

# Tesco, ergo sum

The academy in ancient Athens was at the edge of the *agora* so that its deliberations about truth and value might inform public debate in the market place. By definition a university is an institution which is *universus*, turned in one direction. The Robbins report on higher education in 1963 set among the objectives for higher education as the ability to think and the transmission of a common culture. Universities have preserved human culture through the dark ages. Oppressive régimes often begin by targeting universities to silence the voice of truth. So what has happened to this traditional understanding of higher education?

In less than a decade higher education has expanded from an elitist opportunity for about one in seven 18-year-olds to a mass system involving about one in three. At the same time, the unit of resource per student has been driven down some 30 per cent and we are facing the next 9 per cent cut over the next three years. Everything has to be judged by value for money, hence the sequence of research selectivity exercises and teaching quality assessment and audits.

The delivery of higher education has also moved away from a "set menu" to unitisation, modularisation, semesterisation and the credit accumulation and transfer system (CATS), replacing Robbins's "common culture" with the personal choice of the supermarket, individualistic rather than community-based. Students are perceived either as customers, whom we have to attract with the glittering allure of

**Richard A. Burridge argues that a crisis of value in higher education is shortchanging students and society**

our new improved product, or as the raw material which we process, to make the product we serve to government and industry.

Language betrays our values. This vocabulary shift to "market speak" reflects a crisis of value in wider society. Now the *agora* has taken over the academy; we are all at the mercy of the market. The same is true in both our schools and the National Health Service. It is too simplistic to blame the Government. This shift of value is a consequence of the social changes following the collapse of modernity, of scientific materialism in the West and of communism in the East, which has left a spiritual void, where any belief rushes in to fill the vacuum. The Robbins report's "common culture" has been replaced by the pick 'n' mix of a supermarket: from all the options, you choose beliefs — and values.

While it is exciting and stimulating to live in a pluralist environment, it inevitably means no objective standard of value. Rather, it is an individual subjective choice imposed on reality as we personally find it, as all beliefs and ethical systems are privatised to the individual: you believe what you like and others must tolerate it. However, in society or in the university, we have to agree some shared value. Recently, this has been the spontaneous order of the market, which

must be free to regulate itself through competition. Thus value for money is the only value which leads to the change of language in higher education, the NHS and elsewhere.

Human beings are viewed from a financial perspective as means to ends, units of resource or production. The academy must give way to the *agora*, and the supermarket provides the only agreed value: *Tesco ergo sum*, I shop, therefore I am.

Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* draws a bleak parallel with the decline of the Roman empire: "This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time." In previous dark ages, the church and higher education formed an alliance whereby culture and values were preserved through monasteries and colleges. Many institutions of higher education preserve this tradition from their Christian foundation into the multicultural present. Thus the motto of King's College is still *sancie et sapienter* — with holiness and wisdom.

The Christian tradition, with all the world's major faiths, has always offered the objective standard that human values, and particularly the value of human beings, are based in the external reality of God. We have value because we are created by God in his image, blessed and affirmed by him (Gen-

esis 1.27-31). Because we are fallen creatures, universities, through study, assist in the liberation of the children of God. The incarnation demonstrates that God values human existence sufficiently to share it. The atonement gives us worth and value because Christ died for us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5.6), while Christ's resurrection proclaims that human beings are not just economic units, but have an eternal destiny.

Finally, eschatology suggests that quality control and external audit will not be by market criteria but in the love of God himself. Those who have an uncomfortable feeling that something is not quite right about valuing human beings simply in economic terms bear witness to the objective moral demands of the Creator God that all his people should be valued for who they are, not what they do.

The change in higher education from the transmission of a "common culture" to the supermarket has affected the sense of community, reflecting the individualism of the customer culture. The Christian faith has always been communal rather than individualistic as is demonstrated in its major sacraments of baptism and communion.

Many universities have a chapel or a tradition of corporate worship, a small protest against the individualistic customer culture and a reminder that we are here on earth to serve God and others, rather than ourselves. Only a traditional communitarian ethic of being *universus*, turned in the one direction of hope,



can stand against the individualism of the here-and-now profit.

As dean of King's College, I am conscious of its Christian tradition. However, I am aware that there are many who do not share that tradition, but wish to affirm the ultimate worth of human individuals. All the main world faiths share an opposition to relativism and agree about the centrality of God for all things, but especially for human value.

Many of those of no faith also wish nonetheless to align themselves with this tradition in its valuing of human beings. The alliance of higher education and the church preserved values through previous dark ages. Unfortunately, neither church nor higher education looks fit for the task of doing so in this dark age since both have been governed by the barbarians of market forces for some time.