

The Christian Roots of University of Western Ontario

When visitors enter the Great Hall in Huron College and the one in the University of Western Ontario (UWO), they will see the portraits of the 19th century Bishop Isaac Hellmuth. These portraits suggest an attempt to appropriate his image as an icon in support of the ongoing life of the college and university. The implication is not only that Hellmuth was a key in establishing Western and one of its affiliated colleges, but that he would also endorse their development with their proliferation of disciplines and buildings. What is ignored, however, is the fact that Hellmuth would never have supported a modern university separated in policy and spirit from any denominational tradition. While his achievements are celebrated, his own motivation for founding the two educational institutions were thoroughly intertwined with his evangelical Anglican faith. But little evidence remains of his faith commitment that shaped and propelled Western. Hellmuth was not a pioneering secularist. His understanding of God and a life of faith are constantly in the fore of his own writings and in comments made by his contemporaries. In his time the Christian faith had a tremendous influence on education. Schools - from elementary to university - were largely the creation of the Church and maintained a Christian emphasis.

Turning to events in London, we begin with Benjamin Cronyn. From the time he came to London, Upper Canada, in 1832, he worked as missionary parish clergyman, and was elected the first Bishop of Huron, which included London, in 1857. He was an evangelical Anglican, stressing conversion, personal piety, the authority of Scripture, and love for Jesus. In Hellmuth, Bishop Cronyn found a kindred spirit. He was a Polish Jew who was converted to the Christian faith through a missionary supported by the Society for the Conversion of Jews. With the help of new-found Christian friends, Hellmuth eventually made his way from England. He was baptized at All Saints' Church, Liverpool, in 1842. After he came to Canada he studied for the Holy Orders in the Church of England. A sketch of Hellmuth's early years reveal a number of interesting things which impacted his life in succeeding decades. He had a deep interest in missions, and he was eager to serve the church institutions that nurtured him. He was a gifted scholar and teacher, being educated rigorously by his father and in the classroom. His experiences strongly influenced him in the direction of assisting faith-based education, especially when such education had the goal of enabling clergy and missionaries. Hellmuth joined Bishop Cronyn in 1861. Shortly afterwards the newly appointed archdeacon of Huron made two trips to England to canvass his evangelical friends for "funds for the establishment of a sound Evangelical College from which men may be sent forth to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all godly simplicity and fullness." He became the first principal of Huron College when it opened in 1863. Hellmuth succeeded Cronyn as Bishop in 1871. He was the driving force behind the establishment of Western University, later the University of Western Ontario.

It is abundantly clear that Hellmuth's primary reason for the founding of Huron College was to train young men for the Anglican program of organizing local congregations throughout the Diocese of Huron. The lack of qualified and sincere men for the ministry was a source of great anxiety for him. For Hellmuth, then, as for others who worked to establish colleges, it was imperative to provide an educated clergy for the growing population of Canada in order to cultivate sincere Christian life and an evangelical spirituality that would bring the inhabitants of

the flourishing colony to God. Ultimately, his desire for an increase in the number of clergy, was rooted in his Christian faith his appreciation of the Anglican tradition and of the Gospel as a message for all people. Nevertheless, he was not only interested in theological studies. In the founding of the Western University of London, Hellmuth hoped, among other things, to keep in the diocese the brightest of its young people; some of whom could be attracted to a theological education and the life of a missionary or clergyman. In comparison with the deep interest in the latter, his enthusiasm for the development of faculties such as Medicine and Arts was muted. This is apparent, especially in his final report, "Huron College and the Western University," to the twenty-sixth session of the Synod of the Diocese of Huron. Speaking in the support of the need to develop a university offering programs in the Arts and Sciences, Hellmuth states, "We need in these days a sounder Scriptural, and a higher literary and scientific training, if the Church is successfully to meet the dangerous tendencies of a 'Philosophy' so called." He apparently understood the philosophical challenge raised by modern scholarship against traditional Christianity and was confident that they could be met partly on their own terms. In other words, he believed that Christian scholarship in the Arts and Sciences was possible and that it would affirm the Christian faith and expose the hollowness of the "'Philosophy', falsely so called." Thus, the non-theological subjects were considered as handmaidens to theology. At one point, he made reference to the "higher branches of learning based upon sound church principles." But nowhere is there any indication of how, for example, the study of medicine and church principles or biblical theology would interact. The icon of Isaac Hellmuth as merely a vigorous administrator with some religious preference is without a soul. His story is a window into a world of institution building as a service to God and humanity

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