

Occasional Papers on Faith in Higher Education

*A joint publication of
Whitelands College, University of Roehampton, London, UK, and
CUAC (Colleges and Universities of the Anglican Communion)*

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INTRODUCTION

Not so many years ago, there was a fairly widespread assumption, at least in Western societies where the inheritance of the Enlightenment is so strong, that religious faith had no place in higher education. Faith was largely ignored and, to the extent that it was countenanced at all, it was claimed to be a personal, purely private matter. Any influence that individuals might allow it to have on their scholarship, research, learning, and teaching was presumed to be deleterious, because faith could not but inhibit critical enquiry and distort academic judgement.

But times are changing. Today (as Elaine Graham discusses in her paper), religion plays an increasingly visible political and socio-cultural role at many levels, from local communities to international relations. Even religious sceptics are compelled to acknowledge that it is (for good or ill) a significant factor in the lives of a large proportion of the world's population. And that is not something that happens only in underdeveloped societies. Large-scale immigration has brought many religions and many faithful to the heart of the developed world, where shapers of public opinion – politicians, the media, big business – cannot afford to ignore it.

Nor can higher education. In this new world, a convincing argument can (and, we believe, must) be made that education in the twenty-first century has to include developing what is often called 'religious literacy'. This term is rarely defined, but seems to imply at least two intellectual capacities, regardless of one's personal convictions. One is an awareness of a human need for faith in something that lies behind or beyond the tangible, everyday here-and-now and touches the everywhere-and-always. The other is a working knowledge about and understanding of the major religious faiths.

This contention raises a number of questions for those of us involved in higher education. What is the substance of the argument for a greater recognition of faith in learning? What proportion of current students and academics hold some form of religious belief? What are the attitudes of academics and students towards the place of faith in learning? What is the

influence of high-profile scholars who promote or argue against atheism? What form should education for religious literacy take? For those who themselves practise a faith, further questions arise concerning the relationship between their own educational and religious development.

This new publication aims to address such questions within the accepted norms of scholarly discussion. As a collaborative venture between Whitelands, a Church of England college within a modern, secular university, and CUAC, an international network of Anglican-foundation institutions of learning, it will perhaps inevitably be of particular interest to scholars and readers within the Anglican Communion. The scope of the *Papers* is not, however, intended to be limited to Christian concerns, nor a particular denomination or discipline. Although it will include reports and evaluation of research, neither is it intended as a purely research publication. The aim is rather to provide a forum for debate and discussion in all matters connected with faith and the design and delivery of higher education, and the experience of those who teach and study within it.

Two aspects of this new joint venture require a word of explanation. The first relates to the contents and orientation of this first issue. The *Papers* were originally planned as a publication of Whitelands College, addressing questions arising particularly in British higher education. Once the materials had been gathered, and shortly before the journal was launched, however, the editorial board was delighted, in consultation with the board of trustees of CUAC, to widen its aim to serve also as an organ of the international body. The result is that the papers in this issue are all written by authors in the United Kingdom, writing primarily for the local context. Nonetheless, in our globalised world Christian foundation institutions confront many similar questions, and we hope that a great deal of what these authors have to say will be of interest and relevance to an international readership. We also hope that others, from many parts of the world, will be inspired to contribute to future editions, so that the *Papers* will become a genuinely international means of scholarly communication.

The second concerns the frequency of publication, which, as the title suggests, is not predetermined. Our intention is to produce one issue in the first half of each calendar year but, if sufficient publishable materials are received, the *Papers* will appear more often. Information for contributors is included at the end of this edition. Welcome to *Occasional Papers on Faith in Higher Education*.

Seeking the Kingdom?

Stephen Heap

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Seeking to create a good society has long been a concern of the church. Universities have traditionally had a similar concern. Some still do, though it appears in government higher education policy in England in only a very limited way.¹ This paper argues that working for a good society is an important role of universities.

The Church and the Good Society

2014 saw the ninetieth anniversary of a major Christian conference discussing what Christian faith might suggest constitutes a good society. The ecumenical Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship (COPEC) was held in Birmingham in April 1924. It was part of a flourishing of Christian thinking about the nature of society in the inter-war years which occurred both nationally in Britain and internationally in the movement which, post Second World War, became the World Council of Churches. The Anglican William Temple (1881-1944) was significant in both COPEC and the antecedents of the World Council. His work, and that of other Christians, also influenced the creation of the welfare state.

Such Christian concern for the good of society continues today. Many see the 1985 report *Faith in the City* as an example of such work being done well.² Elaine Graham, for example, describes it as one of the 'high watermarks of modern Anglican social thought.'³ *Faith in the City* contains an analysis of the cities of the day, recommendations for action, and is rooted in a Christian view of the world in which 'the inalienable dignity and worth of every individual and the absolute equality of all before God' are stressed.⁴ Rowan Williams is one present day articulator of what such views mean for a variety of contemporary issues. A number of his lectures in this area are in his *Faith in the Public Square*, in the introduction to which he offers this rationale for Christian engagement with wider society:

¹ This paper was originally written for the English context.

² Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, 1985

³ Graham, 2013, p. 210

⁴ Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission, 1985, p. 48.

If it is true that the world depends entirely on the free gift of God, and that the direct act and presence of God has uniquely appeared in history in the shape of a human life two millennia ago, this has implications for how we think about that world and human life.⁵

That includes thinking about such things as ecological issues, economics and how different cultures and faiths might flourish in a diverse society. It also involves acting to shape agendas, which the church continues to do, including through the work of Rowan Williams' successor as Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who has worked on, for example, banking and welfare, sometimes in conjunction with the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster.

Such a commitment to engaging with the nature of society can be seen across the Christian spectrum. John Stott's *Issue Facing Christians Today* is credited with reinvigorating evangelical engagement with social issues.⁶ Amongst the Free Churches, the Baptist Union, Methodist Church and United Reformed Church have their Joint Public Issues Team.⁷ The World Council of Churches has pursued such concerns at an international level, working in particular with themes of justice, peace and creation. There is a long tradition of Catholic Social thought, expressed in documents such as *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), *Deus Caritas Est* (2005) and, from the present Pope, *Lumen Fidei* (2013).

That Christians have such concerns is not surprising. Visions of what constitutes a good society are prominent in the scriptures and lives which shaped the faith. They are there in laws of Jubilee and Sabbath, for example, and in the central proclamation of Jesus about a Kingdom whose life is seen as God is served and as the neighbour is loved, liberated, healed, fed, housed, clothed and so on. Within the early church, sharing with the needy and creating a community which held things in common was a key response to the early kerygmatic proclamation of Peter in Acts chapter two. All this is a response to God, who has called for a way of being marked by love and service. Within it is a vision of how life should be lived in community.

⁵ Williams, 2012, p. 1

⁶ Stott, 1984

⁷ www.jointpublicissues.org.uk, accessed 30/4/14

The University and the Good Society

Traditionally, whilst universities have had a variety of roles, and whilst what it means to be a university has been and is contested, there is a long-present and continuing theme which says they are to seek the public good. One of the landmark debates about what it is to be a university preceded the foundation of the University of Berlin in 1810. Wilhelm von Humboldt, Secretary of State for Religion and Public Instruction in Germany at the time, was involved in that debate and wrote that the new university was to be devoted to the 'moral culture' of the nation and its 'spiritual and moral formation.'⁸ It was for the good of society.

More recently, in the United Kingdom, a massively influential report on British Higher Education was produced in 1963 by a Committee on Higher Education chaired by Lord Robbins.⁹ Robbins was amongst those who helped create the British welfare state, contributing in particular to employment policy.¹⁰ He was also involved in William Beveridge's report on *Social Insurance and Allied Services*.¹¹ Although Robbins' work on higher education was later than most of the reports and legislation associated with the creation of the welfare state, it can be seen as part of the same movement to form a particular sort of society, one which, with a sense of solidarity arising in particular from the experience of war, aspired to social progress, slaying what the Beveridge report called the 'giants' of Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness (p.6). It was a state which, to quote Robbins, 'set for itself the ideal of equality of opportunity.'¹² Robbins sees higher education as serving that ideal; hence the 'Robbins Principle', which says 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so' (p.8). Universities were to help create a society of equal opportunity.

Robbins outlines 'four objectives essential to any properly balanced system' of higher education (p.6). The one particularly relevant here is 'the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship' (p.7). Robbins says 'we believe it is a proper function of higher education, as of education in schools, to provide in partnership with the family that background of culture and social habit upon which a healthy society

⁸ Quoted by Higton, 2012, p. 50

⁹ Committee on Higher Education, 1963

¹⁰ Robbins, 1971, pp. 186ff

¹¹ Beveridge, 1942

¹² Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 7

depends' (p.7). Universities are to do that work not only amongst students but in the communities in which they are situated. They are for the creation of healthy societies.

The next major government-inspired report after Robbins was produced in 1997 by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education chaired by Lord Dearing.¹³ He too saw universities as having a role in shaping a good society. Like Robbins, he saw four main purposes of higher education, one of which is 'to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society' (p.72). He is thus quite specific about the sort of society higher education should help to create.

Current university mission statements suggest some, but not all, individual universities see themselves as being about the good of society. The University of Roehampton, in which these papers are produced, has a mission statement indicating a commitment to 'helping our students ... be responsible citizens and leaders' and says 'We are focused on creating new knowledge and ideas that help us understand our world and make it a better place.'¹⁴ The university for which I work, Winchester, says it has a mission 'to educate, to advance knowledge and to serve the public good.' It goes on: 'We value freedom, justice, truth, human rights and collective effort for the public good.' Its value statement includes 'We seek to embody social justice and develop our students as effective and fulfilled global citizens. They will be prepared to challenge the *status quo* and will have the strength to stand up for what they believe to be true.'¹⁵

These universities are clearly expressing a commitment to the public good. Both are, in whole or part, church foundation universities. Others in other parts of the sector express similar sentiments. So, for example, the city of Bristol has two universities. The University of Bristol says its mission is: 'To pursue and share knowledge and understanding, both for their own sake and to help individuals and society fulfil their potential.'¹⁶ The University of the West of England says 'Advancing knowledge, inspiring people and transforming futures is at the heart of everything that we do.' That includes,

¹³ National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997

¹⁴ Sent by Mark Garner, Head of Whitelands College, following enquiry.

¹⁵ www.winchester.ac.uk/aboutus/missionandvalues/Pages/MissionandValues.aspx, accessed 29/4/14

¹⁶ www.bristol.ac.uk/university/governance/policies/vision/mission.html, accessed 24/4/14

amongst other things, a commitment 'to advance the health, sustainability and prosperity of our locality and region.'¹⁷

Other universities, from various parts of the sector, display no such commitment in their mission statements. Typically, they are more focused on the economic benefits of higher education, in particular to the individual student.

Government Policy on Higher Education

The latter universities are more in line with the present government's higher education policy for England, from which the idea that universities have a public role to help create particular sorts of societies is, at best, present in only a very limited way indeed. The key documents are the 2010 report of the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, chaired by Lord Browne,¹⁸ and the June 2011 White Paper.¹⁹ The former is an independent report, the latter government policy, which selected from Browne.

Browne's report considers higher education to have two primary functions; supporting the economy and enhancing social mobility. Whilst the first section of his first chapter is headed 'A strong higher education system is an important element in the economy and culture of a leading nation', the point about culture is not developed. That about the economy is worked on throughout the report and is linked to social mobility. Thus in the opening section of chapter one, Browne highlights the economic benefits of higher education to individual graduates who 'are more likely to be employed, more likely to enjoy higher wages and better job satisfaction, and more likely to find it easier to move from one job to the next' (p.14). Browne advocates steps, such as targeted funding, to ensure such benefits are available to more people from disadvantaged backgrounds (p.48). That will advance social mobility, for 'participating in higher education enables individuals from low income backgrounds and then their families to enter higher status jobs and increase their earnings' (p.14).

Browne says higher education brings economic benefit not only to individuals but the nation. He argues the UK's economic future is dependent on having a highly skilled workforce and that universities have an important

¹⁷ www1.uwe.ac.uk/aboutus/visionandmission/strategy.aspx, accessed 24/4/14

¹⁸ Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, 2010

¹⁹ Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2011

role to play in creating that workforce. They must do so, and do it more effectively; 'there needs to be a closer fit between what is taught in higher education and the skills needed in the economy' (p.23). Failure to meet that challenge will lead to national economic decline. It will also have a negative effect on social inclusion as it will 'compound inequality' at a time when 'The UK already has one of the least equal societies among OECD countries' (p.17). Thus in creating economic growth higher education will also help address inequality and they are its two main goals in Browne.

The White Paper is more concerned with the details of a new system, following Browne, than the purpose of higher education. It does, however, clearly see universities as agents of social mobility, to which chapter five is devoted. It affirms the importance both of opening the doors of the academy to a greater range of people and opening what it calls the elite universities in particular. It proposes the strengthening of the Office for Fair Access to help with that.²⁰ It also sees universities as serving the economy. 'One of the purposes of higher education is to prepare students for a rewarding career', it says (p.38). In order that universities might do that more effectively, it calls for greater collaboration between universities and employers 'in the design and delivery of courses' (p.39). That will also 'maximise innovation and promote growth' (p.39).

Within contemporary higher education policy, there is an emphasis on universities serving the economy and social mobility. It could be argued that within such priorities is a vision of society. It is of a society which in economic terms is wealthy and where a greater number and range of people have the opportunity to share personally in that wealth. It is, in other words, a vision almost entirely focused on the material. It is important to recognise that the material matters and to value what is good about this policy. At best, it is about the liberation of the poor, the opening of a door to skills and a share of wealth which might in turn lead to other opportunities. That is to be rejoiced in. However, neither individuals nor societies can live by material wealth alone and there are highly important things universities can and need to do which are almost entirely missing from government policy.

Amongst the latter is any idea that the university has a role in envisaging and seeking to create a good society in wider terms than the economic. There is almost nothing of the sentiments expressed by Robbins and Dearing about healthy, democratic and inclusive societies. There is nothing about slaying

²⁰ BIS, 2011, pp. 6-7

Beveridge's giant of ignorance, or seeking the truth. There are but a few crumbs supportive of the commitments in the university mission statements quoted. Any such bigger vision for higher education appears only briefly in the first two paragraphs of chapter one of Browne, together with one brief allusion in the sixth paragraph. In the White Paper there is even less about the non-economic benefits of higher education.

For the sake of completeness, the comments which express something of a wider role for higher education in Browne say higher education 'helps to create the knowledge, skills and values that underpin a civilised society', and that higher education institutions 'generate and diffuse ideas, safeguard knowledge, catalyse innovation, inspire creativity, enliven culture, stimulate regional economies and strengthen civil society. They bridge the past and the future; the local and the global.'²¹ To a list of the financial benefits of university to graduates the report adds they 'enjoy substantial health benefits' and 'are less likely to be involved in crime, more likely to be actively engaged with their children's education and more likely to be active in their communities' (p.14). Finally, the sixth paragraph says 'The historic strength and openness of our higher education system has contributed to Britain's cultural and intellectual life, as well as its role in the world' (p.15).

Even such sentiments do not make it into government policy as expressed in the White Paper. That has one comment about the purpose of higher education which deals with other than the economic: 'Higher Education has a fundamental value in itself.'²² What that value might be is not stated. Government simply fails to pick up any bigger vision.

In summary, government is focused on higher education contributing to the economic wealth of individuals and the nation and enabling social mobility. They are important matters, but this is a very thin view of higher education. That is worrying because, in today's world, the other possible aims of the sector Browne briefly alludes to, along with those highlighted in earlier reports on higher education, and in the mission statements quoted, are very significant.

They are significant because society faces serious and unresolved questions which go beyond the economy and social inclusion. They might be summed up as to do with how human beings live sustainably in a diverse community

²¹ Independent Review, 2010, p. 14

²² BIS, 2011, p. 4

on a fragile planet for the good of all. Arguably, they are survival issues. They include questions about how to live with difference, how to do economics morally, how to live with creation. Universities can help address such questions, drawing on their interdisciplinary learning, wisdom and insight so to do. Government takes little or no cognisance of that in its higher education policy. That is a serious failure, given the urgency of the questions faced.

Universities and the good society: Anglican perspectives

A number of theologians have written on the need for a bigger vision of what universities are for. The work of three who write about the English scene is drawn on here. They argue that universities have an important role in discerning and contributing to the good of society.

David Ford has written theologically about higher education and its purposes in the context of a world facing major challenges. He argues change is one of those challenges; 'complex, multifaceted and overwhelming change.'²³ Another is sustainability, which he characterises as the possibility of 'environmental disaster brought about by human agency, as in the destruction of species, pollution and climate change', and which he says is 'perhaps the emblematic trauma of the twenty-first century' (p.338).

Ford argues that universities have a role in helping the world face such challenges. An important part of that is offering students 'all round educational formation' (p.319). Such all round education must include work on 'values, intellectual virtues, good judgement, and broad understanding of people, institutions and society' (p.319). It will help students become graduates equipped and willing to face complex issues for the sake of the good; 'wise people committed to the common good' (p.322). That is a rather bigger vision than in Browne or the White Paper, and one more suitable to a world facing the challenges it does.

Ford alludes to one of his key themes there: wisdom. In his book on *Christian Wisdom*, he discusses what wisdom is. He characterises it as combining 'knowledge, understanding, good judgement and far-sighted decision-making' (p.1). Reflecting on it in the light of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, he says that wisdom 'responds to the cries of humanity, is involved with

²³ Ford, 2007, p. 338

complexities and intractable realities, tries to appreciate the most significant connections and differences between discourses, disciplines, cultures, periods, philosophies, worldviews and religions, and takes responsibility for seeking the long-term flourishing of the natural and human world' (p.341). People imbued with such qualities are needed to face the challenges of a complex world and universities have their part to play in creating such people.

Another theologian who has commented on universities as places of personal development is Rowan Williams. He is concerned that universities be places where good and moral citizens can be formed, 'mature citizens, persons who are free from certain sorts of prejudice and fear' as he put it in a 2006 speech at Wuhan University, China.²⁴ In that speech he also argued such maturity is to do with virtue. It is about 'civility - in the narrow sense of patience and courtesy in dispute, and in the much larger sense of concern for proper and open public life in the civitas, the city, the community of citizens.'²⁵ He made a similar point more recently in an article in *Times Higher Education* about 'Impact.' He writes that, in a democratic society where 'all citizens are potentially agents in public life, [...] the most important bit of 'impact' any university course can have is to help people become intelligent citizens.'²⁶ Part of being an intelligent citizen, he suggests in a chapter in *Faith in the Public Square*, has to do with development in the virtues, with 'humane imagination' and 'empathy.'²⁷ He made a similar point in the House of Lords in 2011 following unrest in Tottenham and elsewhere, arguing that 'a good educational system in a healthy society is one that builds character, that builds virtue.'²⁸ On that occasion he also explicitly criticised an educational system 'more and more dominated by an instrumentalist model.'²⁹

Both Ford and Williams are arguing, rightly, that an important task for universities is helping students become citizens who will engage for the good in society.

Giving students the chance to develop into such citizens requires self-conscious engagement with the task by universities. It tends to happen now

²⁴ Williams, 2006

²⁵ Williams, 2006

²⁶ Williams, 2014, p. 38

²⁷ Williams, 2012, p. 271

²⁸ www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldhansrd/text/110811-0001.htm#1108111000300, accessed 6/5/14

²⁹ www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldhansrd/text/110811-0001.htm#1108111000300, accessed 6/5/14

only 'in part', says Ford, 'and that mainly through optional participation' by students.³⁰ Ford argues for a more concerted approach by universities, in which they face the challenge of 'how to teach, study and research in responsibility towards the long-term flourishing of our world.'³¹ To do that, they also need to face questions about what is good; questions of 'meaning, values, ethics and long-term commitments.'³² Such questions arise in many fields, even utilitarian ones, and says Ford,

There are very few places in society where there is even an attempt to consider all these [meaning, values etc] together. Part of the value of universities to society is that they can be independent places of debate and deliberation about such matters in the interests of the long-term ethical and intellectual ecology of our civilization. (p.332)

How far they are independent is open to question; they are human communities, part of society, and with vested interests. They may also not always debate big issues well; witness the response to Universities UK guidance on speakers requiring gender segregated seating on campus, in late 2013. That response seemed mainly to consist of the statement of positions and little attempt to converse across different viewpoints. The point is included in order to avoid unmerited idealism about universities. Yet universities still do remain places with the potential to contribute to the good and their ability to do so must be fostered.

That point is argued by the theologian Mike Higton. He considers higher education in the light of the eucharistic liturgy in Anglican Common Worship.³³ For Higton, the eucharist is a 'community-forming activity' which points towards 'the fulfilment that God has for God's creatures,' namely, the coming of the 'kingdom of heaven' (pp.158, 145, 149). The eucharist is also a context for learning, for gaining knowledge of things as they are, which involves seeing them in relation to God. That includes seeing them in the context of the good to which God is leading creation and the way to which God calls humankind. The knowledge gained in Eucharistic learning is, therefore, 'knowledge ordered towards the common good' (p.163).

Higton argues that all learning should be similarly ordered. Learning is not, as Newman claimed, an end in itself, but needs to be about the nature of

³⁰ Ford, 2007, p. 321

³¹ Ford, 2003, pages not numbered

³² Ford, 2007, p. 332

³³ Higton, 2012, pp. 143ff

society. It needs to be directed 'to the formation of the flourishing life of all God's people together ... towards the common good', towards shalom. (pp.215-216). For Higton, it is fundamental that universities should be concerned with helping to create a good society. A university not thus focused may come to serve the vicious and the violent; an oppressive state, for example (p.216).

These contemporary theologians are arguing universities have a role in creating good citizens and societies. That is very much part of the tradition of what it means to be a university. Christians were exhorted by Jesus to seek God's Kingdom; the ultimate good society, which came near in Jesus. As those called by Jesus, Christians have worked for good and Kingdom-like societies in varied contexts. They are called to do so today. Universities also have a mission to work for the good. 'A university is not a Church, but it has historically had something in common with some aspects of the Church's life and priorities', including a concern for civic life, argues Rowan Williams.³⁴ The theologians discussed have put their cases for them continuing to do so today. Universities are, as Ford suggests, one of the places in which a variety of concerns, world-views, philosophies, faiths and disciplines come together with the possibility of focusing on questions of the good. To argue that they should aspire, and be funded, to do that work is not simply to engage with a theoretical question about what being a university involves. It arises primarily from a concern that human beings do face difficult questions which require focused, disciplined work and the development of citizens able and willing to try to face those questions. Universities are obvious foci for doing such work. The failure to prioritise that in current government thinking is a failure to deal with the world as it is and risks universities offering a form of education woefully inadequate to the present context. It thereby risks failing this and future generations. That must not be allowed to happen. Universities, like the church, should be ordered to the common good.

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³⁴ Williams, 2012, p. 271

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What's your motto? Faith and values in education in a multi-cultural society

Richard Cheetham

Bishop of Kingston

Introduction - Why have faith in Higher Education today?

The question is deliberately ambiguous: despite the increase in student numbers in recent years there are serious issues concerning the role, purpose and character of university education in the 21st century. In particular, how are our basic world-view, religious or otherwise, and our deep values, are embedded in higher education?

The growth of higher education has been remarkable in the last two hundred years. At the beginning of the 19th century a university education was the preserve of a tiny minority. For most people there was very little formal education. Today there is compulsory education to the age of 16, with approaching half of the UK population going on to further or higher education. It has obvious benefits for a modern economy which needs a constant supply of literate, numerate and skilled people. It can be the passport to a rewarding job and income, but not necessarily so. Much of the emphasis today is utilitarian and functional – the value to the workplace. There is also a great stress on the benefit to the individual, and especially their future earning power, rather than on the contribution that person might make to wider society. But where do our basic values and understanding of life fit in? How do they shape what is going on in higher education? And is there any place for religious faith in higher education today?

During the 19th century the Church of England played a major role in establishing the national system of school education, and was very influential in universities. As that century progressed, more and more government finance and control evolved for schools, beginning in a substantial way with the 1870 Education Act. There were major debates about the control and content of education if government money was involved. Who should shape the education agenda and, especially, any religious and moral content? In universities should students and professors be required to make statements

of any particular faith – in those days, Anglican? What was the appropriate relationship between the national education system, the Church and wider society? That last question remains just as pertinent today with the additional complexity of a multi-faith and multi-cultural society. In addition there is the, as yet uncharted, effect of students paying substantial fees for their own tertiary education and being regarded more and more as customers in an education market. Is it possible to have ‘faith-and-religion-free’ education as some would wish?

What’s your motto – identity, values and truth claims?

Most organisations today, including universities, charities, companies, and governments, have a logo and a strapline which seeks to capture how they wish to be seen and understood. In earlier times noble families, and ancient organisations may have had a shield full of symbols and a motto which expressed something of their identity, values and aims. It is an interesting exercise to reflect on how we might draw up our own personal shield and motto.

Many educational institutions retain a shield and motto. In my own education there have been three main ones. From 1966 to 1974 I attended Kingston Grammar School which has an Elizabethan foundation. Its motto is ‘*Bene agere ac laetare*’ – translated as ‘Work well and be joyful’. It is sound, pragmatic advice in the ancient proverbial wisdom tradition. My first degree in Physics and Philosophy was from Oxford University, with origins in the 12th century, whose motto is ‘*Dominus illuminatio mea*’ – the opening words of Psalm 27 - meaning ‘the Lord is my light’. It suggests that a true view of life and reality involves placing God at the centre. My doctorate, undertaken in the 1990s, was from King’s College, London, founded in 1827 with Anglican roots. Its motto is ‘*Sancte et sapienter*’ – translated as ‘with holiness and wisdom’ – a focus on moral qualities, but with an understanding that both holiness and wisdom are rooted in God. In terms of world-view, faith, specifically Christian faith, is embedded in two out of the three, and these mottos still stand in today’s much more secular and plural context. In addition, I am now a professorial fellow at the University of Roehampton, which has a unique ethos that seeks to draw on the traditions and values of its four more ancient colleges (C of E, Roman Catholic, Methodist, and Froebel’s secular/humanist educational philosophy) and place them within a more secular framework in the wider sense of enabling all to flourish in a mutually enriching way.

Today's world has an irreducible plurality. Many understandings of life, both religious and non-religious, exist cheek-by-jowl. The secularisation thesis so dominant in the 1960s – that as the world modernises it will become inevitably more secular – has proved to be far less simple than first imagined. There is certainly much less institutional religion in western societies, but in other parts of the world churches are growing rapidly. There is a powerful and growing influence of Islam globally. Simply seeing religious belief as a private matter for the individual no longer works. There are very complex interactions between religious belief and the public realm, and they are much disputed.¹

In this environment it is vital to provide education for diversity – i.e. an understanding of our own tradition, belief and values and, crucially, how we relate to others who may not share those beliefs and values. Perhaps one of the most pressing issues for the 21st century, along with justice and poverty, the environment and climate change, is how to live well together in a multi-cultural, plural world.

A vital question is the degree to which people regard their world-views (religious or secular) as true descriptions of the way things really are, and if world-views seem to disagree with on another, are some simply right and others simply wrong? Our culture has become fearful and very nervous about the very idea of 'truth', and especially of the truth claims of apparently competing world-views and religions. This has led to an unhelpful marginalising or trivialising of the idea of truth. We need some careful philosophical, sociological, educational, theological and political thinking about the shape we want a mature plural culture to take. To borrow a phrase from the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, we need a 'more-than-liberal' society.² I shall reflect on the elements that might be needed and especially the attitude to competing truth claims. This seems to me to be an essential pre-requisite for the much desired community cohesion and statement of common values contained in several recent government initiatives.

The idea of truth and falsity applies in different ways to different kinds of statement. Dealing with straightforward factual matters seems fairly simple, but as soon as you get to moral views, religious beliefs, aesthetic judgements, and so forth we are in difficult territory as far as truth is concerned. Small

¹ Volf, M., 2011, Introduction

² Williams, R., 2006

wonder then that Pontius Pilate famously said to Jesus during his trial, 'What is truth?' In our post modern culture we have become suspicious of the very idea of truth, not only because it is a complex idea philosophically, but because it can sometimes be used in morally offensive ways to try to impose what, at the end of the day, are 'just my (or our) opinions' onto someone else. There are countless examples from history of religious and political fanatics trying to coerce others into their way of seeing the world. Very few people want the Inquisition, Pol Pot, or Islamic State or anything like them. Even at a more benign level, in a world of many different religions and worldviews we are so aware of the multiplicity of views held by good, thoughtful people that we are reluctant to say that our view is unequivocally right, or better, or more true than others.

And yet the idea of truth will not simply wither and go away. There is something fundamental about it for human life and thought. Timothy Radcliffe, the former Master of the Dominican Order in the Roman Catholic Church has written that, 'A society which loses confidence in the very possibility of truth ultimately disintegrates.'³ Questions of truth matter to us. They matter in religion and basic beliefs. I want to say concerning my Christian beliefs that they are true in a very important sense. They have cognitive content and are not irrational.

Education and the pursuit of truth

Questions of truth matter in education. The University of Roehampton has written into its mission statement the importance of the pursuit of truth in education. However desirable this is as a philosophy of education, it can come under pressure from the impact of a measurement and utilitarian culture on education. Often it seems that deeper questions about the basic purpose of education in human life are sidelined. To explore this vital area let me begin with some simple reflections on the philosophy of education. The most helpful division here of views of education is a threefold one of traditional, liberal and post-liberal.

Traditional philosophies of education assume an objective reality or truth. This can take religious (e.g. Christian, Muslim or Jewish understandings) or non-religious (e.g. knowledge or moral values as 'objective') forms. It is the task of education to make learners aware of that truth so that they understand

³ Radcliffe, 2005, ch. 6

the world 'as it really is.' In its Old Testament and Jewish form, this philosophy is based on the understanding that God has revealed his nature and purpose through the history of Israel and in particular the Law of Moses. Education is not just about learning in an 'academic' and cerebral manner: it is induction into a right way of living and a proper understanding of the nature of life (i.e. as under God). It often has a communal rather than an individual emphasis.

This traditional view is expressed from a Jewish viewpoint by Sacks, who spoke of himself in his own education as 'being inducted into an identity and a series of moral commitments. I was becoming part of a people, its shared experiences and hopes.' In order to learn 'we need to see how master-practitioners practise their craft.' He sums this up by saying that 'education is the transmission of a tradition.'⁴ He likens it to the inheritance of a magnificent building of which we are but the temporary guardians. It will be adapted to each new generation, but retains its integrity down the ages.

This traditional view is repeated in the Muslim understanding of education. Sarwar says that in Islam, education is viewed as a process through which a child is prepared for this life and the afterlife so that the child can face life situations with an awareness of responsibility and accountability. Islam requires all human endeavours to conform to Qur'anic Guidance which is immutable, infallible and valid for all times and climes.⁵

Catholic education similarly sees no division between education and faith. James Arthur argues that the primary aims of such education are 'grounded in revealed truths about our nature, our origin and our destiny.'⁶ Anglican schools, partly for historical reasons, have had to act as both neighbourhood schools and as church schools. As a result their approach is nuanced. There is a delicate balance held by Anglican schools between on the one hand, open, critical education and, on the other hand, nurture. There is an assumption that education is based on basic Christian beliefs about the nature of human life.

Greek and Roman philosophies of education tended to emphasise discovery of truth by the human mind rather than through divine revelation. Plato's theory of education is based on the 'Form of the Good' - an objective,

⁴ Sacks, 1997, pp.173ff

⁵ Sarwar, 1994, p. 1

⁶ Arthur, 1995, p. 48

transcendent base of values and ultimate reality. To be educated is to assist people to 'see' this objective truth. Some modern writers argue on the basis of such a traditional view. Mitchell suggests that education based on 'transcendent values', agreed across many religions, is tenable.⁷

With the Enlightenment came the shift in many areas of western culture towards a liberal philosophy of education. Previously education in the West had been dominated by the Church, and especially the doctrine of divine revelation with the Bible as the source of authoritative knowledge, and the doctrine of original sin which emphasised the flawed nature of human nature and reasoning. The Enlightenment and the rise of modern science stressed empirical observation and human reason as the only reliable route to knowledge. Increasingly, western, liberal education was based on the use of reason and experience rather than on convention and tradition. The aim was to produce independent, free-thinking, rational human beings, who could then make informed and reasonable decisions about matters of human life.

The ideal of liberal education was very strong in the 1960s and 1970s and is still extremely influential today. It is based on several assumed foundations:

- that objective knowledge can be found via empirical scientific method and the use of a universal human reason;
- the freedom of the individual to make their own choices about life;
- a neutrality about competing visions of the 'good life';
- the location of moral order in the concepts of human rights and society.

When it comes to religious education, the liberal view regards religious knowledge as suspect and not in the same category as mathematical, scientific and historical knowledge. In particular, Hirst ⁸argued that we can only teach about religion because there are no publicly agreed standards or tests for religious knowledge. Matters of religious commitment are a private matter for personal choice and are outside the remit of liberal education, which sees young people as autonomous decision makers using empirical observation and human reason to guide them.

With the advent of postmodernism and pluralism, this liberal philosophy of education has come under increasing attack from a number of different directions - notably Christian, Muslim, postmodern, conservative, and

⁷ Mitchell, 1997, pp. 5-15

⁸ Hirst, 1990, pp. 305-313

philosophical. It is important to take note that these critiques are both powerful and increasing in number.

Underlying all this is the question of the pursuit of truth in education and what this might mean. In the liberal understanding, the aim of education is to give students the tools, especially the use of reason, to engage in the pursuit of objective knowledge as defined by the canons of liberalism in terms of scientific rationalism. The problem is that this marginalised religious beliefs and faith commitments to matters of private choice which could not be decided on rational grounds. The advent of the plural, postmodern world has meant that the liberal prescription of what counts as knowledge and as truth is now under fire. As Middleton and Walsh put it in their account of postmodern culture with its emphases on worldviews as human constructs, the plurality of voices, and claims to truth as covert exercises of power, 'Truth is stranger than it used to be.'⁹

Truth, religion and education – some areas of overlap

The publication, 'Faith in the system' has given a rationale from both government and faith communities for the involvement of religious bodies in education.¹⁰ We have moved in this country from a system in which the Church was the principal provider of education, to one in which government played the central role with the so-called dual system of church and state control being set up in the 1944 Education Act. Now we are in the era of a far greater diversity of educational provision under the umbrella of the State and funded by public money. My own view is that some such system is both inevitable and desirable in a plural culture provided such institutions abide by certain criteria relating to admissions, what is taught, and a firm commitment to enable pupils to relate to, respect and understand those of other traditions. Religious Education should be part of the national curriculum. An understanding of the different religious traditions of the world and how they can be understood is vital to living in the 21st century. We need people to be religiously literate.

An important element in this debate concerns moral education, and how this might be undertaken in a plural world with many different moral philosophies and norms. Back in 1996 there was a national attempt to produce a statement of common moral values which could be used for the

⁹ Middleton and Walsh, 1995

¹⁰ Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007

purpose of moral education in schools. The method used was to have a meeting of a large number of representatives from faith traditions and education and look for the *de facto* common ground. The problem with this was twofold. First, it produced a 'lowest common denominator' statement. Secondly, the source of moral authority was simply majority vote of those present. The government is promoting another debate about common values in Britain. It is a worthy goal, but needs to be more nuanced in its approach than the 1996 effort. The current signs over the 'British Values' debate are not promising in this regard. To move on, we need to develop a deeper understanding of how the different world-views relate to one another at every level: philosophically, theologically, ethically, politically, and socially.

A new plural, critical realist paradigm – a framework for faith and values in education today

We are at a crucial transition point in our culture where we need to move on beyond an old-fashioned liberalism (which has served us extremely well, but is showing signs of strain) to a new paradigm. This is not, I hasten to say, to abandon all aspects of liberalism, many of which are vital for today, but to develop it for a plural world. Rowan Williams has suggested that we need to move to what he called a 'more-than-liberal society.' There is much talk of the need to educate for diversity and the need for integration and cohesion.

I conclude by briefly outlining some features of a paradigm which might provide the sort of framework that would be helpful for solving some of these issues. This has been developed from doctoral research into Acts of Collective Worship in schools, which is one primary place where different world-views interact in public space in a way which is extensive and unavoidable.¹¹ I have called it a plural, critical realist paradigm.

- First it needs to be *genuinely plural* recognising openly and honestly the deep differences that there are between people in their basic views. In particular it needs to recognise that liberalism often adopts a hegemonic position to which many object, perhaps exemplified in Francis Fukuyama's essay *The End of History*.¹²
- It needs also to recognise that there are a *number of different rationalities and traditions*. Each tradition has to develop its own understanding of

¹¹ Cheetham, 1999, 2004

¹² Fukuyama, 1989

pluralism and especially the relationship between its own absolute claims and the relativising nature of a plural context. That means finding a way between an over-confident objectivism and an agnostic relativism. In a mature plural world, we cannot simply inhabit our own tradition and consider all others as marginal or trivial. One of the meanings of the word *trivium* is the three lower orders of mediaeval education – namely grammar, logic and rhetoric. Each tradition must pay careful attention to its own logic and grammar, and how it relates to those of other traditions – not least in its rhetoric about them.

- This paradigm would also emphasise the *importance of communities in forming individuals and traditions*. We are not simply free-floating individuals and there is a delicate balance to be had between the role of the community and the needs of the individual. For example, the philosopher, John Cottingham has said that, 'We learn how to grow morally by being immersed in a community before we fully understand what morality means'.¹³ It is the approach of St. Anselm, *Credo ut intelligam* – 'I believe that I may understand.' This is intimately connected to the question of individual and corporate identity which links into both the current debate on 'Britishness' and common values, and the television programme *Who do you think you are?*.
- We also need certain basic beliefs or what the scientist, Michael Polanyi has called '*fiduciary frameworks*' within which we operate.¹⁴ Complete scepticism is rarely sustainable. Sooner or later we have to take some things for granted. We all have our own fiduciary frameworks and it is vital to be explicit about this. John Cottingham has recently written, '...any human stance is necessarily one conditioned by pre-existing frameworks of understanding...of belonging and commitment and dependency.'¹⁵
- There is a great need for an emphasis on *conversation and dialogue*. Adopting a more pluralist stance opens the door sometimes to fragmentation and division. Hence there is a need for genuine dialogue – a practical 'people-centred' approach. It is 'good to talk' as they say. Another meaning of the word *trivium* is the meeting of three roads. We need places in our society where we can genuinely meet and converse.

¹³ Cottingham, 2005

¹⁴ Polanyi, 1958

¹⁵ Cottingham, 2005

Many profound thinkers, including the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, have put great stress on this. Sacks has argued that ‘the best way to live with moral difference and yet sustain an overarching community is conversation – not mere debate but the disciplined act of communicating (making my views intelligible to someone who does not share them) and listening (entering into the inner world of someone whose views are opposed to my own)’.¹⁶

Even more strongly he argues that ‘the greatest single antidote to violence is conversation, speaking our fears, listening to the fears of others, and in that sharing of vulnerabilities discovering a genesis of hope.’¹⁷

- Lastly, it is vital that we have a *real concern for the concept of truth*. We must not give up on the notion of truth. In many ways it provides good reason for our conversation; a belief that by telling our story and listening to others, our understanding of life and reality will grow. Truth is not simply subjective, or internal to a particular world view and culturally conditioned. Education should always be deeply concerned with the question of truth avoiding the arrogant claims of an absolute truth and also the laziness of a total relativism which has discarded any significant notion of truth. The pursuit of truth is basic to our humanity. As Timothy Radcliffe, the former head of the Dominicans has recently written, ‘A society which loses confidence in the very possibility of truth ultimately disintegrates. St. Augustine called humanity “the community of truth.” It is the only basis upon which we may belong to each other.’¹⁸

In short, we need an approach to life, and to education, that avoids the *Scylla* of exclusive fundamentalism which sees only my undiluted truth, and the *Charybdis* of easy-going relativism which fails to discern between different views. We need to be wary of the view that accords ultimate truth to my beliefs and to have an awareness that my beliefs may well be trivial to others i.e. peripheral to their view of the world. We need an attitude that incorporates both truth and trivia – held in creative tension.

We live at a crucial time of transition from a ‘thin’ liberal, secular framework to a ‘thick’ mature plural culture. This involves a deep examination of how a

¹⁶ Sacks, 2002 p.83

¹⁷ Sacks, 2002, p.2f

¹⁸ Radcliffe, 2005, ch. 6

world of very different perspectives and understandings of life, both religious and non-religious, can live well together. It requires reflection at every level, philosophical, theological, moral, political, and sociological and is one of the major issues of the 21st century. Our education system, and especially our universities, which by their very name should provide a context for good conversation and challenging engagement between multiple perspectives, can play a vital role in developing that vibrant world in which reason, faith and values all interact in a creative way.

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Apologetics without apology: navigating our way in a globalized and multi-faith world

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Introduction: the challenge of the 'post-secular' university

In their studies of the changing profile of religion in contemporary American higher education,¹ Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen have argued that the renewed visibility of religion in public life (as I would qualify, within the Western world) calls for 'a more comprehensive and connected conversation ... with religion in its entirety - including its personal and social dimensions, values and ideas, subjective and objective characteristics, and potential for good or ill.'²

Yet they are insistent that this new visibility 'does not represent a movement back toward the past but is actually something quite new.'³ I happen to share this sense that whilst religion may be newly prominent, this state of affairs is an unprecedented, somewhat problematic development. The title of one of Jacobsen & Jacobsen's books, *The American University in a Post-secular Age* (2008), reflects one way of characterising this complex, emergent era, in which religion is undergoing simultaneous 'decline, mutation and resurgence.'⁴ This is a situation which fits neither the narrative of secularisation nor that of the return of Christendom. For me, therefore, this terminology of the 'post-secular' represents a paradoxical, almost agonistic space, in which the gulf between those of faith and those of none is widening.

Arguably, this is not just a concern for individual believers, but is highly pertinent to corporate bodies, such as any faith-based institution like a Christian university (and I recognise that a definition of that may well itself be contested and multi-faceted). Interest in religion is running strongly; but knowledge may be lacking, and societies are often at a loss as to how to manage the enduring presence of religion within a context of greater pluralism, and of diverse ways of believing and not believing. So this is about

¹ Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 2008; 2012

² Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 2008, pp. x-xi

³ Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 2012, p. ix

⁴ Graham, 2013, p. 3

finding ourselves in a complex and paradoxical situation which is diverse and manifests itself in different ways according to cultural context, but which has strong common currents around the world. And if we are to attempt to navigate our way between the *Scylla* of religious resurgence and the *Charybdis* of secularism, towards new, uncharted 'post-secular' lands, what awaits us?

This links strongly with the theme that has been set for this year's Colleges and Universities of the Anglican Communion meeting, of *navigating our way between the twin poles of 'faithfulness' and 'relevance'*. What currency, what usefulness, are the resources of a Christian heritage to institutions that both seek to be faithful to their historic foundation and legacy - rooted perhaps in an era of Christian dominance or colonialism that appears increasingly anachronistic - and yet which truly engage constructively (as well as critically) with changing contexts? When religion is perceived increasingly by many as irrelevant at best, toxic at worst, what does it even mean to 'speak of God in public'? Can faith-based institutions dare to name their values in pursuit of meaningful presence in a contested and volatile public square?

I want to think about the characteristics of that 'public theology' of engagement with what is increasingly being termed a 'post-secular' culture. In a world that is more sensitive than ever to religious belief and practice, yet often struggles to accommodate it into secular discourse, how do people of faith give an account of their core theological values in ways that are accessible and comprehensible to an ever more fragmented and sceptical body politic?

My suggestion is that a public theology needs to work at the level of deeds and words; and that Christian organisations and individuals should cultivate a public theology that is *apologetic* in nature. This is the task of offering a reasoned defence or rationale for one's faith. The early Christian epistle, the first letter of Peter, summarises this imperative as follows: 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.'⁵ It is not self-derogatory or guilt-ridden; not confrontational or dogmatic, but rooted in a conversational, dialogical space.

But along with offering a rationale for purposeful engagement, and in seeking to contribute to the creation of a civil, dialogical public space, the tradition of public theology affirms some very important theological truths about the nature of our shared humanity and the possibilities for the common good. In

⁵ 1 Peter 3.15, NIV

‘seeking the welfare of the city’ – or as theologians would term it, ‘the common good’, public theology acknowledges the service of the Gospel and the *missio Dei* as larger and more expansive than the insights of institutional religion alone. It is an attempt to find common cause in practices of solidarity that do not seek to privilege or defend Christian supremacy, but are a means of reaching across the ‘post-secular divide’ to those of all faiths and none.

The Turning of the Tide

... the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions ... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled ‘secularisation theory’ is essentially mistaken.⁶

From the last quarter of the twentieth century the world began to see the unexpected ‘re-enchantment’ of global politics – something we can probably date from the Iranian revolution in 1979, the rise of the Moral Majority in the US in the 1980s, the emergence of Islamist movements in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia; clearly, the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 stands as an iconic and devastating moment in all this, as an explicitly religiously motivated intervention in world affairs.

So on the one hand, religion is strikingly visible in public life, whether we are thinking locally, nationally, or globally. Tony Blair’s comment that ‘religious extremism’ will be a major source of global conflict throughout this century⁷ may be a little simplistic (ignoring as it does other factors such as competition for natural resources, migration, climate change and economic polarisation), but it does go to show that faith is not dead. In many of the most rapidly-developing economies, such as Brazil, China, or India, religion continues to grow and to be a significant part of public life. Even in the UK, this is particularly evident in some areas of public policy, which highlights the renewed currency of religious belief and practice particularly around its potentially beneficial contribution to welfare reform, well-being and community cohesion.

On the other hand, however, there is little reason, certainly for those of us in my particular part of northern Europe, to feel quite so sanguine about the

⁶ Berger, 1999, p. 2

⁷ Blair, 2014

resilience of religion or its future prospects. Levels of formal institutional affiliation and membership in mainstream Christian and Jewish denominations continue to diminish across the Western world. Religion continues to be held as deeply suspect by others – such as the so-called ‘New Atheists’ who resist as strongly as ever the encroachment of the things of faith into public life. Religious observance is increasingly disaffiliated and individualised; religious institutions are viewed with indifference at best, distrust at worst.

This has had profound effect on intellectuals within political philosophy, social theory as well as the study of religion. Assumptions that an inevitable consequence of economic modernisation right across all cultures would be the disappearance of religion had to be revised. In political theory, this meant the model of the separation between religion and the body politic and the creation of an allegedly neutral public square in which ‘talk of God’ and allusions to the sacred were deemed illegitimate modes of speech.

Writers such as Talal Asad (2003) have made connections between this and post-colonial critiques of Western ways of thinking. The very concept of secularisation, and the binary logic of secular and sacred, hinged on Western readings of history and culture. So the revision of this thesis was, then, partly a recognition that the conceptual framework did not fit; and partly a realisation that global events were moving in new, unexpected directions. Religion was not in terminal decline; yet at the same time, this was not a simple case of what Peter Berger termed ‘desecularization’ – not at least in terms of reversal, for a number of reasons. Firstly, many cultures in the global South especially have never been ‘secular’ along Western lines, although they may still have struggled to accommodate forces of globalisation and modernisation with the traditional powers of religious authority and identity.

Secondly, for those in the West, religion has re-emerged, but into a radically and irrevocably secular age. As Charles Taylor has argued, even those of a strong faith commitment recognise the existence of pluralism of belief and non-belief such that any kind of religious identity is a choice. At one point in his book, Taylor talks about ‘Unquiet Frontiers of Modernity’,⁸ to describe how it feels to inhabit a world seemingly far removed from religion, which is nevertheless continually shot through with glimpses of what he terms ‘a place of fullness.’⁹ As moderns, we have learned to be self-sufficient, to live

⁸ Taylor, 2007, pp. 711-727

⁹ Taylor, 2007, p. 6

immanent lives and yet at the periphery of our vision, our lived, quotidian experience, lies a different landscape, in which our horizons of meaning, belonging and identity hint at a transcendent source, beyond immanence, which speaks of 'some good higher than, beyond human flourishing.'¹⁰ We have, if you like, then crossed a 'secular Rubicon' into a world still ambivalent to religion, yet one that is increasingly and often unexpectedly receptive to it. As Charles Taylor puts it,

Thus my own view of secularization ... is that there has certainly been a "decline" of religion ... But the interesting story is not simply one of decline, but also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life. This new placement is now the occasion for re-compositions of spiritual life in new forms, and for new ways of existing both *in and out* of relation to God.¹¹

We have therefore the signs of decline, of slow but steady marginalisation, and yet there are contrary trends which suggest that it is not simply about accommodating to the inevitabilities of secularisation. Whatever forms of religion hold sway, they are far more deinstitutionalised and fluid due to social media, globalisation and post-traditional forms of church. People are more likely to describe themselves as 'Spiritual but not Religious.'¹² Statistics on the religious outlooks and affiliations of young people (including university students) note this most strongly.¹³

So as far as many parts of the world are concerned, this new dispensation represents much less of a religious revival and much more a quest for a new presence in the midst of public life that is more fragmented, more global, more disparate. It is a context in which the contribution of religion to the well-being of communities is welcomed by some, with new agendas and increasing enthusiasm; but at the same time, the very legitimacy of faith to speak or contribute at all is contested as vigorously as ever.

The philosopher and critic Terry Eagleton puts it most eloquently in his latest book, *Culture and the Death of God*: 'The world is ... divided between those who believe too much and those who believe too little.'¹⁴

¹⁰ Taylor, 2007, p. 20

¹¹ Taylor, 2007, p. 437, my emphasis

¹² Fuller, 2001; ComRes, 2013

¹³ ComRes, 2013; Pew Forum, 2010; Guest *et al*, 2013

¹⁴ Eagleton, 2014, pp. 197-8.

The Christian University and the Idea of Public Theology

One of the implications of this for churches and other Christian institutions is that, if they are committed to any kind of significant public role, any kind of mission to wider society, then the nature of their public presence must change. No longer are they speaking into a common frame of reference, in which their Biblical or moral allusions fall comfortably on waiting ears. Rather, in a context where people's familiarity with any kind of organised religion is ever more tenuous, faith-based institutions will need to find a new language by which they justify the legitimacy of religion within public life.

In my recent book,¹⁵ I consider whether the discipline of public theology can articulate new norms for Christians who are concerned to engage constructively with public debate and political policy, but are aware of the growing gulf between this and the discourse of faith; yet who still want to communicate the basis of their faith and the roots of their concern for the common good convincingly and reasonably to the world at large.

Public theology varies across different contexts, but has a number of core features. Broadly, it seeks to comment and critically reflect from a theological perspective, on aspects of public life such as economics, politics, culture and media. Traditionally, the notion of 'public' has encompassed several dimensions: firstly, a commitment to the public, social and structural articulation of religion in the face of its privatisation or withdrawal into forms of personal piety.¹⁶

Secondly, public theology refers to the ways in which religion interacts with questions of economics, media, politics, law, globalisation, social justice and environment. It concerns the moral and material transformation not just of individuals, but of powers and principalities, structures and systems. And thirdly, it reflects a pledge to do one's theology *in public*: to conduct debates about the public trajectories of faith and practice in ways that are transparent and publicly accessible.¹⁷ So public theologians regard themselves as rooted in religious traditions, but strongly in conversation with secular discourse and public institutions. As Max Stackhouse notes,

¹⁵ Graham, 2013

¹⁶ Hainsworth and Paeth, 2010; Graham and Lowe, 2009.

¹⁷ Breitenberg, 2003

if a theology is to be trusted to participate in public discourse, it ought to be able to make a plausible case for what it advocates in terms that can be comprehended by those who are not believers ... It should be able to articulate its core convictions in comprehensible terms across many modes of discourse, explaining its symbolic and mythical terms ... in ways that expose their multiple levels of meaning.¹⁸

This is a sensibility that resists the 'provinciality'¹⁹ of theology as merely that which originates from and informs the Church as exclusive community. Rather, any theology of public life must begin with the recognition that the interaction between Church and world, or Christ and culture, is always one of what John Reader has called 'blurred encounters.'²⁰ This is born of an understanding of the Church as formed by the activities of God in Christ who wills the flourishing of all creation, and seeks to embody the attainment of the common good. The Church should certainly never cede ultimate authority to any temporal power, but is nevertheless called to exercise forms of critical solidarity with institutions that further the virtues of justice, solidarity and human dignity. This in turn rests on particular doctrines of creation and incarnation, the nature of revelation and common grace, and of the possibility of a shared space by virtue of our common humanity in which rational communication about the ends, aims and substance of public life can be conducted. As Max Stackhouse has put it,

From very early on, one of the meanings of apologetics was that you enter into another person's vocabulary and worldview as best you can, and the very fact that we can do that in some measure suggests that there is some deep contact between humans. Some profound creational theology is behind that: we are all children of God, whether everyone acknowledges it or not, and we can enter into one another's vocabulary and begin to articulate the most profound things that we think are really true.²¹

Another way of thinking about this debate is to see it as caught in the perennial tension between the principles of what I might call 'authenticity' (to tradition) and 'relevance' (in the context of the context in which one finds oneself). Writing from an Australian context about the theological foundations of Roman Catholic schools, Tony Harkness talks about the

¹⁸ Stackhouse, M. 2007, p. 112

¹⁹ Ziegler, 2002

²⁰ Reader, 2005

²¹ Chase, 2001

tension between *authenticity* and *inclusion*: how the Church's education policy and provision can be true to tradition and the core values of the Church ('Have a strong Catholic identity and give witness to Christian values') yet reach out to wider constituencies ('Be open and accessible to those who seek its values').²² This will best be achieved, he argues, through a 'God-centred rather than Church-centred theology of mission.' Mission, or involvement of Church in public policy, is not about 'the work of the Church alone, exercised and directed through the powers and structures of the Church', but is driven by an understanding of 'the work of the Holy Spirit calling forth all of creation.'²³

Harkness here draws on the work of Peter Phan, who has argued that theology of mission in the Roman Catholic tradition since Vatican II represented a decisive shift away from a church-centred model towards one of God at work in the world, and a focus on the Church in the world as an instrument or sacrament of God's mission. The Church is not an end in itself but a pointer to the way God acts in the world. Phan criticises pre-conciliar Catholic missiology in which 'the centre and heart of the missionary project is the church, and church understood primarily in the institutional model',²⁴ understood as 'unique, exclusive, superior, definitive, normative and absolute.'²⁵ Hence the emphasis in post-conciliar Catholic theology (especially theologies of mission and contextual theologies of inculturation) about mission as involving the humanisation of society as much as expansion of the Church; but crucially, also, it asks mission to locate itself from a theological and apologetic vantage-point, rather than an ecclesiological (and ecclesiastical) one. For Phan, post-Vatican II missiology has restored the four elements of mission from an ecclesiastically-centred model of 'church, proclamation, mission, reign of God' to their right priority: 'reign of God, mission, proclamation, and church.'²⁶

The theological keynotes of this stance may be summarised as follows:

- God-centred not church-focused – theological not ecclesiastical;
- Creation, incarnation and common grace;
- Mission as transformative not propositional; orthopraxy not orthodoxy.

²² Harkness, 2003, p. 2

²³ Harkness, 2003, p. 4

²⁴ Phan, 2002, p. 3

²⁵ Knitter, 1991, p. 475, quoted in Harkness, 2003, p. 4

²⁶ Phan, 2002, p. 2

It is this commitment to engagement with non-theological sources and resources that has been one of the characteristic commitments of public theology, and gives rise to the suggestion it has an important apologetic dimension. This stresses the significance of taking one's values into conversation and encounter in the hope of communicating 'God-in-the-world, to the world.'²⁷

Deed and Word: Post-Secular Christian Identity in Higher Education

As well as commentary on public affairs from a religious standpoint, we might also conceive a further task of public theology as one of *Christian apologetics*, insofar as (especially in a religiously pluralist, global context) it is expedient to articulate (and be prepared to defend) the values that inform Christian statements about, and interventions in, the public realm. So what might this look like for a body like CUAC? I want to suggest a way of doing, or performing, public theology that integrates deed and word and which might serve as a theologically-rooted strategy for an engagement with higher education and public life in post-secular contexts.

Luke's Gospel speaks of Jesus of Nazareth as 'a prophet, powerful in deed and word before God and the people.'²⁸ True theology involves that sacramental unity of acting and speaking: of orthopraxis, in which 'talk about God' is always primarily enacted in purposeful witness and directed towards transformation. So too, an effective public theology for a post-secular age will be an apologetics of speech *and* presence: to embody and demonstrate our values in the kind of institutions we model, and especially our commitment to the well-being of everyone, regardless of creed or profession of faith.

Ambassadors for Christ: Public Theology as Christian Apologetics

Public theologians face the challenge not only of articulating theologically grounded interventions in the public square, but of justifying and defending the very relevance of the Christian faith in a culture that no longer grants automatic access or credence. This was also one of the tasks with which the earliest Christians were charged. As Christian communities became established and dispersed around the Graeco-Roman world, so the

²⁷ Graham and Lowe, 2009, p. 4.

²⁸ Luke 24.19, NIV

imperative of interpreting and commending the faith to Jewish and pagan cultures became apparent.

In his *History of Apologetics* first published in 1971, Avery Dulles groups Christian apologetics into three main genres, depending on the context and intended audience. Religious apologies argued for the superiority of the gospel over other religious or philosophical systems; internal apologies were concerned to correct error or heresy within the Christian community itself; but a third group, which Dulles terms political apologies, developed their arguments in order to secure civil toleration of Christianity in the face of state persecution.²⁹ From the very beginning, then, the task of apologetics has been one of defending and commending its claims against a variety of non-believers, detractors and persecutors: pagans, sceptics and emperors.

That is why the terminology of ‘ambassador’ seems particularly pertinent to our discussion of how public theologians and faith-based higher education institutions commend and articulate their concerns within a pluralist, post-secular public square. In the words of the second letter to the Corinthians,³⁰ apologetics is about being ‘ambassadors for Christ’: not in order to shout down our opponents, but to give plausible rationale for our presence in the public square.

Ambassadors are public representatives of a government or cause: when a citizen of one country meets an ambassador, they encounter not just an individual but the nation or organisation in whose name they have been sent. An ambassador may be sent abroad and therefore be on foreign territory, where the terms of engagement may not be of their making. The expectations of the role are of diplomacy and advocacy on behalf of one’s commissioning body, coupled with a respect for the context in which one finds oneself. Ambassadors and other diplomatic envoys are sent to build bridges, establish mutual benefit, and facilitate cultural exchange: there are no grounds to assume a position of victimhood or antagonism therefore, but only to receive the respect and hospitality due to an honoured representative and to reciprocate.

Bilingualism

²⁹ Dulles, 1999, p. 28

³⁰ 2 Cor 5.20

But apologetics is always a kind of *mediation* between the profession of faith and the world-view of others, as the work of Max Stackhouse suggests. This is consistent with the view of public theology I have been putting forward, which necessarily stands at the threshold of church and world, of sacred and secular. It likes to speak of itself as being 'bilingual':³¹ mediating between the discourse of faith and that of wider society. In Heinrich Bedford-Strohm's words, public theology

does not separate itself from the world into a self-sufficient counter-community with its own religious language, but knows how to speak the language of the world and how to be in dialogue with the world; a public theology that...is grounded in Christ and therefore challenges the world to make God's way for the world visible, a prophetic theology that leads the world beyond its worldly ways.³²

Being bilingual is not the same as speaking Esperanto, in which all speech is assimilated into one synthetic discourse. Bilingualism does not deny pluralism and difference but nevertheless seeks ways of mediation and dialogue as a means of moving between cultures and languages. So by analogy, we return to that tension between faithfulness to tradition and historic identity, with relevance to contemporary contexts: but regarding this as a necessary tension, a creative dialectic, and one that has always lain at the heart of good theology.

Yet this conversational respect for the other represents an invitation to others in the name of common purpose and theology of revelation. It suggests that if we consider the (post-)secular public square as a primary space of engagement for Christian apologetics, then this serves up a dual task for those involved in theological and religious education (such as CUAC). It redirects the matter of Christian formation and education towards the practices of Christian apologetics and establishes a stake for public theology in fostering theologically literate persons. It follows then that faith-based institutions must ensure they are promoting skills and aptitudes of religious literacy - of attempting to close the post-secular gulf - in the wider world; and secondly, that they are charged with a serious responsibility to equip the laity to exercise such a secular calling effectively.

³¹ Breitenberg, 2010

³² Bedford-Strohm, 2007, p. 36

The Welfare of the City, not the Interests of the Church

So the best apologists are those fully immersed in the community of faith, which is where the exemplary vision of truth and goodness is nurtured; but who then perceive a calling into the dialogical world of public debate and pluralist, post-secular culture. Its watchword in this respect might be from the exhortation from the prophet Jeremiah to 'seek the welfare of the city'³³ where the aim to forge common purpose over-rides sectional interest.

Public theology, as I understand it, is not primarily and directly evangelical theology which addresses the Gospel to the world in the hope of repentance and conversion. Rather, it is theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church ...³⁴

Conclusion

In contemporary terms, a public theology that 'gives an account of the hope that is within you' is something that demonstrates convincingly, as much through action as words, that faith can make a positive contribution to post-secular global civil society. I hope I have made some constructive suggestions about the particular calling of CUAC members in this respect. It is about being prepared, and theologically equipped, to offer an accessible and convincing account for your engagement in higher education and the grounds of our stake in its future, as a contemporary version of Christian apologetics. But this is apologetics not as a weapon of conversion, but a gesture of solidarity. It respects our common places of pluralism and encounter. It recognises that persons of belief must be called to account for their faith and be prepared to justify themselves; but primarily, seeks to pursue a public vocation that is more interested in the well-being of humanity than narrow or partisan self-interest.

These are the challenges and opportunities facing members of CUAC in considering how you fashion your identity and engage with wider culture. It is about the way you speak into public debates about the role of higher education in your various societies; the way you manage your corporate life and express core institutional values; the way you treat students and staff; and the way you model particular styles of learning, teaching and scholarship. It is a question of truth, identity, and vocation; but all of these

³³ Jeremiah 29:7

³⁴ Forrester, 2004, p. 6.

hinge on the kind of public theology – in deed and word – that lies at the very heart of your institutions and which serves as the well-spring of a distinctive Christian presence in higher education.

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Faith and the university experience in the UK

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In the twenty-first century, research on religion in British higher education is flourishing. Religion had been neglected in studies of contemporary higher education, but over the past decade it has attracted new attention. This attention comes both from academics – scholars of higher education and of religion – and higher education leaders and policymakers. The religiosity (or non-belief) of students and staff is of new interest to university managements as they negotiate provision for all students, religious or non-religious, and as they work to discern how they can be inclusive of religious perspectives.

There are three main drivers for this new focus on faith in higher education. The first is *policy*. Since the 1970s equality legislation has been passed outlawing discrimination on the grounds of gender, race and disability. Inequalities related to religion, sexual orientation or age were not recognised through legislation until the twenty-first century; for instance, the 2006 Racial and Religious Hatred Act and then the 2010 Equality Act which aimed to provide for the full gamut of equality characteristics (called ‘protected characteristics’ in the Act) including age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity. Policymakers and higher education professionals, including the Equality Challenge Unit (founded in 2001 to support equality and diversity in higher education), HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England, founded in 1992 in the wake of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992) and the National Union of Students (founded in 1922 to improve students’ lives), have become aware of the need – indeed the legal requirement – to consider religion as an equality issue within higher education and to work to ensure religious students and staff are treated equally and respectfully.

The second driver is *the research community*. The social scientific study of religion has gained new prominence since the funding of the £12 million Religion & Society research programme led by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. The Religion and Society programme funded 75 projects, with its second phase focusing specifically on Religion and Youth. Religion in higher education had

been investigated before this new wave of research: Sophie Gilliat-Ray's pioneering book *Religion and Higher Education*¹ sketched out the contours of 'the multi-faith campus,' pointing to religious diversity as a driver for the 'de-secularisation' of many British campuses. Following her lead, the field gained new momentum. The Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education project led by Adam Dinham at Goldsmiths College London,² the Religion and the Idea of a Research University project led by David Ford at the University of Cambridge³ and the Religion and Belief in Higher Education project led by Paul Weller at the University of Derby (to be discussed) are three of the dozen or so significant projects on religion in British higher education.

The third driver is the university sector's increased focus on *the student experience*. The development of the University of London in the nineteenth century and the civic or 'red brick' universities at the turn of the twentieth century ushered in the beginning of an era when university education became available to more than simply the élite. Student numbers increased again from the 1960s, first via the development of new campus universities in the wake of the 1963 Robbins Report, then by the government's 1992 conversion of polytechnics into universities. Under Prime Minister Tony Blair, in 1999 the Labour government set a target of getting 50% of young people into university education by 2010. That target was not met, but nonetheless the numbers of students have risen from 400,000 in the 1960s to over 2,000,000 in the early 2000s.⁴ Higher education has become a major player in the UK 'knowledge economy' and universities have to compete for students, spending increasing amounts on promoting their institutions as delivering not only good education, but also a good overall university experience. Accordingly, the concept of 'the student experience' has become prominent in the twenty-first century.

Sabri pinpoints 2009 as the date when articulations of 'the student experience' began proliferating in policy documents.⁵ In 2005 the National Student Survey (NSS) was launched, an annual questionnaire asking final year students about the quality of the teaching, assessment, facilities and personal development opportunities associated with their university degree programme. Analysts – and indeed critics – of the NSS argue that it is

¹ Gilliat-Ray, 2000

² Dinham & Jones, 2012

³ <http://www.ideaofauniversity.com/>

⁴ Blanden & Machin, 2004

⁵ Sabri, 2011

symptomatic of the increasing positioning of students not as learners but as consumers. Concurrently with this national survey, individual universities have paid more attention locally to soliciting student feedback, with module questionnaires, course committee meetings with student representatives and annual feedback questionnaires opening up space for 'the student voice.' This focus on the student experience has been positive, especially in empowering students to highlight problems that need remedying. But academics are concerned that, in positioning them as consumers, students begin to expect to be entertained rather than intellectually stretched, to see education more as a product than a process, and to measure educational success in relation to the salary they achieve post-graduation (which surveys such as the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey measures and since 2012 publishes on the Unistats website).⁶ The rise in student fees has exacerbated these trends, having been introduced in 1998 (£1,000 per year), raised to £3,000 in 2004 and to amounts up to £9,000 in 2012. With students paying more for their education, albeit indirectly via loans, they expect more 'value for money', even though universities do not, on average, have any more resources to improve their delivery. The 'student experience' discourse, claims Sabri, sanctifies the notion of the student as rational consumer. Moreover, the concept of *the* 'student experience' or *the* 'student voice', Sabri argues, unhelpfully 'homogenises students and deprives them of agency at the same time as apparently giving them "voice".'⁷ Students are diverse (e.g. by class, ethnicity or gender) and their diversity is masked by the student experience discourse, as is the diversity of their university experiences.

How does this relate to religion? Religious diversity, like gender, ethnic or class diversity, is mostly absent in these homogenising discussions of 'the student experience.' It appears, insofar as it becomes a diversity need, to be catered for within the requirements on universities to ensure adherence to equality law, but this represents a kind of individualising of religion. If the student is a consumer of learning and of their university experience, religion becomes an individual need to be met. Universities support students in their individual right to express their religious beliefs, and wish to provide appropriate experiences for them as consumers. Hence students should be offered prayer spaces, access to faith advisers and some faith societies to select from, and should be protected from abuse or discrimination against their religious beliefs. But, Sabri argues, this neglects the social and

⁶ Williams, 2013

⁷ Sabri, 2011, p. 657

communal context of religion.⁸ Therefore, I believe we must ask whether simply providing a few opportunities for religious consumption at university does justice to conceptualisations of faith that students, or religions themselves, might hold.

Faith in UK universities: findings from recent studies

In this context, with policymakers pressing for religious freedom and inclusion at universities and universities keen to deliver a good student experience to those of all faiths and none, the studies deriving from UK researchers enable us to see how universities are responding to these drivers. Exploring several of the key studies on religion and UK higher education reveals several important themes, themes that raise issues for those working at universities and with students.

Religion and belief in higher education: the Equality Challenge Unit project

Weller, Hooley and Moore's project *Religion and Belief in Higher Education: the experiences of staff and students*, funded by the Equality Challenge Unit, is important, not only because of its findings, but also because, in being funded by a government-sponsored policy unit, it demonstrated an increasing government concern to monitor how well universities are implementing religious equality legislation.⁹ The research team surveyed 3077 staff and 3935 students at UK universities. They found that the majority of students identified themselves as religious (only 31% said they had no religion). As a survey using a snowball sample, this is perhaps not surprising (it is likely that voluntary surveys about religion will be more attractive to religious participants); yet, upon examining other data from universities who ask students their religion when they enrol (see below), the figures are quite similar. Of their student participants, 44% were Christian, 9% were Muslim, 5% were spiritual, 2% each were Pagan, Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish, 1% were Sikh and 2% ticked 'Other'.¹⁰

Participation and access were a key theme that emerged: many, probably most, universities do not monitor student or staff religion, so it is hard to know whether they are doing enough to ensure equality for religious people. Most students are satisfied with how religion is dealt with in their classes;

⁸ Abstract submitted for a chapter to be written for a book, provisionally entitled *Religion and Belief in Higher Education*, to be edited by Kristin Aune and Jacqueline Stevenson.

⁹ Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011

¹⁰ Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 25

even though religion is often not discussed, the students did not feel discriminated against. Some religions have dietary requirements – for instance halal or kosher food – and some universities provide for this. Others do not or do not label food sufficiently well for Muslim or Jewish students to feel comfortable eating. For instance, a Muslim student said: ‘My university has a halal certificate but does not clearly state what is halal and what is not, so most Muslim students, including myself, do not eat at cafeterias.’¹¹ But another pointed out that other faiths may object to halal meat: ‘Generally, vegetarian food is well catered for; however, the advent of halal food fails to recognise that many communities, including non-vegetarian Hindus and Sikhs, find this type of meat served by default to be morally unacceptable’.¹² Alcohol is a significant issue for religious students in Britain, where it is central to many student activities. Students who do not drink alcohol, or do not drink to excess, report feeling excluded, and this is especially so for international students. As one said: ‘My tutor said: come and have a whisky. When you say you don’t drink whisky, they don’t quite understand. They don’t follow through. I have had to say “Am I not invited then?”’¹³

Accommodating religious observance was a second theme in Weller, Hooley and Moore’s research. Most university academic years are structured around the Christian calendar, making it difficult for students of other faiths to take time out to celebrate their festivals. Universities’ understanding of this is variable. One Jewish student said:

My first day of lectures was on Yom Kippur, which is the Day of Atonement and a most holy day for Jews. The day for moving into the halls was on Rosh Hashanah – Jewish New Year. I am not a very religious person apart from the two days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These are the three days when I come out of the woodwork and go to the synagogue and I pray. Last year because it was the first year of university, I had to come to university early but on my first day of lectures I was caught between a rock and a hard place. Do I go to university or go to synagogue like I have for the last 18 years? It just didn’t feel right.¹⁴

In 2015 and 2016 Ramadan, Muslims’ fasting month, falls in the June exam period, making it especially important that universities make provision for

¹¹ Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 42

¹² Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 43

¹³ Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 50

¹⁴ Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 55

this. Will universities provide an alternative exam period for those affected by this? The use of prayer or religious buildings in graduation is also an issue as it can make students of other faiths or none feel uncomfortable.

Religious dress, for instance the face veil for Muslim women or the turban for Sikhs, can occasionally be interpreted by universities as problematic – for instance in relation to photo ID cards or the requirement that medicine or nursing students have their arms uncovered for health and safety. Positively, 86% of students who said they had religious dress requirements said they were able to fulfil them satisfactorily,¹⁵ but with some disturbing exceptions: an international Sikh student was accosted for wearing a large *kirpan* (ceremonial dagger) and the police were called.¹⁶

Discrimination and harassment were a third research theme. Ninety four per cent of surveyed students said they had not been discriminated against or harassed because of their perceived or actual religion or belief identity, but there were variations according to religion. Jewish, Sikh and Muslim students were most likely to feel discriminated against or harassed.¹⁷ For instance, a Jewish student reported: ‘When discussing the Holocaust as part of a theology module, I felt another student was being insensitive, as she told me I needed to get out of the “Jew-box” when viewing the Holocaust.’¹⁸ Incidents of harassment were discussed by students of all religions and none, and Hooley and Weller conclude that more monitoring of religious identity will enable universities to determine whether harassment is occurring, so that it can be dealt with. In relation to staff, monitoring religious affiliation will also enable universities to see whether there is a ‘religion pay gap’ similar to the ‘gender pay gap’ and whether more needs to be done to ensure staff of particular religion or belief groups are treated (and promoted) equally. Indeed, this research project led the Equality Challenge Unit to recommend to the Higher Education Statistical Agency not only that religious monitoring of staff and students’ religious affiliation be done, but that HESA include ‘spiritual’ as a category within their (as yet optional) religion monitoring question.

The faiths in higher education chaplaincy project

¹⁵ Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 67

¹⁶ Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 69

¹⁷ Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, pp. 76-78

¹⁸ Weller, Hooley & Moore, 2011, p. 79

Chaplaincy and faith advice provision is a crucial area of universities' religious provision and an important project foregrounding this was *Faiths in Higher Education Chaplaincy*, a report carried out by the Church of England Board of Education.¹⁹ This project investigated the role of chaplaincy, reflecting on how chaplaincy appears to be changing in the twenty-first century. Clines surveyed chaplains in over 100 universities, ran thematic dialogue groups and visited many university chaplaincies. He found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that Anglican chaplains are by a substantial margin the largest group among chaplains. Just over half of chaplains are volunteers, and Church of England chaplains are the most likely group to hold the full-time paid jobs and to be the main chaplaincy coordinator in individual universities. The majority of chaplains are part-time and Christian, but there are increasing numbers of Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu and Baha'i faith advisers. The report identifies a need for more Muslim chaplains. Indeed, the training for them provided by the Markfield Institute of Higher Education since 2003 is producing more Muslim chaplains, although how their role will be funded is a critical issue. Clines also found that, although inter-faith activities happen in many universities, they do not attract large numbers of students, raising the question: if chaplaincy is, as the report argues, a vital site for the development of inter-religious understanding, how can students be persuaded of the importance of inter-faith engagement enough to be involved in it at their own university?

The Muslim chaplaincy project

New research by a team of researchers at Cardiff and Birmingham universities offers an important pioneering study of Muslim chaplaincy. Gilliat-Ray, Pattison and Ali interviewed 65 chaplains, the majority in prisons and hospitals. Drawing on Clines' work, they estimate that there are around 50 Muslim chaplains in further and higher education in the UK.²⁰ The eleven higher education chaplains they interviewed contrasted with those working in other areas, in that many of them were born overseas and most were men. These chaplains were pioneering in occupying a role that has not existed until very recently, partly because Islam lacks a role similar to the Christian priest or pastor role (although the task of a chaplain does relate to various roles Muslim leaders perform such as teaching and advising).

¹⁹ Clines, 2007

²⁰ Gilliat-Ray, Ali & Pattison, 2013, p.16

Today's Muslim chaplains (who are called different things at different universities) face unique challenges and opportunities. Among their challenges is their volunteer status: most are volunteers offering faith advice alongside another job (for instance as a lecturer or member of support staff) so time and funds are limited. Moreover, there is no formal network for Muslim chaplains (one was started but later discontinued) so they lack the support networks that Christian chaplains can access. Additionally, they may be burdened with expectations by their universities that, under the *Preventing Violent Extremism* agenda – a government-funded programme over the last decade 'to stop radicalisation, reduce support for terrorism and violent extremism and discourage people from becoming terrorists'²¹ – they should be monitoring students for signs of radicalisation. Among their opportunities, Muslim chaplains enjoy the chance of sharing Islam with students and staff, are able to negotiate successfully with university authorities on behalf of Muslim staff and students, for instance for better provision of *halal* meat or by persuading lecturers to allow their Muslim students to attend Friday prayers. Muslim chaplains work within multi-faith teams; this presents both benefits and challenges, as chaplains need to ensure that all students' needs are taken care of, and this sometimes necessitates complex negotiations. One part-time male higher education chaplain reported:

I said I would not allow any wine or anything in the building. Well, then the Hindus came up, 'we will not allow any meat in the building'. So, I mean, that sort of compromise we had to reach. I said, 'all right'. That is the sort of compromise we had to reach in the end. All our meals in the multi-faith centre will be vegetarian so that Muslims, Christians, Hindus, anybody can eat there. And there is no alcohol served.'²²

The issue of space is an important one for chaplaincy and faith societies, to enable individuals' spiritual needs for prayer, reflection and meditation to be met. A central dilemma relates to the question of whether shared space can be provided that suits the needs of all groups or whether it is better to provide diverse spaces that suit different needs.

Multi-faith spaces in universities

²¹ House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, 2010, p. 5

²² Gilliat-Ray, Ali & Pattison, 2013, p. 108

A recent research project, 'Multi-Faith Spaces: Symptoms and Agents of Religious and Social Change', focused partly on university chaplaincy.²³ Crompton, Brand, Biddington and Hewson found two models operating in multi-faith chaplaincy: one in which existing religious spaces – mostly chapels – were opened up to students of other and no faith, and a second newer model in which a new kind of multi-faith sacred space was designed, usually an empty white room, that different groups could fit to their needs.²⁴ The Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, opened in 2004, exemplifies this newer model, as it offers flexible spaces that are occupied by different groups at different times.²⁵ The University of Huddersfield Faith Centre is an interesting example because it provides some permanently separate spaces for Christians and Muslims: a Christian prayer room, and interconnected brothers' and sisters' prayer rooms with washing facilities for Muslims, a large common room (the 'community room') which can be used by anyone, and a multi-faith prayer room for students of other faiths, which doubles as a quiet room for meditation by students of any faith and none.²⁶

The Christianity and the University Experience project

The research outlined so far raises some key issues relating to faith and the university experience in Britain: participation, accommodating religious observance, discrimination and harassment, chaplaincy and faith advice, and provision of space for religion on campus. The rest of this article will present findings from the first major study of Christianity in English Universities: the *Christianity and the University Experience in Contemporary England* project.²⁷ This three-year project was collaborative, involving four researchers at the universities of Durham (Mathew Guest and Sonya Sharma), Chester (Rob Warner) and Derby (Kristin Aune). It was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Economic and Social Research Council's Religion & Society programme youth stream. The project explored how the university experience shapes the identities of undergraduate students who self-identify as Christian. Essentially, we were exploring what happens to Christian faith at university. Our aims were:

²³ <http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/architecture/research/mfs/>

²⁴ Abstract submitted by Andrew Crompton for a chapter to be written for a book, provisionally entitled *Religion and Belief in Higher Education*, to be edited by Kristin Aune and Jacqueline Stevenson. See also Crompton, 2013.

²⁵ <http://www.multifaithcentre.org/>

²⁶ <http://www.hud.ac.uk/wellbeing-disability-services/faithcentre//>

²⁷ See Guest et al., 2013 for more findings.

1. To identify the religious beliefs and social values of Christian undergraduates.
2. To explore the impact of the university experience – educational, social and religious – on those beliefs and values, and vice versa.
3. To identify how organised Christian groups – from chaplaincies to Christian Unions – help students respond to the university experience, and to examine their impact upon cohesion and division within the student body.
4. To address implications of these findings for HEIs, government policy, and religious organisations.

The research employed two methods: a survey and semi-structured interviews. The university sector is diverse, so building on Weller and Gilliat-Ray's work,²⁸ we divided universities into five types: traditional elite universities (often with a history connected to the church); civic or 'red brick' universities (established in major cities around the turn of the twentieth century); 1960s campus universities (established after the Robbins Report); post-1992 'new' universities (most of which were previously polytechnics); and 'Cathedrals Group' universities (part of the Council of Church Universities and Colleges, founded mostly in the nineteenth century as church teaching training colleges, gaining university status around the turn of the twenty-first century). The online survey aimed to capture responses from students at three universities from each of the five types (fifteen in total). Securing access to universities via university administration managers and academic networks led to thirteen universities agreeing to participate. University administrators distributed the survey via email to 3,000 students in each (Cambridge's collegiate structure necessitated a different approach). The survey had two parts: the first asked general questions that could be completed by any student, whatever their religion. Those who identified as Christian when asked 'To what religion or spiritual tradition do you currently belong?' (see below for the response options) filled in the second part. We received 4,341 usable responses, of which 2,248 identified as Christian.

The project's second stage was to conduct interviews in one each of the five university types: Durham (traditional elite), Leeds (civic or red brick), Kent (1960s campus), Derby (post-1992) and Chester (Cathedrals Group) were our case studies. In each university we interviewed fifteen students and five staff and religious professionals (for example, Students' Union officers, equality and diversity managers or chaplains).

²⁸ Weller, 2008 and Gilliat-Ray, 2000

A key survey question was ‘To which religion or spiritual tradition do you belong?’ Given the options indicated below, 51.4% said they were Christian and just over a third had no religion.

The proportion of Christian students is somewhat higher than we anticipated and should not be cited as evidence that 51.4% of students in *all* universities are Christian. There is no previous research on students’ religious affiliation, and what comparisons can be made derive mostly from the few universities which collect religious affiliation data from students on enrolment. We were provided these data by several universities and the average Christian figure from that was 43.6%; likewise, Weller and Hooley’s snowball sample survey produced a Christian figure of 43.8%. Our 51.4% figure is higher, probably reflecting religiously indifferent students opting out of our research, but not vastly askew of the other data available.

	% (weighted)
None	34.0
Buddhism	2.2
Christianity	51.4
Hinduism	2.0
Islam	4.9
Judaism	0.5
Sikhism	0.3
Other	4.7

Table 1: Responses to the question ‘To what religion or spiritual tradition do you currently belong? Please choose the one that fits best’ among undergraduates studying at universities in England (2010-11)

Our research aim was not to discover the percentage of students who were Christian; rather, it was to understand the faith and characteristics of Christian students. This is not to say that we were uninterested in statistics relating to religious decline or growth. In a context where fewer people are calling themselves Christians and where some of the indicators of religious adherence suggest a particular drop-off among younger people, we wondered: is Christianity losing significance especially for young people? Moreover, in the context of research that suggests that, although the majority of English people tick the Christian box in response to the Census question

‘What is your religion?’, many of them are only minimally religious,²⁹ we wanted to see whether this was the case for students. Does faith hold little or no meaning for most students who are, on paper, Christian?

To ascertain this, we asked the Christian students if they identified as spiritual, religious or neither (see table below).

If a student was a nominal Christian who did not actively participate, we would expect them to select ‘not religious or spiritual’. Yet only 15.4% did. 40.4% said they were religious and 31.2% spiritual and the rest were unsure. The reason for the large numbers identifying as ‘spiritual’ as well as

Religious (%)	Not religious, but spiritual (%)	Not religious or spiritual (%)	Not sure (%)
40.4%	31.2%	15.4%	13.0%

Table 2: Orientations to religion or spirituality among Christian students (weighted)

‘religious’ was illuminated during some of the interviews we conducted: some students said they did not like the term ‘religious’, as they felt it was about tradition and ritual rather than a living faith; for them ‘spiritual’ connoted active faith and practice better than ‘religious’.

Examining students’ religious practices sheds further light on the degree to which their Christian identification translated into faith-based actions or commitments. We compared students’ church attendance in vacations to attendance in term-time and found that vacation attendance was higher.

In vacations, a third of students report attending at least once a week; a third never attend. In term-time the ‘never’ figure of 50.5% is substantially higher. Fewer attend weekly but the figure for more than once a week is very slightly higher than for vacations, suggesting intensified church commitment for a minority. The reduction in term-time attendance could be interpreted as evidence of declining religious commitment at university. An alternative interpretation is that, since most students live only at the parental home in

²⁹ Voas & Day, 2007

Frequency	Church attendance during term-time (%)	Church attendance during vacations (%)
More than once a week	10.9	9.6
Once a week	17.9	25.2
Once a fortnight	3.4	4.8
Once a month	2.7	3.2
Occasionally	14.6	24.6
Never	50.5	32.6

Table 3: Church attendance in term-time and vacations among Christian undergraduates (weighted)

vacations, in vacations one or more parents take their children to church; so during term-time when students are free to make their own decisions, it is easy for churchgoing to lapse. Furthermore, as I will show below, the qualitative responses of students to the question 'In your view, and in your own words, what does it mean to be a Christian?' demonstrates a low regard for church attendance as a necessary expression of Christian faith; instead, other aspects such as belief or moral behaviour were more strongly emphasised. There were some differences in church attendance figures by university. At Durham and Cambridge, church attendance was higher in term time, but at red bricks and 1960s campus universities it was lower. This may be due to the location of churches and student residences (the proximity of many churches to student residences in the city centre of both cities makes it very easy for students to get to church services), but it is probably also the case that churchgoing students are more attracted to certain universities (and Durham and Cambridge have Christian histories and links that are relatively absent from Kent and Leeds). If a substantial minority attends church regularly as one expression of faith, a larger proportion regularly pray. Almost half pray weekly or daily (although figures for 'never' are high too).

Interested in discovering how university attendance affects commitment to Christianity, we asked students 'Since attending university, how has your perspective on religion changed?' This table shows the proportions. 11.9% of Christian students have become less religious, 15.0% more religious and 73.2% have remained about the same. In other words, religious stability, not change, is a feature of most Christian students' university lives. This finding contradicts earlier studies of students and religion (mostly American and from the 1970s and 80s) and the work of secularisation theorists, who argued

that secularisation was a feature of modern life, especially of university (see for example the work of Peter Berger in the USA and Steve Bruce in the UK). But recent American studies indicate that this is no longer the case. We find the same. In our study, very slightly more Christian students became *more* religious than less religious.

Statistics tell only part of the story and that is where qualitative data become important. Our survey included several questions which were not 'tick box' answers, but allowed students to write their thoughts. We asked 'In your view, and in your own words, what does it mean to be a Christian?' This revealed seven themes, themes that enable us to see the different kinds of Christianity expressed by these students. The first theme was *Christian belief* and here students expressed specific doctrinal commitments, often connected to belief in the efficacy of Jesus' death and resurrection for achieving salvation for believers. For instance, for this student being Christian means 'To believe and have faith in Jesus Christ and God our father who we will live with once again' (black African female, 21, Derby). The next three groups of responses all related to Christian practice, but with different emphases: ethical or moral conduct; churchgoing; Christian rites and mission; and following God, Jesus and/or the Bible.

This response was typical of the second theme, *ethical or moral conduct*: 'Live a life helping others and not seeking personal gain by capitulating to avarice and greed' (white male, 26, Kent), as was the simple 'Being a good person' (white female, 22, Kent). The third theme, *churchgoing, Christian rites and mission*, was given to responses which evoked specifically church-based rites, ceremonies or practices; for instance, baptism, marriage, confirmation or general churchgoing:

'Being baptised in the name of Jesus Christ' (black African female, 26+, Canterbury Christ Church)

'To get married in a church (unfortunately that's all)' (white female, 26+, Canterbury Christ Church)

'To be part of a religious community' (white and Asian male, 19, Cambridge)

Interestingly, as was the case for this Cambridge respondent, where they referred to churchgoing, students more commonly spoke less of attending a church building and more of being part of a Christian community.

The fourth theme related to *following God, Jesus &/or the Bible*:

Following and committing, having a positive Christian presence around others, sharing your faith if people ask, and having morals and belief in the truth in the Bible (white female, 18, Winchester).

To be committed to Christ and to constantly strive to walk in the light. To persevere (white male, 20, Cambridge).

It means to follow your religion and do as the Bible says to do. It is about following the 10 commandments, being a good person and not judging others. I also feel being a Christian does not mean that you must preach about your Christianity to everyone and anyone, I feel if someone is interested, it is your job to tell them what you believe but not to forcefully tell people (white female, 19, Derby).

Following God, Jesus and the Bible related to other themes – for instance Christian belief – but the emphasis here was on following Jesus in a way that they hoped would lead others to do so. The students were clear, though, that they should not force their beliefs on anyone.

The fifth theme was *experiential Christian spirituality*. Students whose responses fell within this category saw Christianity as being to do with having a relationship with God, with an embodied, experiential faith. As this female student said:

To be a Christian is to have a personal relationship with God – to discuss your daily life with him, and to allow him to guide you in the choices you make. It is similar to a relationship between friends, or as a father and child. Each person's relationship with God varies, but all true Christians will share an underlying feeling of love and patience (white female, 20, Kent).

Relationships with God connoted intimacy and friendship. For this mature student, 'It is a way of life, not just a Sunday thing. I enjoy having a daily cup of tea with Jesus and a chat' (white female, 26+, Kent). God was seen as personal and this relationship outweighed any requirement to engage in particular church-related practices: for this Winchester student being a Christian meant 'Having someone to always turn to when you need to in God

and that your religious beliefs should not be proven by attending church on a regular basis' (white female, 21, Winchester).

While these students' faith was experiential, it was rooted in Christian doctrines and practices, unlike the sixth group. These students embraced a *subjective spirituality*. This sixth group expressed spirituality but not in explicitly Christian terms and believed personal choice and private experience were most important. This Winchester student referred to being a Christian as 'to have faith in something you are constantly working to understand, something to base your principles on' (white male, 20). This Kent respondent put it succinctly, disassociating Christianity from any dogma or doctrine: 'It doesn't matter what you believe in, so long as you believe in it' (white male, 21). This Derby response is similarly noncommittal with relation to the concept of God:

To have faith in the idea that life is not without meaning, there is universal balance to the world we live in. Act responsibly and take responsibility for your own actions. Whether or not there is a God this is your chance to make a difference for the better (black African male, 23, Derby).

The seventh and final theme related Christianity to *scepticism, cynicism and uncertainty*. Christianity was discussed in the negative, as something students did not believe or were cynical or negative about. This woman from Cambridge simply responded: 'Oppression' (other white mixed ethnicity female, 19). Another, similarly negative, wrote: 'It means that you have been indoctrinated with a belief that is irrational, dangerous and has been used throughout history, by powerful men and women, to control the masses and justify evil doings' (white male, 20, Durham). This woman equated Christianity only with a secularised version of Christmas and Easter: 'Honestly, the only things I participate in that are remotely Christian are eating Easter eggs and opening presents on Christmas day, and the Christian aspect of both these events is generally lost' (white female, 20, UCL).

In summary, our study of Christianity and the university experience in England reveals a diverse picture. A significant proportion of students – approaching half – affiliate in some way to Christianity, and the majority of these find Christianity meaningful and something that they believe and/or practise during their student years. A minority of Christian students – exemplified by those for whom Christianity connoted scepticism and

cynicism, and by the 15.4% who say they are 'not religious or spiritual' – retain 'Christian' only as a label. For most students, Christianity is a relatively stable identity during university, and university is not, on the whole, either a secularising or radicalising influence (though it is for small numbers). Although 28.8% of students in our survey attended church at least once a week during term-time (more than the general population, although as people tend to over-report their attendance, the true figure may be around half of that)³⁰, church is more about community and relationships than it is about regular attendance. Only a minority see church-related activities as central to their faith. Larger proportions express forms of Christianity centred on one or more of: Christian belief; following God, Jesus and/or the Bible; ethical and moral conduct; and an experiential faith. Students are especially inclined to see religion as *practice*, yet church is not central to their practice of faith.

Given that Christianity is retaining significance for students who are not going to church, how is this happening? Perhaps this is what sociologist Grace Davie calls 'vicarious religion', the idea that students are passively benefitting from the religious practices of a few and turning to faith only in times of crisis?³¹ This may be partly true and there was evidence that, although students did not avail themselves of all the university's Christian provision (especially chaplaincies), they were still glad that they existed. But most students appeared to have more active engagement with the Christian faith than this. Our interviews (notwithstanding the problem that the students from the survey who agreed to be interviewed were probably those who were more committed to their faith and more eager to discuss it with interviewers) showed that Christianity is central to many, even most, Christian students' lives. It is important that universities take this seriously.

Conclusion

Reflecting on all the research discussed in this article demonstrates the vitality of faith in the twenty-first century UK university. On the whole, students are not (to quote lyrics of the 1990s band REM) 'losing their religion.' Universities are increasingly religiously plural spaces, home to students from many places and many religions. Policy shifts have encouraged universities to take faith more seriously, ensure they are respecting students and providing for their needs. In many ways this is great news. But universities'

³⁰ Hadaway, Marler & Chaves, 1993

³¹ Davie, 2007

approach to faith is often seen primarily as about providing spaces for prayer and worship, and chaplains and faith advisers for students to talk to. Conversations about faith on campus, in classrooms and between students are paid less attention, as are the ways in which people of faith can positively impact their campuses. Faith is seen as a need to be met, rather than something that shapes and transforms the university environment. Perhaps this is the challenge for religious people: how might they seek to intervene in the university environment in a way that shows that faith is not simply about providing a bit of space for a privatised religious experience, but is something that can shape the whole institution?

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Submitting convictions to critical enquiry: a challenge for higher education

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Introduction

In recent decades in the United Kingdom there has been a proliferation of Christian congregations outside the historic established denominations. The largest number of these is in the London area, where some 700 new churches opened between 2005 and 2012. The large majority are charismatic and/or pentecostal churches, with a membership drawn predominantly from the black constituency.¹ In 2011, there were approximately 500,000 black Christians in Britain and an estimated 4,000 black majority churches nationwide.² Many of these are independent single congregations, although some groups of churches are organised under their own denominational structure, and others maintain informal fellowship networks. In this paper, all such congregations are referred to for convenience as non-traditional community churches (NTCCs).

Unlike the majority of historic UK denominations, which have an ordained pastorate (and in some cases other leaders), the ministers and congregational leaders of NTCCs are typically appointed on the basis of criteria other than formal professional education. Indeed, there has been among NTCCs a tendency to regard formal theological education as unnecessary, and even inimical, to the formation of spiritual leaders. Recently, however, encouraged by government policy of widening access to higher and further education, there has been considerable interest among the leadership of NTCCs in receiving such education. A number of universities (and other institutions with university-accredited courses³) offering generic or denominationally-oriented theological and/or ministerial training now have a significant

¹ Brierley, 2014

² www.bmcdirectory.co.uk [accessed 15 July 2011]; Goodhew, 2012

³ For example, Spurgeon's College, Queens Foundation, Springdale College, Regents College, Mattersey Hall, Christ Redeemer College.

enrolment of students from NTCCs. At least two English universities⁴ offer (and some others are considering offering) programmes specifically designed for NTCC leaders.

The demand for ministerial-theological programmes (MTPs) offered or accredited by universities is steadily increasing. At the University of Roehampton, for example, enrolment in the two-year Ministerial Theology foundation degree programme, designed specifically for NTCC leaders, has increased from 12 students in 2007, when it was established, to 154 in 2014. A proportion (approximately 68) of these students have progressed to study for a Bachelor's degree in Theology and a few have continued to Master's level.

The learning outcomes of MTPs are intended in the first place to benefit the various NTCCs themselves. Well-educated leaders are more able to encourage their adherents to deeper and more informed faith, and to equip them with the knowledge and understanding needed to enable them to bear a more effective witness to the Christian faith in an increasingly educated society. There are, however, also potential benefits to the wider Christian community beyond the new congregations and denominations. Against a backdrop of a general decline in church attendance in the UK, NTCCs have shown consistent growth over the past decade and, with their wholehearted commitment and particular spirituality, they are in a strong position both to enrich the lives of the historic churches and to make a significant contribution to multi-faith dialogue in contemporary society.

Such wider and more public engagement between NTCCs and other Christians (as well as other faiths) has so far, however, been at best sporadic and is far less extensive than could be desired. The traditional and non-traditional churches conduct their worship, teaching, and witness largely independently of one another.⁵ Even in a number of cases in which an NTCC makes use of the premises of a long-established church, the two congregations may co-exist with virtually no social interaction—still less shared worship or theological discussion—between the two congregations. The reasons for this lack of mutuality are no doubt complex, and merit investigation. It is not the

⁴ The University of Roehampton and Canterbury Christ Church University.

⁵ An exception is Jesus House in London, the flagship congregation of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, which has a strong relationship with Holy Trinity Brompton.

aim of this paper, however, to explore this question. Suffice it to say that the research reported here was motivated in part by the belief that carefully designed and appropriately delivered MTPs can make a contribution towards increasing engagement. Critically aware and outward-looking NTCC leaders are in a better position to engage in dialogue with their counterparts in the historic denominations and ultimately with those in other faith communities.

The teaching and learning that occur in MTPs are, however, far from straightforward. Students from NTCCs constitute a distinctive group of non-traditional students, very different from those for whom the programmes in the established disciplines, including Theology, were designed. A large majority of them are from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities and there is much anecdotal, and some research, evidence, that the retention rates and attainment levels of BME students in all university programmes are markedly lower than those of the more traditional student body.⁶ For example, a recent study by the Equality Challenge Unit found that the national attainment gap between BME students and white students in 2008-09 was 18%. The attainment gap is the difference between the proportion of white students who obtained a first class honours or upper second class honours and the proportion of BME students who achieved at the same level.⁷

Teachers on all programmes (including MTPs) with a large proportion of BME student in their intake thus face the general challenge of adapting the design and delivery of their courses to the particular learning needs of these students without compromising academic integrity. But there are further specific challenges for MTPs. The students on these programmes are predominantly mature-age, have extensive life experience, and come from cultural and ecclesial backgrounds underrepresented in the wider student population. They typically hold strong, theologically conservative, Christian convictions, based on a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible.

Teachers on MTPs are confronted by a crucial pedagogical dichotomy. On the one hand, the learning environment in higher education, in all disciplines, is based on principles of critical inquiry and intellectual engagement with a wide range of conflicting theories, viewpoints, and

⁶ Connor *et al.*, 2004; Broecke & Nicholls, 2007; Richardson, 2008

⁷ Equality Challenge Unit, 2010

assumptions. The educational approach is to question, inform, and thus enrich students' epistemology, ontology and (in the case of MTPs) theology. On the other hand, the aim of MTPs is to provide professionally relevant formation that enhances church leadership through critical reflection. This requires drawing on, and building up, the students' significant theological convictions, cultural perspectives, spiritual practices, and rituals. The imperative is to equip the students with the desire and ability to engage in the kind of critical reflection that will inform and enhance, rather than undermine, their faith and identity as Christian leaders. Striking a dynamic balance between these two potentially conflicting requirements demands considerable pedagogical knowledge and skill.

MTPs, if they are to be successful, cannot simply mirror the approaches of traditional university Theology courses. The curriculum needs to be carefully designed to engage with students' spiritual needs and strengths. The teaching must sensitively address both their theological assumptions and their pastoral practices. Appropriate curricula and effective teaching on an MTP depend on a good understanding of the learning processes of this kind of student; of what occurs when profound and long-held religious convictions, developed independently of formal learning, are challenged by the intellectual processes of higher education. Because the presence in universities of substantial cohorts of students with such convictions is a very recent phenomenon, however, there is little research evidence of their processes of learning. Without such evidence, it will be extremely difficult to meet the pedagogical demands and hence ensure the desirable outcomes of MTPs.

The research reported in this paper is a modest preliminary step towards filling this gap in the evidence. The authors have conducted, over the past two years, a small-scale study involving Ministerial Theology students at the University of Roehampton. The research focused initially on one key aspect of the programme: the requirement for students to reflect theologically on their own ministerial practice. The scope was then broadened to investigate more generally students' responses to the critical enquiry approach that underlies all of the modules on the programme.

The findings provide some insight into key pedagogical issues, but the limited scope of the research and the small size and possibly

unrepresentative nature of the study sample mean that the findings can at best be taken as indicative and provisional. It is intended in future to build on this beginning through a large-scale, multi-institutional study that will provide a more comprehensive and robustly evidence-based picture of the present state of and potential future developments for education in MTPs.

The study

Phase I

The first phase of the research, as stated above, explored Ministerial Theology students' experiences of learning in practical theology, specifically, their conceptions of and engagement in theologically reflective practice and their perceptions of its usefulness in their ministry. The sample was made opportunistically and comprised twenty second year students. All data were collected, with the full knowledge and explicit consent of the participants, from three sources:

- i. Students' assignments
- ii. Class discussions
- iii. Focus groups

Theological reflection assignments submitted as part of the module requirements were analysed thematically. Participant observations were then conducted of four class discussions about theological reflection. The themes arising from these two sources were used to formulate the questions posed to the subsequent focus groups. Two groups, each of eight participants, were conducted in class times. The conversations were recorded, selectively transcribed, and anonymised. The transcripts were then analysed thematically and by key words and phrases and the findings were used to triangulate those of the assignments and the class observations.

The analysis of all the data focused on frequently recurring comments made by students relating to the processes of learning, rather than on the specific issues and incidents that formed the subject of their reflection. Notes were made of difficulties reported by the students in grasping the concept and purpose of theological reflection, and its application in practice, as well as its perceived benefits (or otherwise) to their ministerial formation.

In general, it was evident from the findings of this phase that there was, on the part of students, a widespread lack of clarity and unanimity concerning both what the concept of theological reflection means and how it can be applied in their practice. This was despite the fact that all participants had completed one year of their studies and were familiar with the topic of theological reflection. Three interrelated conceptions of what constitutes theological reflection emerged:

- i. the connection of Christian beliefs to practice;
- ii. the application of theology and Christian tradition to beliefs and practices;
- iii. the interrogation of beliefs and practice with the aim of improving practice.

These findings were broadly similar to those of published studies in theological education programmes other than MTPs.⁸

One frequently reiterated reason given for students' difficulties in engaging in theological reflection was that the NTCCs from which the participants came discouraged critical reflection. This is reflected in the following two interview excerpts. (The second excerpt implies that this problem may be greater for female students from typically male-dominated NTCCs; this was not explored in the study, but it merits further research.)

It's been difficult for me to grasp because it's not something that I was encouraged to do in church so already my mind is not really thinking like that. It's whatever the pastor says, you just accept it, you are not really taught to have that kind of mind where you think, where you reason, and where you are critical. And I think that holds so much cultural and social attachments to it as well, because in another culture, it can be seen as quite normal. It's encouraged. But from my background it's not encouraged.

I think this course has helped me to ask the awkward questions. Sometimes in the past I have avoided it because I knew that I would be seen as a "Jezebel." That's a very popular name that is thrown out in the black church. If you are asking genuine questions, if you just want to know more about your faith, you are

⁸ For example, Lynch & Pattison, 2005 ; Smith, 2008; Walton, 2002

seen as rebellious, you are seen as someone who is trying to destroy the church.

The participants in the focus groups were asked to suggest what approaches to learning and teaching would enable them better to engage with theological reflection. The main themes can be summarised as follows:

- i. Building on prior knowledge helps to engender conceptual change.
- ii. Active collaborative learning develops deep learning in which students focus on understanding concepts.
- iii. Experiential learning encourages students to reflect theologically on experiences they have encountered in their work placements.

These statements are hardly surprising: they reflect well-established educational principles of teaching as learner-centred, guided praxis rather than as expert input.⁹ Nonetheless, they emphasise how important this approach to pedagogy is for MTPs, in which the students bring to their studies a great deal of practical, if not always well-informed and critical, experience in Christian leadership. Some specific ways of enhancing the design and delivery of MTPs in this respect are given in the Recommendations section below.

Phase II

The theological reflection component was the initial phase of the study, because such reflection requires the willingness and ability to examine and evaluate one's own professional practices, and students' responses to it can be regarded as a specific example of challenges in learning and teaching encountered in the MTP overall.

Phase I, however, gave only a partial picture, for reasons discussed in the Conclusions section below. The next phase of the research had a wider compass, investigating cognitions and values. We were interested in the responses of the learners to two learning experiences, which for many of them were quite new. The first is encountering Christian views that are different from, and sometimes antithetical to, their own (often implicit) theological beliefs and ethical assumptions. The second, which

⁹ See, for example, Biggs, 2003; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Entwistle, 1997; Kolb, 1984.

frequently arises from the first, is having these beliefs and assumptions subjected to critical academic enquiry.

The next phase of the research explored their perceptions of the outcomes of both of these processes with regard to personal and communal identity, beliefs, and ministerial practice. The aim was to discover whether there are certain categories of response that characterise what might be regarded as a typical cohort of MTP students. A particular objective, given the desired outcomes of the programme to enhance and inform faith and practice, was to identify any kinds of response that point to the need for careful and perhaps innovative approaches to teaching that could help to overcome students' difficulties.

The data were gathered from an opportunistic sample comprising ten students in their final year¹⁰ of formal study on the Roehampton MTP. We conducted one-to-one, semi-structured interviews, which were recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. The transcripts were analysed thematically and by key words and phrases by the researchers independently; the coding was then discussed and modified until an acceptable level (in most cases, virtually 100%) inter-rater agreement was reached.

In the light of the small, quite possibly unrepresentative sample, the findings of our analysis must be seen as tentative. Nonetheless, some clear patterns of results emerged that indicate three kinds of responses by students, which we term *compartmentalising*, *respecting alternatives*, and *deep learning*. A fourth response, which can be imagined, but for which our research could not (for reasons indicated below) find clear evidence, is *rejecting*.

Compartmentalising occurs when a student responds (for example, in class discussions, presentations, and written assignments) in the way he/she thinks the teachers require, whilst privately holding on to his/her own pre-existing views. For example, one respondent told us how he dealt with course content that conflicted with his own preconceptions:

¹⁰ I.e., 2nd year of the Foundation Degree or 3rd year of Bachelor's degree.

Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. If I write what I understand rather than what I've been taught, I'm not going to meet the criteria of the curriculum ... In order to pass, I have to say what you are teaching me.

This response is, of course, not confined to students on MTPs, as any experienced teacher will attest. It need hardly be stated that such an outcome is highly undesirable: the student has simply acquired more 'facts' about the topic and has not developed new and better-informed ways of thinking about it. Educationally (even if not in terms of the students' marks) it represents failure, especially so for a professionally- and ethically-oriented course of study like an MTP. Fortunately, to the extent that our findings can be extrapolated to the whole MTP cohort, it appears to be a minority response: of the ten participants, only two provided evidence of compartmentalising, and one of those only partly. One approach to pre-empting this response is discussed in the Recommendations section.

Respecting alternatives is a response taken by students who realise, perhaps for the first time, that other Christians sincerely hold different, sometimes directly opposing, views on a range of issues. These students may find it interesting, even enlightening, to accept that there is genuine diversity across the Christian world. Their own beliefs and values, however, are not challenged or altered, except to the extent that for some of them the fact of allowing legitimacy to alternatives is in itself a form of spiritual and intellectual development. This response to learning is reflected in the following interview excerpts:

The course has really opened my eyes to understand that there are various versions of Christianity and it has made me more tolerant and able to accept those that have different views than the view I am holding.

If somebody says something that doesn't correspond with me, it is their opinion they are giving, and now it's just made me know that there are some people thinking this line, and I think in this [other] line, and I have to give my opinion in which line I think.

From an educational point of view, this response is surely preferable to compartmentalising. It could be seen as evidence of learning, albeit of a

somewhat limited kind. In terms of leadership skills, it is likely to make the individuals more accepting of others who profess the faith and less dogmatic in what they regard as Christian truth. It may also represent a first step towards the possibility of engaging in genuine ecumenical and perhaps even inter-faith dialogue. Nonetheless, if it were a common response, the MTP would scarcely have met its main objectives. Our findings, however, suggest that it, like compartmentalising, is in fact not particularly prevalent among the student body.

Deep learning is a phenomenon that has been quite widely researched and discussed in the educational literature.¹¹ In our study it is the response of students who find their theological views have developed in breadth and depth, and that their perceptions of themselves and other Christians and their role as church leaders have all been enriched. They become more critical of the accepted wisdom in the traditions from which they come and learn to live with questions and uncertainties with regard to their faith and ethics. This process may be stimulated by interaction with fellow students who belong to different theological traditions. For example, one participant referred to the transformational potential of critical reflection on practice:

I don't think that when you are criticised it is just to put you down, or when you critique something the essence is just to put it down or shut it out. But to look at it because there are always ways that you can improve or do what you are doing better ... And also, because it's ministerial theology, we have a lot of pastors from different cultures and backgrounds. So interacting with them also helped me to look at different things and try to understand things from different perspectives. Because all I know is from the Ghanaian culture and background and from the African background. But here you interact with people from different African backgrounds and different cultures and different nationalities. So you get to understand and hopefully get a bigger picture.

Another student said that the course has encouraged him to question his own church tradition:

¹¹ For example, Dall'Alba, 1991; Moon, 2004; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Biggs, 2003; Entwistle, 1997.

I would say it's quite new [for me] because if you went to church and either a pastor, a deacon, a reverend, they say something, you tend to take it as it is ... I never used to ask the questions, but now that has been awakened in me.

It is often stated in the literature that deep learning is the ultimate goal of all pedagogy, especially perhaps in higher education. It leads to intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth. Its effects can be seen not only in the quality of students' work but also in their enthusiasm and motivation for learning, which they see as not confined to any particular course of study, but as a lifelong process. An MTP in which deep learning is the response of a substantial proportion of students is successfully meeting its primary objective. The findings of the research, as well as much informal discussion with a number of students, indicate that this is indeed the predominant response in the MTP in which the study was conducted. Whilst this is a gratifying indicator, however, we must be careful not to generalise it too far without much more extensive research, as any opportunistic sample in educational research is almost inevitably skewed towards those whose response is deep learning.

Rejecting is a fourth response that can be imagined: it is that of students who are unable to cope with having their views subjected to critical enquiry and are unwilling to allow legitimacy to beliefs and values other than their own. Like compartmentalising, this response by a student would be an indicator that the programme had failed with respect to him or her. The findings of the present study found no evidence of rejecting. This was entirely predictable, since students who had chosen to enrol in the programme in the first place, often at some personal cost, were overwhelmingly likely to be those who were, at least in principle, amenable to learning and developing. Any who were not would almost certainly have withdrawn before the research began (towards the end of the term). Furthermore, as noted above, an opportunistic sample is subject to self-selection bias: students whose learning experiences had been positive were more likely to volunteer to participate in the research. A different study, conducted in the first week or so of the programme, and/or focussing on former students who had withdrawn from or failed the course, would be needed to establish the nature and extent of this postulated response.

Conclusions and recommendations

Most students on MTPs share a number of characteristics, including practical experience of leadership in charismatic ethnic minority churches and strong, typically conservative, religious conviction, which distinguish them from most student cohorts in traditional disciplines in higher education. The findings of the research suggest specific pedagogical challenges to ensuring that MTPs achieve the objective of developing self-reflective and enquiry-based learning among leaders of NTCCs.

The main overall conclusion to be drawn from the study is that, for probably the large majority of the students, having their beliefs and values subjected to critical academic enquiry and encountering a variety of alternative Christian perspectives on a variety of issues are a confronting experience. Three kinds of response to this experience were identified: compartmentalising, respecting alternatives, and deep learning. The first two of these are evidence of, at best, limited learning. Although they appear to be the responses of a minority of students, they need to be recognised and, as far as is practicable, anticipated in the design and delivery of the programme. The third response, deep learning, indicates that the programme is succeeding. It was in evidence in the majority of our participants, but further research with a larger and more reliably representative sample is needed to ascertain how generalisable this finding may be.

One means of helping students evincing any of these responses to gain more from their encounter with critical enquiry has been implemented in the Roehampton MTP. Regular worship sessions have been integrated into the curriculum. The academic year begins with a welcoming service and ends with a valedictory service in which all those leaving the programme are commissioned for their future ministry. Fortnightly communion services are held throughout the year. As well as deepening fellowship among the students and staff, these events fulfil a valuable educational function. Students participate in Anglican liturgy, which is for many a new experience of an alternative approach to worship. The preaching is oriented towards helping them to place their studies in the context of Christian worship and often explicitly addresses specific theological difficulties they have grappled with in the course. There is extensive, albeit anecdotal, evidence that the

students find the services particularly helpful, and not infrequently the content of a sermon is discussed in subsequent classes.

From a pedagogical perspective, the research suggests three approaches that could be used to enhance the learning. One is to build into the curriculum regular individual and small-group tutorials. Tutorials make heavy demands on staff time, but without them it is unlikely that the programme will achieve its intended outcomes. They give students the opportunity to deal, through guided conversations, in depth and at length with uncertainties, doubts and new understandings that arise in the plenary teaching sessions. In the focus groups, students said they preferred a learning environment that encourages questions and discussions, rather than the unidirectional, information-laden lecture format. In the interviews, one respondent stated that when she encountered views in class that conflicted with her own pre-existing beliefs she would solicit further explanation from tutors:

I have been challenged and I have spoken to one or two lecturers, just to clarify a few things, because without that I would be letting a lot of water to be going under the bridge and that would not be helpful, because I would go away and still have questions and doubt. But if you approach the person and they are able to explain, I may not necessarily agree, but at least I have the clarification which is always helpful.

The second is to incorporate, in all classes, learning activities designed to elicit students' understanding of reflective practice in general and critical theological enquiry in particular. Such activities are pedagogically effective because they build on students' (often extensive) prior learning and experience. They also help to inform the selection of starting points for the design and delivery of course content. Finally, providing formative feedback on assessment is important for student learning and achievement.¹² We found that students on the Roehampton MTP who received formative feedback and used it productively tended to submit higher quality work as a result.

As we have stressed, this study has several limitations, in particular arising from the fact that it was conducted in one site and from the size and untested representativeness of the sample. Nonetheless, we hope

¹² Hounsell *et al*, 2008; Gibbs, 2010

that, as the first small step in building a base for a new and potentially highly significant field of higher education, it will provide an encouragement and starting-point for other researchers. Given the increasing demand for this form of education in the UK (and probably elsewhere), MTPs with well-informed, evidence-based curricula and pedagogy could make a significant contribution to the wider church and to inter-faith dialogue.

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NOTES FOR AUTHORS

Papers on topics relevant to the general theme are invited from any interested person or group, not simply those with a connection to Whitelands or CUAC.

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