



10 October 2010
The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity
Choral Evensong
Ecclesiasticus 6 vv. 23–37
Ephesians 4 vv. 17–32

Freedom of Thought
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From the cowardice that dare not face new truth, From the laziness that is content with half truth, From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth: Good God, deliver us!

The beginning of the year is always a glorious mix of energy and freshness and of course the deeply, *deeply* familiar - which may in *certain* quarters for *some* people *some* of the time bring just a touch of wearisomeness. I have to confess to being in that latter category on Friday, struck down by an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu* on reading the student newspaper, *Varsity* this week, and coming upon, what was billed as *The Essay* entitled '*An inappropriate alliance*'.¹ The author, Peter Atkins, an Oxford chemist is, in the world of the so-called 'New Atheists', a minor celebrity, a B-lister if you will. The piece in question on the fundamental antithesis of Science and Religion, a classic of its type in many respects, though Atkins' essay, clearly aimed at the impressionable fresher, is verging on the spoof-like with its pantomime-esque polemic:

'Whereas science is meticulous in its objectivity, and where false observation is soon exposed by parading data on public platforms (hooray), religion grasps at wisps of observation and, if they strike a sentimental chord, absorbs them into the fabric of belief.' (boo, hiss) (though I wonder whether 'sentimental' includes compassion?) Anyway,

'Science respects the intellectual capacity of humanity (three cheers) while religion scorns it' (tut tut). And so it goes on, I particularly enjoyed the final hymnic verse, devoid, of course of all sentiment: *"The scientific method is a gloriously optimistic flowering of the human intellect, bringing to everyone the opportunity to experience the joy of true comprehension."*

Inevitably, there are a couple of palpable hits in the course of the essay, not least and I would have to agree, that theologians are not always the model of clarity, but in the main its all fabulous knock-about stuff, and deeply characteristic of what can only be described as a worldview, which is every bit as dogmatic as that of some religious people and more so than many.

In her recent book, *The Absence of Mind*², in which she analyses what she describes as '*this remarkably reiterative literature*'³, the award-winning novelist Marilynne Robinson identifies a number of key hallmarks of this worldview, which she describes as 'para-scientific', and which the historian of ideas or philosopher will recognize as a degraded form of the Nineteenth century philosophy of positivism.

Let me briefly touch on five related points: The first, foundational point, is turning a method, the scientific method, into a full-blown philosophy alleged capable of providing a comprehensive and reasonable account of the world; a second is what might be described as a belief in '*the great myth...of "the modern"*' that prior to the rise of Science there was little thought which could be deemed useful or relevant to us today, an approach which leads to some staggeringly ignorant statements in this body of writing as a whole. As Robinson remarks: '*Contempt for the past surely accounts for a consistent failure to consult it.*'⁴; third, there is an extraordinary sense of triumphalist conviction (rarely a good sign of healthy intellectual debate). Fourth, and more worrying still, and that which presses most closely on today's sermon topic, Freedom of Thought, is the concerted attempt to place clear boundaries on what it is acceptable to think or explore. So, for example in his article, Atkins writes:

¹ *Varsity*, 8th October 2010, p 13

² *The Absence of Mind: the dispelling of inwardness from the modern myth of the self*, Yale university press, 2010.

³ *Ibid* p 2.

⁴ *Ibid*, p 29.

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'In the exercise of its power to answer deeply troubling questions, science has to distinguish apparently real questions from the merely invented and heart-warming' or again, through the scientific method, 'mankind appears to have stumbled upon a way of reaching a true understanding of anything of interest.'

These Orwellian overtones, 'apparently real questions' and 'anything of interest'; these attempts to police the acceptable boundaries of thought, lead us to a fifth observation about this strangely commonplace worldview, which is its truncated and limited view of human nature and of the human mind. For in the place of a rich humane tradition of exploration which acknowledges the intrinsic complexity of what it means to be a self, in the place of that extraordinary and extended conversation on the human condition which draws not just on the Classical philosophical tradition but also on Shakespeare's Hamlet or Macbeth or Othello or the poetry of a Donne or a Dickinson, (to take but a fleeting glimpse at a slither of human cultural achievement and its imaginative meditations on the ambiguities and conflicts and desires and motives of the human mind, on the operations of conscience and compassion), in the place of all this the worldview of parascience works with an extraordinarily reductive account of humanity weaving together threads from Freud, Nietzsche and Neo-Darwinian thinking to suggest that human consciousness can *really* all be boiled down to some primal instinct or urge or agent, of which the individual is a simple instrument, whether it is described as the sex instinct or the selfish gene or by some equally inane concept. To quote Marilynne Robinson once more:

'Every poem, theory, philanthropy, invention, scandal, hoax, and crime of violence tells us more' [about Human consciousness]. One would think that the inadequacy of any model to deal with the complexity of its subject would make its proponents a bit tentative⁵

Whilst the pantomime clothes of this so-called debate depict the characters 'Religion' and 'Science', once stripped of their gaudy garments, this worldview is in fact an attack on the central tradition of a humane, liberal education in the West as well as involving a caricature of the nature of science itself. In what sense, let alone a scientific sense, the simplistic notions at the heart of this worldview can possibly bear the weight of the word 'explanation' is something I have struggled to take even remotely seriously for something like two decades and yet so many nod *as if* it were true. It is not inappropriate to render the assent given to such '*as if*' truths in the public domain by employing the language used in reading from *Ephesians*: that of '*darkened understanding...blindness of heart...vanity of mind*⁶', or perhaps in the language of William James, the eminent psychologist, as a witness to the '*power of the intellect to shallow*⁷'.

The freedom, the liberty to think is a deeply precious one which requires time and space for its cultivation. A *certain sort of space* free of coercive powers and pressures, be they ideologies, with pretensions to dominance like parascience, or institutions and authorities with particular agendas – like the State. In the remaining minutes I want to suggest that genuine freedom of thought may be better protected by a liberal, generous and humane Christian foundation than by any secular alternative. A vision of one such space lies at the heart of what is indisputably the most profound articulation of what a University is for: John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University*,⁸ composed of lectures given in the dark and distant past of the 1850s in the context of an attempt to found a Catholic University in Ireland. The model set out by Newman is underpinned by an understanding of the reality of God as the source of all truth and value but - and it is a big and very interesting But, that got Newman into trouble with Irish Catholic hierarchy - Newman is also quite clear that *if* thinking is to flourish in such a place dedicated to that end, the University must be kept free of all attempts to control, capture or

⁵ Ibid p 72.

⁶ Ephesians 4: 17-18

⁷ William James classic text *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, orig. 1902; Reprint 1961; Collier, p 389, note 10.

⁸ There are a number of editions, including *The Idea of a University*, Ed. F. M. Turner, Yale University Press, 1996.

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direct its mental life, kept free of all ideologies and even, even in a Catholic University, free from the control of the Catholic Church.

Three features of Newman's understanding which relate to the idea of freedom of thought are worth recalling to mind at the beginning of a new year in this place:

The first is that truth is genuinely complex, even mysterious:

Newman's vision for a university as a generous and gentle space, as a place where thinking could be genuinely free, was of '*A school of knowledge of every kind, consisting of teachers and learners from every quarter*' where '*rashness*' may be '*rendered innocuous, and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind and knowledge with knowledge.*' It is a straightforward ideal and yet one of the curiosities of our media-driven world is the way in which experts, even quite eminent individuals, in particular fields, be they economists, biologists, psychologists, who are also possessed of a flair for self-promotion and the capacity to turn a good phrase, seek to reduce the complex mystery of life, the universe and everything to the assumptions and framing of one discipline seemingly unaware of the basic conversations that go on in other fields. By contrast, Newman's vision of the University was exactly that all subjects might sit at the table as equals, to listen and learn from each other, and as a result become increasingly aware of the proper limitations of their own knowledge.

The second, that learning to think involves personal encounter; it implicates all in a process of rich human formation; in personal encounters, in relationships which are nurturing and require of all a generosity and discernment. As Newman observed, '*the general principles of any study you may learn by books at home; the detail, the colour, the tone, the air, the life which makes it live in us, you must catch all these from those in whom it already lives*'. In fact, Newman goes on to single out for praise the scientific community of his day as being a '*remarkable instance*' of this principle in operation.

Genuine challenge and complexity; the personal character finally, genuine freedom of thought is hard won by the individual and community against elements of the human psyche; It is a moral activity. Whilst, quite clearly for Newman, human subjectivity cannot be reduced to the sort of simple terms paraded by the likes of an Atkins or Dawkins or Hitchens, but he is well aware of the scale of the challenge of dealing with those parts of our make-up to which such terms seek reference. As he puts it:

*'Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk, then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and pride of man.'*⁹

Genuine freedom of thought entails wrestling with the central paradox, that the writer of *Ecclesiasticus* identified around 2, 200 years ago, that real knowledge is not cheap and easy, but rather that those who seek wisdom and understanding must be bound, chained and fettered to the pursuit; that the freedom and depth of understanding that wisdom brings requires that we live within the constraint of certain disciplines. For it is only in submitting to such disciplines that we come to discover that wisdom's fetters are a strong defence, her chains a robe of glory, her bands purple lace¹⁰.

None of this, will of course come as news to those who are serious about the education business.

⁹ Ibid. p 90

¹⁰ Ecclesiasticus 6: 23-28

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