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Can Theology Save the Academy? Exploring the Role of Theology in the Crisis of the Humanities –and the University Itself

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Abstract: A growing chorus of informed voices is lamenting the dire state of universities around the world, with many worrying negative symptoms. The question arises to what extent this perceived crisis could be linked to the progressive secularisation of academia in recent times, and to what extent we can identify its 'malaise' with the absence of religious inspiration and support. This thesis needs further analysis and could be justified after some analogy with the so-called "malaise of modernity". The article proposes a more active role for theology in universities as a way to provide meaning, purpose and hope; as a wisdom to educate how to believe; as an instance of respect for human dignity and rights; and as a way to assist in coping, resilience and flourishing for all sectors involved in this educational project.

Keywords: secularization, modernity, cultural malaise, believing, resilience

Introduction

It is commonplace to speak of the "crisis of universities" or the many challenges they face worldwide due to various factors: financial pressures, declining social recognition, demographic shifts, questions of perceived utility, ideological influences, and political interests. This perception has become even more pronounced in recent months, as universities in many countries have become contested spaces marked by protests, grievances, and ideological clashes. Recent events in some nations have further positioned universities as victims of growing polarization and political interference—forces that often have little to do with their fundamental mission of pursuing truth and educating future generations.

A quick scan of Internet search engines reveals a gloomy picture in many Western countries, with worrying symptoms ranging from low funding to low standards, low enrolment and the closure of many colleges and universities. The situation seems to be even more critical in the USA, in a system that makes higher education very expensive, leads to high levels of indebtedness for most students, and is subject to many pressures from different sectors that are debating its identity and usefulness in societies that value only some practical results and uses.

The crisis is even more acute when we think about the humanities. Many universities are closing down entire departments of these studies, which are now seen as redundant and useless in the new economic panorama; the humanities can even be seen as cases of cultural disruption. It is a dismaying situation as we follow the fate of many humanities in colleges and universities unable to appreciate their value and important contribution to the holistic education of new generations (Donoghue, 2008; Jay, 2014; Reitter & Wellmon, 2021).

It is likely that the perceived crisis runs deeper, and that the aforementioned problems are merely symptoms of a more radical malaise. Indeed, it is not too risky to extend the title of the 'malaise of modernity' to the university realm, perhaps as a particular setting, where such a structural illness or existential crisis afflicts an institution that is supposed to represent—in some sense—the best of the modern project of universal education and the raising of cultural standards as a means of promoting general well-being and prosperity. In other words, the perceived crisis of the university system reveals an unease with the modern programme of social and cultural progress, a failure to deliver the promised goods in a problematic context, and a high degree of uncertainty about the proper role such institutions should play in advanced societies and highly technologically driven cultures.

Dealing with the current crisis requires a good diagnosis of the causes of such weakness and decline, as a first step that would lead to better solutions and ways to address the current discontent. It is clear that this is a complex phenomenon and that its causes cannot be reduced to a single factor, such as financial neglect or ideological vagaries. A first task is to better describe and analyse the factors involved, a task that has already yielded good insights. However, this article introduces a thesis that has been less considered or taken into account: that this crisis is, among other things, a late consequence of the long process of secularisation that has affected most Western societies, leading to a loss of religious reference and a deep "disenchantment" in Weberian terms—with higher education, which loses its soul and becomes merely a professional activity or even a technical function aimed at providing experts to manage well-functioning social systems.

In recent years more and more voices have been raised about the need for theology to "save medicine", or even to save democracy as a system, or

to support sustainable lifestyles and social models. It is an open question to what extent a similar proposition can be made about higher education, i.e. that only theology can save it from losing its soul. The big issue at stake in many Western societies is that it is becoming increasingly obvious that the absence of religion, the inability to transcend, to provide resilient meaning and hope, is at the root of many social and personal pathologies and limitations that until recently were simply ignored, because the negative effects of such a deficit were less perceptible before, when we could presumably still enjoy some rents from the faith of other generations. As we reach a critical mass of low religious belief and practice, these negative effects become more apparent and the risks more threatening.

The following pages attempt to develop the proposed thesis. The first section will explore the causes of the perceived crisis, and the extent to which we can link the malaise of higher education to a loss of religious reference or to the deep secularisation of universities. The next section will attempt to be more constructive, suggesting the role that Christian faith and theology can play and contribute to addressing some of the challenges now perceived, in order to promote a different model of university, capable of providing much needed functions beyond the technical. This proposal, however, raises the question of what kind of theology would be appropriate in this context?

What went wrong with universities?

I am probably taking a risky step in linking the two crises: the fairly well-trodden intellectual path leading to the emergence of critical and deeply disappointing aspects of modernity, and the newly perceived problems of higher education. To some extent, the connection could be seen as too obvious or ignored: since universities are a vital element of the modern project of universal education for the general betterment of humanity, the crisis of modernity would be reflected or projected in the crisis of these educational institutions. However, this is not a necessary consequence; indeed, some modern institutions, such as scientific research or the welfare state, appear to be functioning reasonably well, despite

a less encouraging framework and, again, in the midst of many complaints. Indeed, until recently the system of higher education in most Western societies could be regarded as one of the best achievements of modern times, even though its origins date back to the Middle Ages. There is some debate about when the first signs of dissatisfaction began, or even whether it is a legitimate complaint; indeed, we find studies on the "crisis of the university" for at least four decades (Karnoouh, 1989; Amaral & Magalhães, 2003; Scott, 2018; Cook, 2021). It seems that the perception of "crisis" is intrinsic to the university universe, an endless condition due to its own quality as a centre of research, innovation and experimentation (Tight, 2024). It is difficult to assess the extent to which the pessimistic mood has increased significantly in recent years, feeding a sense of failure and a certain soul-searching, leading to calls for deep review and urgent reform (Christopherson et al., 2014; Thompsett, 2021; Ling & Livingston, 2023; Nehring, 2024; Woods, 2024; Bogost, 2025).

Descriptions of the crisis in higher education point to different causes and factors, and it is therefore important to pay attention to these different scenarios in order to avoid confusion, even if in more cases these factors seem to be quite intertwined. To summarise, the crisis is mainly linked to the following factors:

- Financial or economic, as many questions arise about the current models, such as: the involvement of public investment and its accountability, or the policies to avoid some excesses or wasteful spending; the huge costs for many students and their indebtedness; the big business associated with some models of higher education; and now more about the dramatic cuts this system is undergoing in several countries.
- Organisational issues, due to a change of model, moving to a more managerial and effective organisation, less aimed at improving wisdom and research, and more aimed at achieving a successful balance sheet. A similar case arises when these organisations need to adapt to new contexts of massive demand and delivery of required skills, assuming a more market-like mentality.
- Crisis of legitimacy and confidence, as more and more people mistrust the functions and performance of universities as institutions

providing quality education that contributes to the common progress of society, and the perception that universities are failing in their main mission of preparing skilled professionals able to face the challenges of all their professional and life circumstances (Brown, 2024).

- Ideological crisis, due to the perceived drift in many universities towards radical positions on political and social issues, often at odds with the majority of the population and its interests, raising critical questions about freedom of expression, the limits of inclusiveness and the underlying values that should inspire and support decision-makers and curricula.
- Crisis of interest and attendance, according to some data, students are attending less and less, showing an increasing sense of disengagement and discouraging professors and the entire system, which is resentful of such unblemished disaffection (Moores et al., 2019; Otte, 2024).
- Crisis of values, as many voices point to a profound change in recent decades, when the university ceases to be an institution that aims to "form character" and transmit values, and becomes merely a "knowledge factory" aimed at providing experts for positions in many economic sectors and industries (Donoghue, 2008; Arthur, 2024).
- The impact of new technologies, an aspect that has become increasingly evident in recent years, as the development of intelligent systems provides very efficient tools for education, sometimes overlapping and competing with traditional education systems, thus revealing their limitations.

This list can be extended to include the complaints and grievances of staff, teachers and other stakeholders; the catalogue can be expanded to include the precariousness of many positions for young professors or their low expectations of promotion. In any case, the aim of the former list is not to scare people about how bad things are, but to start from a certain awareness of the current state of affairs and to make a more accurate diagnosis of what is wrong with the current situation, in order to move towards attempts to remedy the perceived problems.

As noted above, this list does not include as part of the problem the "secularisation of the academy" that has been described in several studies in recent decades (Marsden & Longfield, 1992; Altschuler, 1994; Flatt, 2020). Indeed, it is not easy to assess the extent to which the two processes are related: the loss of religious profile and the perceived multiple crises in universities. It could just be a coincidence or, to use a rather minimal description borrowed from Max Weber, just an "elective affinity" between the two historical dynamics. To suggest a correlation seems more risky and even one-sided or reductive. The thesis put forward here is that progressive secularisation could have a negative impact on the way universities have developed in recent decades. This thesis runs counter to the received wisdom, which asserts the healthy and progressive consequences of a process of differentiation and autonomy, which allows the development of institutions aimed at cultivating education and research without interference from other social systems, and even less from religious tutelage, censure or control.

The big question now is to what extent this process can be seen as a gain or a loss, taking into account the many factors and issues involved. The answer probably needs to be more nuanced, distinguishing between positive and negative aspects of this process of differentiation. Something similar can be assumed from other social systems, such as the health care system, where some gains have been made from breaking with religious traditions and guardianship in medical practice, while at the same time we can perceive some losses or dysfunctions due to the lack of religious or spiritual reference in care activities.

The first point is not new. Max Weber, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was already able to complain about the negative consequences of the secularisation process, which he had already observed as something inevitable and a destiny of Western societies; his point was that we pay a price for the economic, scientific and technical progress we are experiencing, a price we feel more in existential terms, but that is the other side of the modern condition. The secularisation of the higher education system in most Western societies, even in religious universities, which can hardly escape this universal trend, is taken for granted, and is seen as progress in contrast to earlier times.

The negative consequences of this move have mostly been ignored or considered secondary to the great advantages that can be found in the secular model of higher education.

The malaise of modernity and the malaise of university

This is a slightly original point: we are well aware of a long intellectual tradition that has exposed the faults, abuses and problems of modernity. Some of them are all too obvious, given the historical record: very destructive wars, terrible forms of social engineering, the annihilation of entire populations... Awareness of the dark side of modernity is nothing new, but an exercise that began quite early. The Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski gave a significant title to an important book, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Kołakowski, 1990). He used the term 'malaise' several times to describe the current situation more than 30 years ago. A year later, Charles Taylor published a book with the evocative title *The Malaise of Modernity* (Taylor, 1991). They were by no means the only ones; several years earlier, the American sociologist Peter L. Berger was raising similar issues (Berger 1974). We can even speak of a literary and philosophical genre that has produced many titles in recent decades. In many cases, the problem is the lack of normativity and values, or even the nihilism that results from such an emancipatory movement. This is a motif that has been present in modern times at least since Nietzsche, through Max Weber, the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, the French New Philosophers, many postmodern thinkers, and finds another radical expression in the critical analysis of theologians like John Milbank (1990). The result is always the same: a perceived void and the inability of modern means to replace religion—Christian faith, to be precise—as a provider of values, moral guidance, motivation, resilience and hope. The institutions that have grown up and become more characteristic of the modern age—the political state, the liberal economy, science, the legal system or even the health system—would be quite incapable of providing the functions and services formerly associated with religion and its rituals or practices. The expected self-correcting

function of social systems, which would find the anti-bodies for their own illness or develop solutions in an evolutionary and adaptive way, are in these studies denounced as unconvincing and insufficient.

The situation of general crisis described above is by no means the only currency in the Western cultural milieu, as many other proposals and developments could reveal the opposite tendency: an undiminished faith in progress, in human capacities, in the expectation of human moral improvement, and in science and new technologies capable of solving every problem and overcoming every challenge we humans face. Adaptability and survival in new environments could be the rule, as it has often been in the past, and it should not be the exception now. This is a controversial and difficult issue to resolve: to what extent secularisation leads to very negative consequences in terms of anomy, disorientation, lack of control and hope; and to what extent this is a price worth paying, given the enormous benefits we could enjoy by getting rid of religion and its heavy tutelage. This is a point made very explicitly by Charles Taylor in his magnum opus *A Secular Age* (2007): the general perception associated with a secular culture is that it is better to avoid religious references and dependencies in order to pursue and live a fulfilling life. It is what he calls the "subtraction thesis": if we subtract religion from the social fabric, things will stay the same or even get better.

The question of the negative consequences of the modern secularisation process has been further explored and in recent years has found new, even alarming, expression. The general question is whether the price is becoming too high and whether we can even survive or achieve a sustainable standard of living without any religious reference. This point becomes more acute in areas such as medicine and health care, where some voices ask whether theology is the only instance that could save medicine (Nissen, 2014; Ranganathan, 2017). The question appears in a more demanding way with regard to the democratic system, as a threatened model and in danger of deteriorating if a balanced Christian faith disappears. It is noteworthy that, in recent months, various essays have registered this alarm: without the right religion, democracy is at high risk (French & Rauch, 2024; Rosa, 2024; Short, 2025).

In broad strokes, we can observe a certain correlation between the increase in perceived threats and uncertainty and a renewed demand for religion. This is

a point that could be expected from the theoretical framework of Niklas Luhmann and his social systems theory (Luhmann, 1977): since the function of religion is identified with coping with unmanageable contingency and uncertainty, then it is to be expected that as the level of contingency—or uncontrollable risk—increases, religious function and performance will be more in demand as a way of filling in gaps or ensuring a minimum of certainty and hope, or limiting the damage associated with this excess of contingency and complexity. Something similar is happening now with the rise of intelligent systems, which could pose an existential threat, as many alarmist voices remind us (Harari, 2024). These last events seem to close a circle that began as a process of modern emancipation, leading to a deliberate disengagement from religion, and a new awareness of the growing bad consequences of this move, inviting a remedy and a better articulation of religion and the other social systems to avoid the worst.

Once these points have been made, and the open questions about the contested role of religion in advanced secular societies have been addressed, attention has turned to higher education and its own secularisation. This is a point which has already been analysed (Marsden & Longfield, 1992; Altschuler, 1994; Flatt, 2020), and which affects even Catholic colleges and universities (McIntire, 2008). This is an obvious point, which in most cases is taken as a normal consequence of the modernisation and differentiation of an institution born within a Christian framework and model. It is less clear, however, to what extent the perceived "malaise of the university", which may well correlate with that perceived in modern society in general, or even more so in areas such as politics and culture, is related to the progressive absence of religious communication or explicit reference to transcendence. In fact, it is much more difficult to identify a Luhmannian rule in this context: to what extent the perception of new uncertainties and symptoms of deep crises could trigger a "religious search" or a need for alternative resources capable of providing some resilience to this particular and very sensitive social system.

A further "technical" cause can be added to the catalogue described: contemporary science and research have been driven by a reductivist attitude that has rendered obsolete or redundant the reference to traditional religious motives or reasons. Since science works better by applying a reductive model

and seeking parsimony, the religious dimension is better dropped as unnecessary and even inconvenient to better explain natural and social processes. Some criticism has already been voiced against this attitude, as Steven Horst denounces that "being reduced" carries negative connotations and reveals a cognitive style that could sacrifice many aspects involved in any process in the expectation of gaining a more accurate insight (Horst, 2007). However, this approach runs the risk of ignoring the complexity of factors involved in human and social phenomena. Such a cognitive and scientific style could also contribute to alienating religion from academia and rendering it irrelevant in higher education.

Obviously, some of the causes of the described crisis have very little to do with any religious absence, such as the important financial issues affecting the sustainability of these institutions. However, other issues, such as the perceived loss of public confidence, the disaffection of many students, or the perception of a useless organisation, are probably more related to a loss of balance in social values and preferences, and the way in which societies could recognise the merits of higher education, and even more so of the humanities, with all the investment required to keep it functioning.

What can do theology to assist and remedy in all this mess?

The question at the beginning of this section might seem rather rhetorical in the midst of the perceived chaos and uncertainty that afflicts higher education. Theology plays a minimal role in this very advanced system, and its presence is usually marginal, on the fringes of campuses—if it is there at all—and in most cases completely absent or ignored. Probably, theology shares a similar fate with the other humanities, a family to which it belongs and where the analysis could start, since both realities run in parallel: the rejection of theology and the deep crisis felt by the humanities.

The particular case of the humanities and its crisis is quite paradigmatic. Some recent books expose this case and the negative consequences of

such a trend. Willem Drees, for example, offers a fine analysis that serves as a vindication of these disciplines (Drees, 2021). His main point is that the main function of the humanities is to give meaning to people's lives, their relationships and our history, a function that is absolutely necessary and even more so in these critical times. This function is less likely to be fulfilled by science and technology, and it is in the area covered by the humanities that it can flourish and work better. The weakness that we perceive in the humanities could be attributed to many developments in this field, since several studies, under the influence of postmodern programmes, could contest even the search for truth as a vain effort, emptying these disciplines of any strong mission in the new context.

The pressing question now is what theology has to do with all this gloomy panorama. Certainly, the humanities stand or fall with theology and religion. Since theology is at the heart of the humanities, but has suffered a steady erosion even in this academic field, we might be justified in thinking that a complete secularisation of the academy, a total absence of religion, will threaten the rest of the humanities and any programme aimed at helping people to understand themselves and others better, or to find meaning and purpose. It is interesting to assess the extent to which the crisis of theology and the study of religion in modern universities is only the first symptom of a global crisis affecting all the humanities, and how such a process could trigger a general crisis of meaning that would affect—and is affecting—the whole of the academy. Indeed, this lack of meaning is clearly visible among those students who are abandoning the classroom, who see attending classes as a waste of time and energy; all they are looking for is a degree that might give them a few more chances of getting a better-paid—or less tiring—job.

Perhaps I am expecting too much from theology in developing this thesis. The idea that the rejection of theology is at the heart of the crisis in the humanities, and that this is at the heart of the dismal state of higher education, could be seen as an exaggeration or an exercise in over-estimating theology, which is usually a much more modest enterprise and does not pretend to be the key to solving all these difficult problems. Other factors, however, can help to focus the question of this role and to give the theological profession more self-respect.

To begin with, the ambition described—to endow theology with a great responsibility to address major challenges in several social systems, including higher education—may recall a rather famous and enigmatic fable by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, who, not far from his dramatic death during the Second World War, proposed the image of a dwarf hidden under a chess table where an automaton was apparently moving the pieces; in fact, it was the dwarf who was highly skilled at the game, and who could see the moves and move the pieces himself in order to defeat any opponent. Curiously, Benjamin associated this hidden figure with theology, attributing to it the unusual function of inspiring and enforcing a historical materialist programme of social progress (De Cauter, 2018).

Obviously, this image, which is more than 80 years old and was produced in a different context of deep social and historical crisis, can hardly serve as a guide for dealing with our current challenges. It can only function as a literary figure or an inspirational motif, with a very limited range. In any case, it is interesting that some critical thinkers can sometimes remind us how important theology can become in highly threatened contexts. The examples cited of theology being called upon to save medicine are just one example. The voices calling for religion to save democracy could be understood in a similar way, since theological discernment is most needed to address very complex issues related to the role of religion, or rather Christian faith, in our troubled times.

In any case, we can go one step further and try to find out what specific functions theology—as the reflective dimension of religion—could provide to meet the challenges described, especially those in the academy. My proposals should be linked to the earlier analysis of the humanities as providers of meaning or general guides, an endeavour that requires some further points of attention. The first, in my view, is to help in the difficult process of forming beliefs, the right ones; the second is related to the issue of preserving human dignity and rights; and the third service expected of theology is to help in providing a clear path to personal and social well-being, including the ability to cope and gain resilience to adversity.

Theology and meaning

The general framework for better understanding the role I am trying to assign to theology in saving the academy is that assigned to the humanities as purveyors of meaning in a context threatened by nihilism. In this case, theology must take on a clear format as a reflection on the ultimate meaning of everything, or on what is more important, more cherished, more valued for us at any given time. It is about the ultimate value we give to our lives, our activities and our society. Doing theology should be recognised as an activity aimed at discerning such ultimate value in more dimensions, which is clearly related to truth, to goodness and even to the pursuit of beauty and happiness. Different religious traditions offer different approaches to addressing and answering the central question: how we can live our lives in a way that we find fulfilling; and how we can design our societies and world in a way that makes them a better place and the right framework for human flourishing (Park, 2013; Oviedo, 2019).

Recent versions of religious vitalism, such as that proposed by Gavin Flood (2019), provide an excellent motivation in this case. This is because religions are described in terms of a constant pursuit of life or life fulfilment. Flood describes the role of religion in promoting civilisation, channeling and managing vital energy, and how both—religion and civilisation—become the basis for achieving better living conditions for all. This is an interesting suggestion as meaning can be clearly linked to the ability to promote life and—as Flood states—to heal the wounds of life. Becoming an instance of living life in its better forms and expressions is very close to providing meaning and purpose, to revealing a worthy living existence.

Theology—framed in these clues—becomes a reflection and a research programme aimed at developing the best means and strategies to overcome the negative aspects that threaten meaningfulness and to reach the highest levels of vitality. In this sense, and in connection with higher education, theology becomes a "school of life" in which students learn how to live their own lives in the most fruitful and fulfilling way, providing higher ideals and nourishing the best expectations for right flourishing.

Theology as a teacher of right believing

In order to achieve the ambitious programme just described, theology must focus on some specific tasks. The first has to do with the question of faith and the process of believing. In our cultural panorama we have a problem with the right acquisition of beliefs, and theology can help to solve it. Indeed, it is clear that many aspects of life and social systems are based on commonly shared beliefs (Fuentes, 2019). But it is also clear to what extent these same systems are suffering from a threatening erosion of these supporting beliefs, rendering these same systems unstable and somewhat illegitimate. This is clear with democracy, when fewer people believe that it could be the best or most functional system of government. Lack of faith or confidence undermines the health system, the education system and even the system that governs personal relationships. The same process certainly affects the university and even science, which is losing confidence from some big sectors of society (New Humanist, 2024).

The topic of beliefs and believing processes has been the subject of intense multidisciplinary research in recent years (Angel et al., 2017). Current studies combine epistemology, cognitive psychology, and even computer science to better understand how beliefs are formed, stabilise, persist or decay, and eventually die out, in a way that reminds us of evolutionary and adaptive processes. We have the means and the tools to better understand this process, and we are aware of the normative aspects involved (Chrisman, 2022). The question for us, once we recognise the importance of beliefs and their inescapable role; and once we accept the emerging crisis that demands correction and normativity to avoid their vagaries and worst expressions; is to what extent theology can contribute to this task.

An interesting answer to this question is provided by Alister McGrath's recent book, *Why We Believe* (2025), in which beliefs—and especially religious beliefs—are defended as sources of meaning and are needed to fill the many gaps left by a culture overconfident in science and modern ideologies. Theology is needed most of all, and even more so in the university context, to assist in the formation of right beliefs. Theologians have a long tradition in the study

of faith and the right way to believe, having become aware of many excesses and unbalanced ways. In any case, for theology, the formation of beliefs is closely related to the possibility of pursuing ideals of truth and virtue; it is not some abstract or unrelated cognitive feature, but one that has very practical consequences and needs to be directed towards these practical ends: believing in order to grow, or believing in order to achieve a better life for all—not just for one person. It is suggested that theology can make such a connection and such an alignment better than any other discipline.

The point is that the process of believing is not just a matter of estimating probabilities or seeking what might be close to certainty. Very often such calculations are rather difficult to make, or to reach a level of certainty that is justified by good testimony and some evidence. In the limit, the question of beliefs, and even more so those that are more crucial, such as our ultimate values, is less about logical discernment or rational estimation, and more about systems that offer real meaning and hope for all, far from reductive and flawed but very seductive proposals. Theology can do a good job and help in this area.

Theology supporting human dignity

This is another point closely related to the provision of meaning and to believing. Indeed, we may more or less believe that human persons are endowed with freedom, inalienable dignity and rights. The extent to which Christian faith and theology can contribute to supporting and enforcing such beliefs and to fostering a sense of respect for the human person is open to debate (Oviedo, 2025). What is beyond doubt for many of us is that we can hardly design a programme for the university as a formative space that ignores this priority: to contribute to the recognition of a high value of the human person that inspires any charter of rights, including those that could become more sensitive in this particular environment.

Theology can provide a good foundation and motivation in this area. It is clear that theology is not the only authority or stakeholder in this controversial area of human rights. However, my suspicion is that the disappearance of theological reference would make the task of dealing with new proposals or charters of rights much more difficult and cumbersome (Pocar, 2015). Finally,

Christian faith provides a ground for maintaining and developing human rights because it anchors human dignity and rights in a doctrine or deep conviction that conceives of human beings as intimately related to God, which is the highest we can conceive of the human condition, i.e. that it is deeply rooted in the divine. We are talking about a set of mutually reinforcing beliefs that make it possible to construct a model of meaning and humanity that should be the basis for all intellectual development and scientific research. This model can motivate a renewal of the University, its identity and its mission.

Theology, coping and wellbeing

The final specification concerns the ability of theology to provide means to achieve greater coping, resilience and flourishing in this often harsh milieu, or to prevent the banalisation of college and university life. This is a well--researched area, pointing to the positive effects in coping with adversity and crisis, gaining resilience, providing meaning and achieving wellbeing (Jones, 2004). For those familiar with the many struggles that both faculty and students face, sometimes due to very difficult and unmanageable demands and pressures, including some levels of failure and personal crisis, religious faith and theology clearly play a positive role in assisting in these difficult cases.

In this context, theology can be seen as an academic activity with a very practical scope: to help everyone to cope better with their challenges, to overcome the worst experiences that are quite common in this highly competitive and stressful environment. In this way, theology contributes to a healthy model that can help in the many struggles and difficulties. It is interesting and highly relevant that the prestigious journal *Nature* has launched a new call for papers entitled "The development, maintenance, and treatment of student mental health difficulties" (Mental Health Research, 2025); or that another journal could ask in an editorial "Student mental health and well-being: are universities doing enough?" (Barrett & Twycross, 2020; see also: Abrams, 2022).

In my opinion, one missing pillar that contributes to mental health is religious belief. However, many studies have shown that not every form of religion works equally well in this case and in this particular context. Since

the university is—or should be—an environment of high intellectual standards, we can expect religious proposals to reach such an intellectual level that they can meet the demands of those who are better educated, and this is something that requires much more theology, not just a simple chaplaincy. I am not sure that this is an issue that requires only a greater presence of professional psychological care and therapy; theology can be very helpful in this task and can make a difference.

Concluding remarks

This article has proposed a way of critically reviewing the many voices that complain of a dire state of affairs in universities around the world and its many causes. It has then developed an analysis that seeks to identify secularisation, or the lack of religious reference, as the cause of some forms of malaise in higher education, a malaise that could be linked to other perceived forms of 'modernity malaise'. The search for secularisation as the culprit is likely to reveal only a limited aspect of a much larger and more complex situation, with all the many factors involved. I have only tried to sketch out an analysis that offers a remedy for many of these problems by bringing theology into the equation and considering its functions and performance as a guiding and reflecting instance for religious faith. This may seem an overly bold claim, and one that is difficult to justify in the present circumstances. It is not a question of reclaiming ecclesiastical authority in university affairs, but of restoring a proper balance between the extremes of the complete absence of religion in the academic world, its total subtraction; and an excess of interference and involvement by religious bodies in research or university management. Perhaps we can find a way of activating the positive function of religion in this particular area or social subsystem without incurring an excess of external and dysfunctional control.

At the moment this is little more than a thesis with very limited evidence. However, just as a personal anecdote, my own experience at one of the finest universities in the world, Oxford, which I visit frequently, is that it is strangely

one of the places with the most vibrant Christian expressions, even a kind of revival that can be perceived at several levels, including the beautiful and deeply spiritual evensongs performed in several colleges' chapels. In this context, it is worth noting that this University sometimes still counts on a theological expert to address and discuss very crucial questions, such as "what is life", as happened last February in a public colloquium at the Sheldonian Theatre (University of Oxford, 2025). All is not lost!

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