same time fees are to be raised even further, putting extra pressure on students to find lucrative employment as rapidly as possible, and casting a fair-sized cloud over the chances of older students – housewives, workers, the retired – in the new world of higher education.

In short, it isn’t clear what the university’s paymasters think the university is there for; they only know that they want it to give value for money. Since there is no sense of why a university might be valuable, the only kind of value for money that makes sense is producing people who generate wealth; and the

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result is a vague but powerful notion that a university which doesn't produce wealth-generators is not pulling its weight. And if the student finance system means that people will naturally look for wealth-generating jobs, the circle is neatly completed.

In this chapter, I will explore two things (the ambiguity of my title is deliberate, of course): first, what it's like to live 'faithfully' in the context of the modern university, to live in a way characterised by faith or trust, and second, what kind of trust we ought to have in the university institution and its future - what we want to depend on, and so to defend and celebrate. And because living faithfully isn't something wholly abstract, divorced from how we learn about trust in the whole context of our experience, the latter point, about what is worth trusting and defending in the institution, will have much to contribute to the former concern. I write as an archbishop of the Christian church, and no doubt what I say about faith will be coloured by that fact; but I hope there may be resonances not restricted to the Christian frame of reference.

I begin then by offering a few thoughts on the general question of 'living faithfully'. Central to what I understand by these words is the recognition that I am not obliged to create or to justify myself. To live in faith is to be conscious at some level, perhaps only a quite deeply buried one, that your being there and your being who you are, are not under threat; your existence and your identity have roots and solidity. There are many ways of learning this, most obviously by knowing yourself to be the object of love or friendship; and for the religious person, it is most importantly anchored in the conviction of being created (i.e. God wants you to be). This sort of faith is the opposite of that attitude which suspects that you have no right to be there, and that other people are consequently out to remove you from the scene: faithless living assumes that we maintain who we are only at the price of keeping the threat of the other at bay. At its root is the fear that I can only maintain myself at your expense, and you at mine. Faithlessness is the absence of trust in my own reality and consequently the inability to trust anyone else.

Competition

Now a university environment looks, in many ways, as if it were deliberately designed to intensify faithlessness. You get to university, in the first place, by a process of competition in which it's more or less true that success is bound
to be at the expense of others. Increasingly, within the university structure from top to bottom; competitive modes prevail; and in a shrinking job market its pressures will intensify. The relatively brief periods of residential study mean that there is not much time to succeed, to make an impression, create a persona. And the more you succeed, the more desperate the competition; you may even end up as a university teacher or administrator, devoting what feels like most of your working hours to explaining what you're doing and listing your scanty achievements for the benefit of the government, with something of the same feeling Scheherazade must have had in relating the Thousand and One Nights (if you stop, you get decapitated).

This also means that the university environment can produce what I'd call faithless varieties of faith. If you feel yourself under threat in one way or another, the temptation is strong to bind yourself to a scheme or system that tells you firmly what sort of being you are and what you should be doing. If your worth and significance is tied to something outside your own achievement, it will be— in some ways— a lot less vulnerable. But the problem then becomes one of making sure this system 'competes' successfully—that is, defending the system against all possible attack. Once again, the university is a place almost designed to make this maximally difficult. It puts a high premium on the asking of awkward questions, and positively encourages what can be maddening and, at worst, destructive—habit of challenging conclusions. So you have the not unfamiliar combination of manic scepticism on the one hand and inflexible dogmatism on the other—the situation in which a good many people conclude that commitment, religious or otherwise, is somehow a disreputable and irregular element in the life of an intellectual community.

So it looks very much as if 'faith in the university' in my first sense is going to be extremely difficult. The environment encourages us not to trust ourselves or each other and colludes very readily with the temptation to take refuge in authoritarian systems in which I no longer have to take any risks, however much these help to isolate us as persons from the context we're in. There, in fact, is a rather substantial problem: if I can only survive as a person by a strategy of defensive withdrawal from questioning, that implies that the questioning I do as a student will not actually be relevant to me as a person. My intellectual questioning becomes no more than a series of skills that I learn so as to satisfy my teachers or my colleagues. Is it possible at all to
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imagine a kind of commitment that is nourished by the context I live in and doesn't need to be protected from it?

Answering that in fact suggests that we move over into thinking about the other meaning of 'faith in the university', before coming back to suggesting what sort of commitment is viable here. What is it about universities that is trustworthy, worthwhile, and important? What is a university? It's an institution which brings together a variety of intellectual activities in the conviction that, despite everything, they have something in common. At its heart is this recognition: that the situation of human beings in the world is neither clear nor static. It is characteristic of human beings not to take their environment completely for granted but to ask about it and modify it. We begin talking about humanity in the evolutionary story when see signs of animals modifying their environment and communicating about this modification; animals that are becoming capable of representing themselves to themselves, treating their own bodies as raw material for transformation. Where you have signs of the dead being buried, sometimes with pigment on their bones, sometimes with little artefacts buried alongside them, where you have shapes being made, in stone or pigment, crude statues, colours in a cave-wall, you have the record of an animal whose own body is not something taken for granted, a self-protecting, self-nourishing organism, but is becoming an object, even a stranger. It has become necessary to 'meet' yourself, to see your own organic life as if it were a 'thing' outside; and so it has also become possible to imagine something different from what is simply given in your biological needs.

Humanity appears when 'culture' appears — culture in the widest possible sense, the whole activity of seeing the familiar world from a distance and asking what might be different, the activity of imagining, making and planning. But culture contains a sort of contradiction as well: the body is no longer taken for granted, but it is not something that can be forgotten or ignored. Body and environment are not the last word, but they still impose limits. So, as human language develops, it brings to light the interlocking realities of a world not controlled, not at the disposal of human consciousness, and a world that also invites the consciousness to see it in constantly new and shifting ways and so to change it. Language itself, with its formal structures and its endless historical changes (you may say the same words twice, but you never say the same thing twice), shows us the kind of
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beings we are: innovative and reflective and limited, always looking for where the boundaries are and never sure they will stay in the same place.

Intellectual activity

What we call intellectual activity is simply the various ways in which we look at all this – at this reality which is in fact there in every word we speak, perhaps in our very ability to say 'I' and 'you'. It's a disciplined projection of ordinary human culture; and it's a necessary projection, because the history of human culture shows that we have a very persistent tendency to forget what it means to be 'cultural' and to assume that the way things are is natural. When you have a lot of people happy to assume that the way things are is natural (people who have forgotten that there is a process of history that gets you to the point you're at), then the intellectual life will look unnatural and won't be very welcome. A society like that is a society that is in danger of forgetting what it is to be human: it will think that it's obvious what people want and how they should get it, and so its people will never learn to be strangers to themselves, to see their bodies from a distance, to meet and know themselves. They will be told what they are. Thus an institution which is about not taking your body and your environment for granted is an institution trying to keep in mind what's involved in being human.

One of the ways in which the university concretely does this is precisely by recognising that there are different sorts of intellectual activity. If you have to spend your time alongside someone who is perpetually asking different questions about the world from yours, you may be less inclined to assume that the questions you're asking are the natural or the only ones. This in turn means that you're less likely to think that your answers are the natural or the only ones; and it is this sort of perception which keeps alive the strong awareness that being human and being 'cultural' is essentially unfinished business. There will always be fresh questions about what can and can't be taken for granted. The co-existence in one institution of these different sorts of activity is, of course, only the bare minimum of what a university might be: properly planned and integrated interdisciplinary study at undergraduate level and some kind of boundary-crossing and sharing of experience and projects among teachers have always been part of what theorists have believed ideal in university life. Present reality – necessary specialisation plus constant erosion of time – makes this harder to achieve; but it remains true that
no-one at any level in a university can be unaware of how differently the task of 'culture' may be understood – in biophysics, metallurgy, medieaval history, theoretical linguistics, and so on. There are things I choose not to question, but I know others do; and their questioning ought to enhance my own awareness of living in a world that systematically invites human beings to new perceptions.

This relates somewhat to another aspect of intellectual life. I recognise that my questions and answers are one strand in a vastly complex tapestry; and that may well suggest that I can't know what questions will be right or interesting to ask as my activity progresses. Problems I am tackling now will generate others, if I have the honesty and energy to follow them through. Intellectual life carries on because it retains some capacity to be surprised; and intellectual training at any level must focus on this fact. To be intellectually competent is to know how to react appropriately and adequately to an agenda that I haven't set – just as to be competent in a language is to know how to reply to sentences I haven't heard before. So, if a university doesn't have scope for innovative work, it won't be training people very satisfactorily in intellectual activity. In plain English, a university without research is more or less useless. It will not convey anything of the sense that every discipline is 'unfinished', incapable of predicting what it will itself generate. Specialised research is bound to be a vocation of limited appeal; but I'm not sure that any significant learning is ever without an awareness of what fuels the enterprise— the impulse to look for a proper response to the questions I haven't simply planned or invented, to look for a synthesis in and through what appears as discontinuity.

The intellect in its present state, with exceptions which need not here be specified, does not discern truth intuitively, or as a whole. We know, not by a direct and simple vision, not at a glance, but, as it were, by piecemeal and accumulation, by a mental process, by going around an object, by the comparison, the combination, the mutual correction, the continual adaptation of many partial notions... Such a union and concert of the intellectual powers, such an enlargement and development, such a comprehensiveness are necessarily matters of training. And again, such a training is a matter of rule; it is not mere application, however exemplary, which introduces the mind to truth, nor the reading many books, nor the getting up many subjects, nor the witnessing many experiments, nor the attending many lectures. All this is short of enough: a man may have done it all, yet be lingering in the vestibule of knowledge; he may not realize what his mouth utters; he may not see with his mental eye what confronts him; he may have no grasp of things as they are; or at least he may have no power at all of advancing one step forward of himself, in consequence...
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of what he has already acquired, no power of discriminating between truth and falsehood, of sifting out the grains of truth from the mass, of arranging things according to their real value, and, if I may use the phrase, of building up ideas. Such a power is the result of a scientific formation of mind...

This process of training by which the intellect, instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science, is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its own highest culture, is called liberal education.21

Like most people trying to reflect on the life of the university, I’ve found it hard to improve on Cardinal Newman’s account. And in case anyone should take fright at that term ‘liberal education’, believing it means a rather dilettantish formation in the arts, we should keep in mind the context of the expression here. Newman is talking about how critical and constructive habits of mind are formed by a process we might call ‘learning about learning’. Learning itself is ‘short of enough’, says Newman, because it does not look at its own workings; and if it does not do this, it simply gives you access to a limited range of information. But if you understand the kind of thing you’re doing when learning, you have acquired what people nowadays call a transferable skill; you are able to review your own starting-point, to question your questions, to learn not just about some object or activity but about your own capacities as a questioner – as an ‘unfinished’ being, capable of surprising and being surprised. This seems to be what lies at the heart of Newman’s vision of ‘liberal education’, and of what he therefore believed to be essential for the university. It means that the university can never be either a simple training school or a pure research institute. A training school would do no more than provide certain limited skills: be no part of its essential job to reflect on what it is to learn. You can go to language school and emerge with a good grasp of Russian or Spanish or whatever, but none the wiser about what it’s like to be a human subject in the world. No criticism is implied; the language school quite properly has limited goals, and sets out to attain them efficiently. And in a way the same is true of a pure research institute: quite properly, it seeks to extend a particular area of skill and knowledge, and only accidentally deepens the sense of what’s involved in learning itself. Most philosophers of science are found outside specific scientific research programmes (and scientific researchers tend to think of them as rather
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a nuisance!) but the research programmes wouldn't last long if the researchers hadn't had a formation which introduced them to the notion of wondering whether they were asking the right questions.

That's the formation a university is meant to give. Professor Anthony O'Hear of Bradford wrote that:

Education...requires both a deep understanding of at least one area of human knowledge as well as some idea of where and how that area fits into the whole of which it is a part. The former is necessary not only for the knowledge thereby acquired, but also because it is through engaging with a form of knowledge at an advanced level that one comes to understand what it is to submit oneself to the demands of reasoned enquiry... One of the main distinctions between a university education and career-directed forms of higher education ought to be the stress placed in the former on a sense of the interrelationships between the various studies and disciplines... [A] university cannot subordinate its educational function to its service role and continue to do that for which it is particularly suited and which provides the reason for grouping all the major intellectual disciplines in one institution.22

Learning alongside people involved in different kinds of learning is, in short, one of the most obvious and resourceful methods of learning about the nature of learning, steering you away from that taking for granted of your own agenda which is ultimately so dehumanising. And this means, as Professor O'Hear makes plain, that any attempt to redefine the university's role in terms of what 'society' believes it needs (i.e. what a particular bureaucracy decides a state needs) is an assault on the essence of the university institution. It implies that someone does know, fairly exhaustively, what questions are good or natural ones, and forecloses the opportunity of asking questions about questions. When this happens, it is a sign that politics has abandoned culture: which is normally the herald of politics abandoning humanity, abandoning the sense of a constant negotiation with a strange and challenging environment, in which we run up against both strength and resourcefulness and our powerlessness and finitude; the politics of environmental indifference, obsessional security-consciousness, the search for 'ultimate' military threats and military defences.

Believing in the university

Faith in the university, trust in its methods, structures and values, is a commitment to humanity and culture, in the sense I've been trying to define. It means believing, in spite of all discouragements that the university
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has something irreplaceable to offer to human society: by its deliberate pursuing, entertaining and criticizing of questions of widely differing kinds, by not allowing that variety to be limited by considerations of short-term profit and results, it reminds a society of the fundamental relation between human beings and their environment. A society that allows itself to be reminded of this will be one in which it is still possible to talk of provisionality, hopefulness, even repentance, a society prepared to resist the anti-culture of totalitarianism.

Even in the short term, we have learned just a little of the folly of thinking that our practical needs—industrial, commercial and so on—are best served by restructuring university education towards those needs. Economics and technology are by no means fixed quantities, ‘technical’ skills that can be mastered once and for all. Now more than ever they involve the imagination; they require an ability to ask questions about the questions being asked. In other words, they require what a university education gives. Anecdotal evidence still suggests that employers in industry and business are often more interested in proven intellectual attainment than in training for specific tasks: in other words, they recognise that they cannot flourish without the creativity and critical sharpness of intellects that have found out how to think about learning.

What then does all this suggest about the faith people might be able to live by within the structures of the university? Intellectual inquiry of itself doesn’t produce religious or other kinds of commitment; but it’s fair to say that faith itself would not be imaginable if human beings were not the kind of beings who go in for the life of understanding, ‘intellect’ in its widest sense. If being human were not a matter of being unfinished, exploratory, not taking things for granted, committed to learning, then presumably they would never raise the questions or experience the responses that shape faith. Faith, however, is not confined by this basic ground. In effect, faith says: given that humanity is like this, the struggle for ‘culture’, the negotiation between our creativity and the inflexible facts of an environment, given that we are both finite and creative, we need to take a further step of imagination. We need to ask whether there is a way of fusing our creativity with limitations so that our life remains in harmony with our total environment. But to ask this question at all is to imply that there is an overall context for ourselves (mind and body) and the perceptible world, a context which makes sense of the
idea that our reality is somehow an ordered whole. Religious practice, even at its most rudimentary, witnesses to some awareness of interconnectedness and balance, some sense of unified world held in its unity by a reality which the sum total of facts about the world doesn’t exhaust.

Faith, then, is a commitment to the belief that our life is more than a struggle between a creative ego, individual or collective, and a lot of raw material; it trusts that there is a possible reconciliation ('atonement') between human selves and their world. Without necessarily entailing that the characteristic restlessness of being in the world is done away with, it sees that restlessness as pressing towards some kind of homecoming, an affirmation and acceptance of the reality we are in, instead of fear, hostility, naked conflict. Different kinds of faith envisage this hope in different terms: Christian faith, with its particular concern with human history, its recognition that we are bound to time, that learning entails giving time, sees our hope as linked with the story of certain human communities in which the perception of a total context of all things, a creator, had become inseparable from the conviction that this context had a personal, purposive character, that it was possible to relate to it not only in trust, but in love. The story presupposes that the creator not only creates but so makes him/herself present in the world's history that people are set free from their fear of their environment and their defensive reliance on will and ego. In this freedom, they are able to trust themselves and each other, and so to become a human community without artificial limit. But it also presupposes that the presence of God in history is something which will profoundly unsettle what we are comfortable in assuming about ourselves. If, as Christians believe, God is somehow decisively present in the life and death of Jesus, God can be unrecognisable to those who want a fixed order in religion and politics. Jesus can appear as the most disturbing 'intellectual' question of all, the figure who most makes us strangers to ourselves, even as he promises the deepest homecoming, the acknowledgement of God as a loving parent.

Faith is not an alternative to the life of the intellect. On the contrary, it presupposes it, it presupposes our creativity, our life in questioning and culture. What it adds is the trust that all of this is an entry into a reality which affirms and holds together all our explorations, not an endlessly fragmenting series of independent enterprises. The very fact of a university's existence, with its unspoken confidence that different essays
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in understanding may learn from each other is a tentative step of faith, trust in some kind of possible human wholeness. One of the tasks of faith in the context of university life is surely to keep alive this tentative hopefulness about the human world by witnessing to more explicit accounts of the wholeness of things, especially in the fragmenting, trivial and anti-humanist context of our present pseudo-culture.

Human creativity.

But to do this, faith has a responsibility to itself. What I earlier called faithless kinds of faith, authoritarian schemes which solve the problems of anxious or dependent personalities by a short cut, are not fulfilling their responsibility (their mission, if you like) to their own environment. Faith needs to keep reflecting on the two-dimensions of human existence that it presupposes: the restless creativity of persons, their urge to remake the world, and the limitedness, the physical, historical boundaries, in which our lives are lived. ‘Faith’ which seeks to quench the creative, to treat all significant questions as answered already, simply colludes with our present political barbarism. But there is also a ‘faith’ which is so obsessed with the ideal of a boundless human creativity, that it cannot face the reality of the consequences of betrayal, failure, violence (sin, in short), the reality of tragic frustration. It lives by what the German radical sociologist and philosopher, Theodor Adorno, contemptuously called the ‘jargon of authenticity’, by the intense cultivation of private utopian fantasies and a refusal to call the ego and the will into question.

If faith in the university can remain critical of its two great temptations, authoritarianism and utopianism, it will not only preserve its own integrity but proclaim what it ought to proclaim in its setting: a confidence in the human future, based not on any glib optimism about how nice or how clever human beings are, but on the generosity which it believes to underlie all things, on the possibility of human beings finding a way of being at home in the world because they have found that world (and themselves in it) to be the objects of love, pity and purposeful engagement. This leads on to a final reflection: faith in the university needs to be self-critical, perhaps even iconoclastic; but this does not mean that it has any business to be without confidence. By confidence I don’t mean an arrogant sense of rightness, and exclusive and dismissive attitude to other visions; simply the trust that,
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however inadequately, the language of faith is genuinely about reality: that it connects with truth.

Only if faith looks to something beyond the state of my – or anybody's – consciousness, only if it shows itself to be answerable to, criticisable by, what it does not have under its control, can it claim any integrity; only so can it claim also to have anything to say that would prompt change or renewal in those who hear. For faith to be any more than a utopian fancy or psychological crutch, it must believe, passionately and argumentatively, that it is capable of opening to human beings a new possibility of unillusioned, unafraid living. It must see itself as a gift and as judgement. And this, far from making the language of faith more easy or smooth, can make it more uneven, more agonised: if we really are answerable to something beyond our scope of control, we can't get away with repetition, with jargon or platitude. The language of faith becomes an art – like the poet's or the physicist's – seeking for the least trivial and inadequate way of giving voice to a reality that is outrunning us. And, in the university, faith has the opportunity of constantly varying and challenging conversation with the styles of human learning, so that its language has every opportunity of being tested and refreshed.

The university as an institution is to be trusted and defended because it speaks from and for our distinctive human identity as cultural, learning animals, bound to, yet not trapped by, our environment. It brings to light and nurtures what faith builds upon. Faith separated from the life of intellect is no longer a human activity, but belongs in the bleak 'post-human' world of totalitarian captivity. Faith, in short, needs the witness of the university. But, like all the institutions of culture, the university also needs to be related to the sphere of human commitment and hope – otherwise it will equally dehumanise itself by isolating intellect from engagement, by nursing the image of itself as a realm of secure and disinterested work. It cannot of itself, of course, insist upon or teach commitment: its value is in its distance, its different perspective. But it can and must be prepared to reflect on the human project it represents, and how that relates to wider stories, political and artistic as well as religious, about this project. It needs the presence of commitment within it, in case it should think it has an alibi when questions of human import are raised. We cannot afford to sit light to the task before us, the task of preserving the human-ness of education itself.