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The Idea of the University and the Process of Secularisation

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Abstract

This article deals with the question of the historical secularisation of the university. It takes as its starting point the common assertion that the university essentially became a secular institution towards the end of the eighteenth and during the nineteenth century. But, when studying the different historical ideas about the university we can discern quite a different pattern. On the level of intellectual history—and when it comes to self-images, norms, values and rituals and practices governing academic life—Christian outlooks and originally theological approaches have continued to exist.

The article discusses a series of examples supporting its main argument. First, it traces the idea of the university historically, focusing on the main figures of John Henry Newman and Wilhelm von Humboldt and the traditions they represent. Thereafter the article discusses the idea of the university in relation to the process of secularisation, drawing on a number of examples dating from the turn of the eighteenth century to the post-war period. In the concluding remarks, the account turns to a recent example in which the idea of the university is discussed and where the process of secularisation also plays an important role.

Introduction

When reading most of the influential scholarly overviews over the history of the European university, a standardised account will in all probability be discovered.¹ Roughly summarised, it tells of the university's emergence in the Middle Ages, with it being a religious institution with close affiliation to the Church, in both geographical and physical, as well as intellectual and spiritual senses. What happens later is that the university in various periods and in different ways breaks away from the Church. Successively, according to this story, the power to govern is transferred to the secular authorities during Early Modern times. And once the proper breakthrough takes place, around the turn of the nineteenth century, it signals that the last remnants of the religious influence yield to secular modernity and are about to vanish. The university liberates itself from the Church in the institutional sense at the same time as it opens itself to growing modern science, which at that point had already existed outside of higher education for two centuries or more. The same process sees the acceleration of theology's slide from its position as the queen of sciences to a marginalised activity with a distinctly shaky status within research and higher education.

This is my rough summary of the emergent image of the university's secularisation, as it is often presented in literature. The complexity of the process is of course great, and the scholarship of the last decades has rightfully indicated that. National patterns, for instance, tend to look quite different, and the historical processes vary quite significantly on an empirical level. Therefore, I would rather not reject categorically that standard account, since in many ways it is not

1 Compare for instance the contributions in Ridder-Symoens, Hilde de (ed.). *A History of the University in Europe*. Volume II: *Universities in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1996.

2 Newman, John Henry. *The Idea of a University*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 1996 [1852/1873].

3 See, for example, Collini, Stefan. *What are Universities for?* London: Penguin. 2012.

4 See, for example, Simon, Paul. *Die Idee der mittelalterlichen Universität und ihre Geschichte*. Tübingen: Mohr. 1932; Ködderman, Achim. "Why the Medieval Idea of a Community-Oriented University Is Still Modern". *Educational Change*. No. 1. 1995.

unfounded. However, what I would like to do in the following article is to question our understanding of the process of secularisation *on the level of intellectual history*. The example I will discuss is the debate about the *idea* of the university, which runs parallel to the institutional, organisational and intellectual changes that we normally discuss in terms of the university's secularisation. First, I trace the idea of the university historically, and thereafter I discuss it in relation to the historical process of secularisation. In my concluding remarks, I then turn to a recent example in which the idea of the university is discussed and where the process of secularisation also plays an important role.

The Idea of the University

Where does the possibility of and a need for the *idea* of the university come from? This question obviously refers in some sense to the English cardinal and university founder John Henry Newman and his famous lectures held before the opening of the new University of Dublin during the 1850s. These lectures were subsequently published under the title *The Idea of a University*.² Very few texts in the intellectual history of higher education have played a role of the same significance as this trendsetting volume of Newman's, and the subject of the idea of the university is thus forever tied to his thoughts on the subject. After this initial input, numerous thinkers, debaters, historians, philosophers and theologians have referred to the Newmanian idea of the university. Today the literature is ever-widening, and leading debaters are constantly referring to Newman's thoughts on education.³

But in spite of Newman's importance, the idea of an idea of the university is older. One answer given by some scholars is that the university actually right from the start, when it first emerged in the Middle Ages, was sustained or based on a specific idea. Some intellectual historians have actually made considerable efforts to pick out and present this idea.⁴ Most commentators are nonetheless in agreement that something radically new made an entrance with the emergence of the modern research university two hundred years ago. It was at

that point in time that many debaters, philosophers and reformers of education began to talk explicitly of the university's idea, and put forward the thought that it was necessary to formulate such an idea.⁵

The thought that a university as an institution should be defined by a given idea actually comes—first and foremost—from the German tradition, cultivated by the idealists and romanticists around the turn of the nineteenth century. Newman himself never mastered German, but his conviction of the possibility of a specific idea guiding the university bears the pronounced stamp of German influence. The primary reason for that was the deep impression left on him by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, not least by Coleridge's thoughts on the character of social institutions.⁶ Newman adopted Coleridge's sharp criticism of utilitarianism and its idea of social institutions' purpose being the satisfaction of individual desires.

Above all else, this influence arrived by means of Coleridge's work called *On the Constitution of the Church and State* from 1829.⁷ The ideas presented in that book were permeated with German idealism under the influence of which the author had fallen during his stays at German universities at the end of the eighteenth century. Coleridge did away with all shallow notions of social institutions as establishments designed to serve the immediate benefit of humans. Instead, institutions were endowed with a deeper idea epitomizing their goal and the purpose of their activity. This view was accepted by Newman, who always remained a fierce critic of every utilitarian idea in the field of education. He viewed utilitarian demands as a key adverse aspect of secular modernity that university education needed to resist even when stripped of its former task of fostering good Christians.

The German states with which Coleridge acquainted himself around the turn of the nineteenth century were, when it comes to academic life, immersed in a revolution, at least if we limit our perspective to the Protestant lands.⁸ The scholarly interpretations of that situation have been much discussed and also altered in recent decades. But there is no doubt that during long periods in the 1700s many universities in German territories were marked with a decline. Certainly, the trend-setting reformist universities in Halle and Göttingen were established. But in general universities attracted a progressively smaller number of students and they suffered from diminishing legitimacy within society.

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See, for instance, Josephson, Peter, Karlsruhn, Thomas and Östling, Johan. "The Humboldtian Tradition and Its Transformations". In Peter Josephson, Thomas Karlsruhn and Johan Östling (eds.). *The Humboldtian Tradition: Origins and Legacies*. Leiden: Brill. 2014.

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Rothblatt, Sheldon. *The Modern University and Its Discontents: The Fate of Newman's Legacies in Britain and America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1997. pp. 4–12.

7

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Volume 10: *On The Constitution of the Church and State*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2015 [1829].

8

Compare Howard, Thomas Albert. *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2006.

9

Paletschek, Sylvia. "Die Erfindung der Humboldtischen Universität: Die Konstruktion der deutschen Universitätsidee in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts". *Historische Anthropologie*. No. 10. 2002; Ash, Mitchell G. (ed.). *Mythos Humboldt: Vergangenheit und Zukunft der deutschen Universität*. Wien: Böhlau. 1997.

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Humboldt, Wilhelm von. "Ueber die Innere und Äussere Organisation der Höheren Wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin". In Wilhelm von Humboldt. *Werke in fünf Bänden*. Band IV. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft. 2010 [1809–1810].

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See, for instance, Scott, John C. "The Mission of the University. Medieval to Postmodern Transformations. *The Journal of Higher Education*. Vol. 77. No 1. 2006; Ridder-Symoens, Hilde de (ed.). *A History of the University in Europe*. Volume I: *Universities in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992.

But change was to come, and the symbol in our own time of that change is without doubt the prominent linguist, philosopher and Prussian public official Wilhelm von Humboldt. Today he is often regarded as the father of the modern university, but at the same time many researchers have pointed out that he attained this label for the wrong reasons.⁹ The stage was actually to a great degree set even before Humboldt's contribution. During the decades preceding his founding of the university in Berlin (1810), a number of the most prominent intellectuals had formulated different types of defences for the university.

Even though this new idea of universities was more multifaceted than how it is usually adopted in the commentary literature, it allows summary of a number of fundamentals or principles. These principles brought together constitute the idea of the university. I will focus only on three of them here. The first principle is the university's independence from the state. Teachers, researchers and the institution they represent should not have any ties whatsoever to political power. They should, in the words of Humboldt, conduct their activities in "Einsamkeit und Freiheit", in solitude and freedom. This expression appears in Humboldt's most famous statement on educational policy; namely, a short memorandum from 1809 called *Ueber die Innere und Äussere Organisation der Höheren Wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin* [On the Internal and External Organisation of the Higher Scientific Institutions in Berlin].¹⁰ As a result of the new autonomy, an important ingredient in the newly formulated university life was that the community was now perceived as a collegiate body.

This idea of autonomy in itself was not new, as it actually dates back to the Middle Ages, when university teachers succeeded in establishing the right to choose colleagues and elect their leaders, for instance.¹¹ But because the notion of autonomy was now so central, collegiality was emphasised even further as the basis for the university's independence. The university dwellers were supposed to form a community that could only be joined by means of academic merit. Through this body all the activities were governed. In other words, we see here the first stage of the principles of internal government defined today as collegiality within academic institutions.

Another fundamental principle—which was also laid down around the turn of the nineteenth century—was the eternally endless character of knowledge. From this period onwards, research understood as the genuine *production* of knowledge, is taking place in the fold of the university, and the *originality* in both the approach and the result is therefore appreciated more distinctly than before. Here we see, among other things, a clear distinction from the tradition of liberal education that we are used to associating with Newman. Certainly, Newman was by no means as narrow-mindedly hostile towards research in the new German sense as later annotators have chosen to make out.¹² But nonetheless, he does not allow research to play the same part as that assigned to it by Humboldt and his contemporaries.

That this is the case also indicated how those different traditions defined the border with lower level education. For Newman and the *college*-tradition he represented, the notion of the university *in loco parentis*—a substitute for parents—is significantly more acceptable than in the German tradition. In the latter, the line that separates school and university is drawn much more distinctly, as for instance by Humboldt himself in the memorandum I mentioned. At school, pupils receive education; at university, students participate in the knowledge process. Therefore, according to Humboldt, the relationship between the professor and the student is also reshaped. As he puts it in the memorandum, the former is no longer there for the latter. Instead, both are there to jointly achieve truth. At the same time the connection between research and teaching is being accentuated in a completely new manner in the German tradition. Not only did Humboldt and his contemporaries emphasise this connection in a loose meaning, but they actually suggested a real and concrete unity of research and teaching. “*Die Einheit von Forschung und Lehre*”, has ever since been the formula for all practices at the modern research university.

It can also be pointed out that a university, which takes form using this idea as a guiding light, soon became characterised by practices, norms and values that we are familiar with today and that have played a crucial historical role. One example is that a researcher is obliged to keep a proper distance from the object of the research—he or she is obliged to cultivate a certain form of disinterestedness.¹³ He

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Ker, Ian. “Newman on Education”. *Studies in Catholic Higher Education*. December. 2008.

13
Hereto, see the discussion in Karlsohn, Thomas. “On Emotions, Knowledge and Educational Institutions”. *Confero: Essays in Education, Philosophy and Politics*. Vol. 4. No 1. 2016.

14
Kerr, Clark. *The Uses of the University*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2001 [1963]. Chapter 1.

or she is also involved in a common and systematic knowledge process, where in an ideal scenario a good argument has priority over all hierarchy and status.

The same process should also guarantee the individual freedom. A researcher has the right to study anything and everything without regard for political and ideological issues, while a teacher has the right to teach at their own discretion without restrictions. In the German tradition these principles are called *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*, the freedom to teach and the freedom to study.

So, what patterns do we detect if we turn to our own times, or at least the developments taking place in recent decades? What immediately becomes obvious, once we ask ourselves what has happened to the idea of the university, is that for a long time it has been seen as something on its way to extinction. An overwhelming number of commentators from the early 1960s to our own day have at least claimed that the idea of the university has grown obsolete and that it is no longer meaningful or constructive to discuss such an idea.

One very important example is Clark Kerr, the legendary leader of the Californian higher educational system in the 1960s. In a famous book from 1963 he insisted that the modern university was no longer held together by a unified idea; instead, it consisted of separate entities, which were linked simply because the institutions shared the same name or the same administration.¹⁴ Scholars and teachers were, in short, a bunch of hardened individualists, joined together only by their common grievance over parking. Since the times of Kerr, predictions about the demise of the idea of the university have been repeated in innumerable versions and along a broad range of the emotional spectrum—stoically, triumphantly and melancholically.

Simultaneously, each generation has fostered new debaters attempting to pick up on the legacy of the idea and formulate it afresh with regard to the requirements of the changing times. I am not intending to take a closer look at these attempts or at the discussions surrounding them. However, what I would like to state is that this extensive debate—which in some ways has been going on since the days of Humboldt and Newman themselves—has been misinterpreted in

important ways. I also would like to argue that this misunderstanding concerns established ways of viewing and understanding the process of secularisation.

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See, for instance,
Shrimpton Paul, *The*
"Making of Men". The Idea
of Newman's University
in Oxford and Dublin.
Leominster: Gracewing.
2014.

The Process of Secularisation

A rather common way to frame the debate about the idea of the university as it has developed during the last two centuries is to identify its first champions as standard-bearers for the change towards secular institutions of research and higher education. The principles of Humboldt and his contemporaries, for instance, put an end to the compulsion to mediate the eternal truths of the Christian tradition according to this line of interpreting the intellectual history of the university. The focus on modern scientific and secular truth-seeking, with its openness and critical stance, became the forefront. According to the representatives of this approach it was also—among other things—with the help of Newman's reasoning that contemporary reformers finally were able to get rid of the notion that higher education's task was to turn students into pious Christians. Newman believed that the latter was the mission of the Church. The university, for its part, had the obligation to educate and form gentlemen who were well prepared for an active life in modern secular society.¹⁵

If one understands Humboldt and Newman in this way, it then becomes possible to interpret the continuing debate on the idea of the university as ever-increasing evidence for an ongoing process of secularisation. Even the very *emergence* of the debate on the idea could actually—according to this line of reasoning—be seen as a manifestation of how the Christian intellectual heritage lost its grip on higher education and had to be substituted for something else. Once the Christian dogmas and the Church as the centre of power lose their influence, they are replaced, so to speak, by the secular debate on the idea of the university, which tries to capture the institutional goal and meaning without any reference to a religious past.

However, the problem is that once you take time to study the sources closely, it soon becomes obvious that this line of thinking is clearly at

odds with empirical facts. As far as I see the matter, it is both possible and reasonable to discuss the debate on the idea of the university from the times of Humboldt and Newman and onwards in terms of a *persisting* religious perception of the university. This religious perception is discernible in formal structures and regulated ceremonies as well as in the content of central ideas and its expressions in norms, convictions and beliefs. I do not have the space now to give a detailed account of all parts of the argument in favour of this interpretation, and neither can I cite every single empirical proof. But allow me to highlight some of the especially significant examples to clarify what I mean.

Let us first go to *die Gründerzeit*, the German context around the dawn of the nineteenth century. When commentators describe what happened, it is usually said that the university resolutely broke away from the religious sphere, as I have mentioned. However, what actually becomes evident as one studies the most noted programme statements on the educational policy from these times closely, is that the situation was rather the reverse. To get access to the subject it might be worth examining more specifically how the debaters on the idea of the university expressed themselves in respect to the phenomena that at that time were quite *new* in the academic context. I will limit myself to two examples originating from two leading figures in the university debate during the period: the new understanding of the role of the academic teacher and the new theories and practices of the academic seminar.

Firstly: the new role of the academic teacher. To put it simply, one could say that earlier in the history of the university a teacher, in general, had played the part of the mediator of an already given knowledge. But now the ideal was rapidly swinging towards an understanding of a teacher as an agent with his own authority and powers to talk freely to students and listeners. Philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, under his controversial professorship in Jena right before the turn of the nineteenth century, was the first to lecture in front of the public without a ready script. Such manner was perceived as enormously scandalous, but soon spread within the university world.

What is interesting in that respect is how Fichte put into words what a new teacher was. In his famous lecture series on the vocation of

scholars, *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung der Gelehrten*, from 1794, he presented the thought that an academic teacher, a learned professor, was actually a new (secularised) clergy and that they had taken over the function that once belonged to the priesthood.¹⁶ The university developed, so to speak, more as a continuation of the Church by other means, rather than as an institution that had entirely broken away from its religious past.

Similar observations can be made when it comes to the emergence of a modern academic seminar. This currently well-established practice is, actually, relatively new within the university. Certainly, a model existed already during the Early Modern times, not least within theological education. However, in its pure *modern* form—the practice we know in today’s higher education—the academic seminar developed during the second half of the eighteenth century, and acquired significance no sooner than the early nineteenth century. The fundamental idea of the modern seminar is that all the participants should be engaged in a free but ordered interaction, in which a fellowship as well as the consensual attraction and love for knowledge should be achieved. And interesting enough, it is quite often the case that this new academic practice was described in a way that is greatly reminiscent of a parish communion. In some cases, it was expressed in notions, clearly influenced by pietism, of an intimate coexistence in a close-knit group with distinctly marked borders against the outside.

Specific examples of the notion of a seminar as something that appears to be influenced by the picture of a parish communion can be seen, for instance, in the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher. He was, among other things, the author of a text that was to be of crucial importance for the design of the modern Prussian university; namely, his *Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten im deutschen Sinn* [Occasional Thoughts on German Universities], published in 1808.¹⁷ This text contains the first elaborated theoretical and philosophical explanation of a seminar as an element of academic life. And it is fascinating how Schleiermacher in his writings to a great extent appears to interpret this new substance in terms of an intimate parish communion, a free association with interpersonal love as by far the most important unifying bond. A seminar for Schleiermacher is, one could say, an “emotional community”, to borrow a concept from medieval scholar Barbara Rosenwein.¹⁸

16 Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. "Einige Vorlesungen Ueber die Bestimmung des Gelehrten". In Johan Gottlieb Fichte. *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*. Band 1:3. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann. 1966 [1794].

17 Schleiermacher, Friedrich. "Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten im deutschen Sinn. Nebst einem Anhang über eine neu zu errichtende". In Ernst Anrich (ed.). *Die Idee der deutschen Universität: Die fünf Grundschriften aus der Zeit ihrer Neube-gründung durch klassischen Idealismus und romantischen Realismus*. Darmstadt: Hermann Gentner. 1956 [1808].

18 Karlsohn, Thomas. "The Academic Seminar as Emotional Community". *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*. No. 2. 2016.

19 Jaspers, Karl. *Die Idee der Universität*. Berlin: Springer. 1980 [1946].

20 Said, Edward W. "On the University". *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*. No. 25. 2005 [1999].

Another confirmation of the university as a sort of *Ersatzreligion*, a substitute religion, can be found in how an academic lecture was perceived at the time. In this respect as well, the period around the turn of the nineteenth century is the time of change. As I mentioned, the oral address was given a new role within the university, and one of the reasons for that was the dramatic increase in reading and writing skills as well as the huge cultural expansion of the printed book. When representatives of the university started formulating the new understanding of a lecture against the background of such changes, it is strikingly noticeable how often they adopted Church models. Quite commonly an oral address was understood as a sort of sermon. Thus, one could draw further analogies with the earlier Christian-dominated understanding of an institution, rather than interpreting it as a break away from the past caused by secularisation.

It could be possible to go far into pointing out how intellectual constructs and interpretation models are transferred from the Christian sphere to the emerging modern university, right in the middle of the very period that is widely described as the phase of the secularisation breakthrough in the university’s history. But instead of proceeding with more examples of that sort, I would like to highlight another phenomenon that is seldom noticed. This manner of extracting intellectual models namely characterised not only the initial stage of the modern research university. It also continued its life in many shapes and forms within the rich and manifold tradition of debating the idea of the university. In the middle of the 1940s, philosopher Karl Jaspers could, for instance, explicitly talk about the university as a so-called Church community. This was done in his work *Die Idee der Universität*, published in 1947.¹⁹ The book in many important respects set the agenda for the first phase of reconstruction of the German academic institutions after World War II. And one could continue citing examples of phrasings similar to those of Jaspers in the German context. But I will limit myself to just one, which came significantly later and shows more connection to the legacy of Newman rather than of Humboldt. I am talking about a lecture called “On the University”, delivered by the influential Palestinian-American scholar of literature Edward Said, at the American University of Cairo in the late 1990s.²⁰

Despite an expressed secular self-perception, Said followed on from Newman and highlighted the British cardinal as an unprecedented

paragon in terms of the thought of the goal and meaning of the modern university. Furthermore, in his lecture Said stressed that, in order to understand the university correctly and to protect it from destructive forces, we must experience it and interpret it in terms of something sacred. One could say that, according to Said, the university is a stand-alone holy place, beyond the range of the commercialism and power play in the secular world. Here one could without doubt use theologian William Cavanaugh's concept of the "migrations of the holy" to interpret Said's understanding of the university.²¹

21
Cavanaugh, William T. *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 2011.

22
Thrift, Nigel. "The University of Life". *New Literary History*. Vol. 47. Nos. 2-3. 2016.

23
Ibid., p. 399.

Concluding Reflections

It is possible to name plenty of other instances of what could be called the transfers of religious intellectual energy into the sphere of the university. But instead I would like to conclude with some reflections on where this takes us in the *current debate* on research and higher education. What I would like to stress is that our understanding of the modern university's historical and present-day character will stay limited if we do not include the religious aspect of its intellectual history into our analysis. If we fail to see the extent of the concepts, constructs and approaches based on Christianity and its theology that has permeated the discussion, we run the obvious risk of being one-sided and blind towards what is at stake in today's debate. I would even dare to claim that one of the most important dividing lines in the current debate on the university goes between those who—often without actually being familiar with the background—want to see the university as an institution with essential ties to Christian culture, and those who would want to cut off this link and erase any sort of religious dimension from the university.

Let me then conclude with the striking contribution of a present-day debater who laid a strong emphasis on the necessity to cut the link to Christianity. Former Vice Chancellor at the University of Warwick and renowned geographer Nigel Thrift has recently published a text based on a talk titled "The University of Life".²² Perhaps, the most important central statement in this text is that the ideas of the university formulated by thinkers and reformers such as Humboldt

and Newman must now be abandoned once and for all. According to Thrift, the idea of the university since the 1800s has essentially been based around values. Those values, however, are highly problematic and make up a "moral-epistemological honorifics, which deals with absolutes as a currency, politics as a faith, belief as a rule and transcendence as a goal."²³ They are therefore a hindrance to a much needed development of the university, Thrift insists. Values make us think solemnly of ourselves as insulated and self-sufficient academics, and make us incapable of contributing pragmatically to affluence, problem-solving and social and economic development. In short, according to Thrift, academic institutions lose their legitimacy in our ever-changing world if they are compelled to embody systems of belief.

What Thrift consequently points out, is the fact that the idea of the university is, more than anything, a *moral vision*. This insight has often remained unnoticed, or at least not sufficiently reflected upon in the political debates surrounding the university. The deep roots of the moral vision in Christian culture have largely stayed unseen. But for Thrift, these roots are not at all invisible. Towards the end of his lecture he explicitly says that the only way for the traditional university to survive is to transform itself back into an openly religious institution. It is hardly surprising that he considers this solution a dead end and highly unlikely.

For my part, I'm not at all that negatively disposed towards a productive rediscovery of the modern university's intellectual roots in religious culture. On the contrary, I believe that this sort of rediscovery must be an essential part of the ongoing reflection on the fate of the idea of the university in our time. By elucidating the religious impulses that determined guiding ideas when the modern academic institutions were established and reinforced, we also better comprehend what is at stake in our own day. Moreover, the normative power of these ideas now tends to diminish and orientate us to a lower degree than before. History clearly seems to be on the side of debaters like Nigel Thrift. One sign of the process is that the rule of independent professional judgement is questioned, and that it has also become increasingly difficult to uphold the traditional distance vis-à-vis political life and economic interests. In systems of research

and higher education in many Western countries, value-based internal attitudes and practices have been challenged in the last decades by active governing from outside and far-reaching external demands for cooperation and concrete, relevant contributions.

This process has by no means been one-sided and negative, but ultimately it has had a destructive effect that is making itself felt all across the university. Aspects of academic life that are connected to values, meaning and professional fulfilment have in many places been pushed into the background. The university has gradually become what has been called a thin institution, lacking a solid backbone of inherited moral standards and firm convictions among teachers and researchers.²⁴ But this development is by no means isolated to academia. On the contrary, it has—to different degrees—made its imprint on most of the central institutions of modern society, such as school systems and healthcare. In other words, at the heart of this contemporary debate lies the question of the very possibility of autonomous and self-contained institutions as part of contemporary societal life. Historically, such institutions have had an obvious link to the church as a model, being a distinctly separate and otherworldly, but yet mundane institution, protecting its independence and yet serving the world for the sake of the common good. If we allow this tie connecting us to the past to fully dissolve, the future of the university will have a very different shape to what we have inherited. _____

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Zijderveld, Anton C. *The Institutional Imperative: The Interface of Institutions and Networks*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 2000.