

## **Serving God and Mammon: Universities, Knowledge and New Religious Orthodoxies (0090)**

Traditionally, the role of universities has been to create credible knowledges and disseminate them through teaching students and other exchange media (such as publication). Civil society has generally trusted such knowledges because they have been produced through known and verifiable processes such as scholasticism or scientific experimentation.

Such knowledges are not the 'truth' in any objective sense – but they are generally accepted as legitimate by virtue of the circumstances of their creation. Medieval universities were closely associated with the Church and the knowledge created by them was credible because scholars rigorously studying the word of God produced it. In the contemporary context, scientists at the University of East Anglia were exonerated of producing unreliable knowledge on climate change because their scientific processes were pronounced robust (Science and Technology Committee 2011).

The constitution of universities and therefore their authority to produce legitimate knowledge has always been imbricated in relationships of power. Medieval universities were manifestations of Church power that supported and sustained religious orthodoxy. Perhaps until twenty years ago, universities operated primarily as self-governing communities of scholars whose knowledge products reflected that community (largely male, elite and white), their values and their subjectively determined version of objectivity and academic rigour. Such environments left little space for heterodoxy, whether heresy in the Middle Ages or women's studies in the late twentieth century. Thus, the legitimation of knowledge has always been contingent on access to power.

In neoliberal knowledge economies validated knowledge yields economic and social power. This has made universities, as producers of valid knowledge, a primary battleground, with governments and others seeking to influence scholarly agendas (Boden & Epstein 2006; Boden & Epstein in press 2011). The translation of universities to market actors has meant that money—Mammon—plays a significant part in shaping them and therefore the knowledge that they produce, legitimate or validate.

It is usual to think of this process in terms of the knowledges being *excluded* from a place at the university table. For instance, in 2011 London Metropolitan University axed the majority of its arts and humanities course because they are not 'profitable' (in the narrow, accounting, sense); the university had to pay back public funds incorrectly claimed by managers during previous years and this resulted in the exclusion of whole bodies of knowledge. But, in this paper, and via a detailed institutional case story, we explore how worship of Mammon is facilitating the *inclusion* of heterodox knowledges by universities—in this case religious faith.

The possession of knowledge can be recognised in a variety of ways – for instance, in medieval Europe one might be a guild member. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, professionals were recognised as knowledgeable by virtue of their ongoing membership of self-governing communities in which they had served as pupils. Both guild members and professionals were trusted and powerful. In neoliberal states, trust of individuals is low and their power not tolerated. The traditional markers of knowledge have been replaced with the examination and the certificate (Foucault 1977)—a process known as credentialism (Brown *et al.* 2010 ). Credentialism is an institutionally controlled and regulated process operated by neoliberalised organisations. The power of certification is therefore substantial—and, for rent-seeking universities, one that can generate substantial income.

Groupings seeking to advance heterodox knowledges in neoliberal states may wish to have them credentialised. But this is contingent upon the income that universities might receive for giving credence to the knowledge. This income might come from selling places on courses or via validation fees paid by knowledge promoters so that they can issue certificates on the university's behalf.

Utilising the above concepts, this paper offers a detailed analysis of the validation of unorthodox religious knowledge by the University of Wales (UW), tracing the role of Mammon and considering the wider consequences. We do so from publicly available sources, including the financial reports and accounts.

UW has no direct students and very few faculty. Now that all the major players in the old federated university have left, only a rump of small, less prestigious universities remain within its aegis. In 2007 UW became a 'confederal' body with substantial powers to validate degrees at 'collaborative partner' institutions in the UK and abroad. It now earns 67% of its income from this source. UW currently validates 177 theology courses worldwide, despite the fact that it has no theology department. Some of these partners are self-avowedly fundamentalist, believing that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and, therefore, in Creationism and that homosexuality is a sin. Thus heterodox beliefs have become credentialised and legitimate knowledge via the payment of a validation fee to a highly commercialised public university. UW degrees have equal status with all others in Europe under the Bologna Process and this has

caused controversy in Denmark. In 2011 the Quality Assurance Agency found UW's validations to be highly problematic, leading the Welsh education minister to assert that UW had brought 'shame on Wales.' Heterodox religious views are not the only new knowledges being legitimated in the UK. These developments may therefore have serious repercussions for the credibility of higher education institutions as producers of credible knowledge.

## References

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