

### **Forming the Moral Life at the Multiversity: A Directors' Seminar with Oliver O'Donovan**

The virtues set before us in that famous passage of the Letter to the Ephesians in which we are told to “put on the whole armour of God” seem to mingle intellectual and practical qualities: truth, justice, peace, faith and security. On closer inspection, however, they may be just one intellectual quality, truth, with a range of practical dimensions: justice as the truth we do between people, peace as the truth of life in fellowship, faith as the truth of our promise, safety as the truth of our presence. But the imagery in which they are described is that of defensive weaponry. Perhaps we can decide to do without the imagery, and recommend these qualities in other ways. But behind that imagery is a thought we cannot do without: truth demands courage. Not so much courage *as well as* truth, but the courage *of* truth. If our virtues are at root one virtue, that virtue is not only an intellectual competence, but at the same time a focused practical persistence. One of the heroes of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* was called Mr. Valiant-for-Truth. We ought to ask, What has valour to do with truth, or truth with valour? Can we do anything with truth other than come to know it? Yes, we can appropriate it, and resolve to live by it. And only in that resolve can we claim to *have* any truth, for truth is something that cannot be possessed if it does not possess the possessor.

And this sheds light on what the University is for. If it offers every one of its members a context for seeking and knowing truth in this field or that, whatever they may be studying, it inevitably also challenges them about the appropriation of truth and to shape their lives by it. Historically, Universities have been important not only for research but for education: not only because truths need to be discovered and clarified - many truths in many fields, for the “University” is only ideally a “uni”-versity, and is experienced much more as a “multi”-versity - but also because we need truth to live by, and exposure to it is an essential preparation for a thoughtful life. The tension between the two tasks is felt strongly by students, torn between the focussed and highly disciplined demands of *listening* to words, often technical and hard to master, on the one hand, and the existential need to *find words to speak*, verifying what has been acquired by a living

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articulation of it, on the other. The twin dangers of the student existence, dangers that frighten and alarm those who see them clearly, are those of academic self-detachment, wrapped up in a study that is all too remote not only from life but from other studies, too; and hasty ill-considered engagement in ill-focused causes that are not the fruit of careful thought and listening.

What does the Christian presence in a University offer to those held in this tension? The passage about the armour concludes with one piece of weaponry that is not defensive: *the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*. Into the midst of the babble of the faculties and the half-articulate stumblings after speech which the student attempts on his or her own account, there enters another word, a “word of God”. It proves itself a word because it makes sense of other words, illuminating them, not shouting them down. But it proves itself a word *of God* because it holds other words to account and cuts a way through their various limitations, showing us where and how they may, and may not, serve the task of living life with integrity and wholeness.

A word of God is something to which we must first listen and attend; it sets before us the task of careful understanding. But it also demands a word in reply, setting before us the task of articulation. If we have learned to *receive* a word of God, reading it and thinking through it, then we are precipitated into speech. So the passage ends with a request for prayer, “that utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly..”

We hope to see articulate and confident Christians. It is our privilege to consider how that fruit of truth and courage can be brought to birth in the contemporary University student.

Oliver O’Donovan