

Inaugural 'Dr Rowan Williams Annual CUAC Lecture'

Canterbury Christ Church University 28th September 2012

Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests:

It's a rather singular honour to be invited to deliver a lecture carrying one's own name, and I have a rather embarrassed feeling that I ought to be dead before something like this happens. However, you have chosen, wisely or not, not only to dedicate this lecture in my name during my lifetime, but to invite me to give it.

What I intend to do this afternoon is to offer you some thoughts on three interconnected questions: What is the point of a university? What is the point of a Christian university? And what is the point of an Anglican university? I hope that in reflecting on these three questions, we may not only get a clearer sense of just what it is we're celebrating in the life of this institution here in Canterbury whose jubilee we celebrate today, but what it might be worldwide to be committed to an ideal of higher education, with its roots firmly and clearly in the Christian and Anglican tradition.

What then is a university for? I want to argue that universities historically have existed not simply for the pursuit of learning, but for the pursuit of intelligent citizenship. All through the history of what we now call "Higher Education", there has been an interest in how what goes on in a university connects with the life of a society. In spite of what some people will say, universities as institutions have never just existed for research. They dry up and die, of course, if they don't take research seriously, but they have regularly had that broader vision and horizon, which has something to do with what I called a moment ago "the forming of intelligent citizens" - using intelligence in public. That is, of course, not a self-evident quality of many societies; that's why universities are important. The point of a university in this sense is, I would say, very clearly and very significantly to promote intelligence in public discourse.

Traditionally in the early universities, not only of Europe but of elsewhere in the world, there was a sense that a university was there to train an elite class, a class of public servants with a particular kind of intellectual common language. That, perhaps, is most evident in the European universities of the Middle Ages and the universities of the classical Chinese world. But where public life is no longer just the preserve of an elite, then to think of university education as having something to do with public life is surely to think of it as having something to do with equipping potentially every citizen with the intelligence that is needed for public life to be healthy, diverse and constructive, with ways of handling and ways of overcoming toxic conflict.

That broad, civic context of university education is at the heart of much of what I want to say this afternoon. The last thing I'd want to argue is that universities should simply be "forcing schools" for a political elite; God forbid. Nor that universities should test their effectiveness and their success purely and simply in terms of whether they're producing people who can talk about the latest editorial in the newspaper.

But I do believe that public discourse requires critical edge. It requires the ability to weigh different perspectives, and the ability to argue in public. Again, in the Middle Ages and in many other contexts, part of the significant purpose of university education was to equip you in what used to be called rhetoric - the ability to mount a good argument in public, and the ability to know what the difference was between good and bad, relevant and irrelevant, arguments. Pick up any one of the public media organs that I just referred to indirectly, listen to any number of public speeches, and you'll see that the capacity to distinguish between good and bad, relevant and irrelevant arguments is not a capacity in huge supply, and it is very important that somebody should be there to take responsibility in furthering it.

But of course, that means that a university is never just going to be a random assembly of specialists. If what you're after is intelligent public discourse, if what you think you're doing is forming intelligent citizens in this process, then closely specified skills are not the only thing that matters – because our intelligence is most importantly shaped by understanding the variety of ways in which people can be intelligent. So I want to say that it's crucial to the life of a university to recognise the number of ways in which people can be intelligent – the number of equally valid ways in which human intelligence, creativity, and enquiry can work. To quote something I've said and written on many occasions before, I believe that one of the most important features of the university is that it reminds you that the questions you're asking are not the only ones, and the questions you think are self-evident are not the only ones. The life of a university is in large part about everyone being reminded that there are other ways of approaching the world that intelligence seeks to understand.

University is not simply about seeking common answers. It's about understanding the diversity of questions. Understanding, in the variety of enterprises and disciplines that go on in a university, just what it is for intelligence itself to be shaped by diversity, by conversation, and interaction. Cross-disciplinary awareness and cross-disciplinary conversation become absolutely crucial to the life of a university in this sense. One of the saddest things that can happen in the world of higher education is when people lose sight of or lose touch with that sense of cross-disciplinary cross-fertilisation.

In all of this, we're taking for granted that a good university is an institution that has some sense of what intelligence itself is. An institution that has, you might so put it, a doctrine of the intellect, a coherent approach to what human understanding is. To begin to build a bridge into the second area I want to touch on, this in practice seems to be a doctrine of intelligence that has to rule out two very insidious, very attractive errors.

It's always a good idea, if you're talking about any concept, to watch what happens as it's put into practice. What happens when we watch people trying to be intelligent in universities? We see them sketching a territory, testing a hypothesis, revising hypotheses, finding that their questions were not the right ones, listening to other people's questions, listening again to their own first questions, exploring, revising and correcting. That's what we see in people doing research, and indeed teaching. If that's what people are doing, there are at least two things that can't be true about intelligence. One is that intelligence is purely and simply a matter of problem solving. There's the issue, there is a right answer, all you have to do is find it and put it into practice. The opposite error is that intelligence is entirely creative and free-floating, and essentially I can say what I choose, depending if I can somehow make a consistent pattern out of it.

The first won't do, because the more questions you ask, the more provisional answers you come up with, the more fresh horizons open up. The yes-or-no binary approach, the simple problem solving approach, is inadequate to what people actually do. Because part of the truth of the intellectual life is that people's intelligence creates problems as much as it solves them, and that creation of new problems is part of the joy and the challenge of the intellectual life. It is no reproach to any researcher to say: you've invented a lot of new problems. That's what research is for, not to arrive at an ideal state where you can simply say: we have now resolved all the problems, and whatever we say from now on is simply a matter of applying solutions.

So we can't just treat intelligence as functional, that set of specific skills that I mentioned earlier. But equally we can't treat it as free-floating and self-generated. Because, once again, watch what people are doing. They come up against the limits of their material, the limits of reality. They bang their heads on the world and find that it doesn't immediately conform to what they would like it to look like. They encounter resistance – that's what a problem is, a resistance to the mind's ambitions. And that means that intelligence has got to be engaging with *reality* in some important sense.

That begins to push us towards the second area I want to touch on, which is something to do with the Christian university specifically. If the point of a university is to generate and nourish intelligence in public and to help to create intelligent citizens, it needs, as I said, to have a doctrine of intelligence. It needs to have a coherent perspective on what the mind is and how it works. One of the strengths of any serious religious perspective on humanity is that it gives us such a doctrine of intelligence. It tells us, you might say, what we have minds for.

The Christian tradition in particular has quite a lot to say about this. From the very beginnings of Christian theology, it was taken for granted that intelligence was a crucial and decisive element in the divine image in human beings. It was in fact, if you look at some of the early writers of the Christian Church, one of those capacities which put human beings in a unique category. The very fact that intelligence is not just about solving problems, the very fact that intelligence can go beyond what is immediately around, the immediate set of stimuli, and ask deeper questions and questions with a longer reach – that was seen as part of the way in which human intelligence mirrored the freedom of God's intelligence. God is unconstrained by the agenda before him; God does not have to answer the examination paper and nothing else. And because human intelligence runs off in unexpected directions and is not limited simply by what's in front of it, human intelligence has just that quality of a kind of freedom. That's one very significant strand in what the Christian tradition brings to the understanding of intellectual activity. Whatever is going on in this mysterious, exploratory area of human activity is part of the reflection of divine liberty in the finite, in the human context.

Rising out of this comes a second, and perhaps at first blush rather startling conclusion. If intelligence is part of the divine image, intelligence is always related to love. Intelligence belongs with love; it is not in opposition to love. And if love is about how connections are built and maintained between what is different or strange, intelligence is inseparable from that activity. It is about making connections; it is about drawing fragments into some sort of wholeness.

One of the most surprising places to find that association of intelligence and love is in the writing of one philosopher, who's often regarded as having a great deal to say about intelligence, and almost nothing about love. That is Hegel, who early in the 19th century pointed out that intelligence worked like love, simply because it sought to get onto the inside of what was before it with sympathy, with

participation – not just by nailing down an object that could be isolated and dissected. And although I'm not sure that Hegel knew this, he was very closely echoing the philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages on just that subject. Intellect and love are not two separate fragments of a diverse and rather incoherent human reality; they're woven together. A work of intelligence belongs with the making of connections, the healing of fragmentation. That's something much greater and deeper than the solving of problems one by one.

Intelligence is an aspect of the divine image. If it's an aspect of the divine image, it's inseparable from love. And if it's inseparable from love, then every true and authentic exercise of the intellect is going to be bound up with the quest for human flourishing and liberation. Those are three of the elements that the Christian perspective on human nature, and the Christian perspective on human intelligence, brings to bear on the issues that I've just been considering.

So, "what's the point of a Christian university?" is a question that could properly be answered in terms of the Christian university bringing to bear on the intellectual life this particular doctrine of the intellect. It reflects the divine image; it's bound up with love and reconciliation; it's therefore connected inescapably with the quest for human flourishing and human liberation; it seeks to heal what's broken, what's fragmented. If that sounds a very ambitious task for the human intellect, then we need, I think, to reflect on what is really involved in the notion that we are created in the divine image. The notion that God has, in some sense, made over to us something of the responsibility that God himself takes for the healing and the wholeness of what is made.

If an institution – a university – builds in, in whatever way, some such perspective to its work, then what it will be doing is, in all its diverse activities, working *from* a recognised doctrine. But not necessarily *to* a recognised doctrine. That is to say, in the background of all that is going on, there is a set of assumptions about what intelligence is and how it works – about the human goals, the human integrity of what is being done.

That does not mean that every area of intellectual activity and enquiry in such an institution has got to come up with a set of theological answers. That would reduce the proper diversity of what an institution does; it would very clearly risk turning all sorts of different intellectual activities into yet another form of problem-solving. Everybody would be expected, you might say, to pull the theological rabbit out their diverse academic caps at different points, and that's not the relation between the diversity of intellectual activity and the informing and enthusing presence of theology that we really need. Informing and enthusing – because I believe very strongly that this doctrine of human intelligence is not only one that shapes and in that sense informs what we do, it genuinely is something that can enthuse.

This Christian perspective on what intelligence is, is a perspective which ought to make us excited about the nature of intelligence, whether in the university or in the wider public sphere. It ought to make us imagine intelligence afresh as a *capacity*, a human capacity, constantly wrestling with what is difficult and resistant to quick mastery, but at the same time inviting us into something larger than we had imagined. Because the notion that in our intellectual work we engage with something actually there – challenging to us, changing us in the process, in that sense opening on new horizons all the time – that surely is a more enthusing version of what intelligence is than either of the errors I mentioned earlier, either the narrowly functionalist problem-solving style, or the free-floating, make-it-up-as-you-go-along style.

A Christian university will work from that recognised doctrine. In the light of that, we'll have a rationale for ensuring both space and connection in the diverse life of the intellectual disciplines. Space for the widest possible diversity of disciplines. And a commitment to connection – that is, to the kind of environment in which people are able to question one another's questions, and to question themselves. The diversity of a university at its best is not, as I said earlier, simply a matter of scattered specialisms assembled in one place or one institution. It is a matter of a very lively conversation about what matters, and how, and why; and why these questions emerge in this way; and whether those are the only questions we can ask, or the best questions we can ask. When a university is flourishing as it ought, that's the way it flourishes, by that mutual challenge and probing that different disciplines and different idioms of thought can bring to one another.

Because of that theological foundation in a doctrine of the intelligence that I suggested a moment ago, the Christian institution is obliged to work harder than most for that cross-boundary set of relationships, that conversational atmosphere which allows questions to question one another, and disciplines to interact. We all know that in practice in a modern university this is brutally difficult. Every area is subject to the scrutiny of those who don't always fully understand what the intellectual life is about. Every discipline has to justify itself again and again in rather narrowly productive terms, and the impulse to withdraw into precisely that set of atomised skills is going to be strong. But that is, I believe, where the Christian university necessarily has something uniquely important to say.

Professor Gavin D'Costa, of the University of Bristol, has recently written an essay: *'On Theology, the Humanities, and the University'*. He writes in this essay that the kind of vision of the university he's sketched *"...will require a complex process of conversations with intellectuals who require interdisciplinary skills that very few possess. It will also require that careful discernment, whereby theology is allowed to call into question presuppositions or methods that are inimical to God, while fully respecting the autonomy of each discipline related to its precise subject matter."*

In other words, in an institution shaped and formed by the doctrine of intelligence that I've sketched, it'll be quite proper for questions to be raised about certain methods and means of posing the basic problems. If a discipline is increasingly dominated by strongly materialist and reductive models, there's a case for saying "why are those the questions you're asking?", keeping those questions open so that they don't simply solidify in a narrow and inadequate view of what is human.

Because that is the fundamental question: can the Christian university keep the humanities and the sciences human? Can it foster and broker the kind of conversation in which the question is constantly being asked: is this adequate to what human life really is? Is this three-dimensional enough? And when different bits of the intellectual map seem to be shrinking into mechanistic and reductive models, that's the time for questions to be asked.

This is not a matter of suggesting that a Christian university is one which censors what goes on within its walls. It's not about theology claiming to direct the method and outcomes of sciences. But it is about maintaining a climate in which it is always possible to ask of any particular bit of scientific or scholarly method: is that adequate to the human vision from which we start? So long as that question can still be asked and that debate still conducted, then I would say, the Christian university is fulfilling its Christian calling. As I said a moment ago, it means that the Christian institution needs to work extra hard for cross-cultural interdisciplinary authenticity of conversation.

Thus far then, to sum up what I've been saying, a university is part of the equipment of a healthy, self-critical society, because it trains the intelligence. It trains the intelligence in argument and honesty. It trains people in the capacity to engage with honesty and intelligence in public debate. But for that, it needs a view of what intelligence is about. And the Christian tradition offers a robust and very resourceful account of what intelligence is all about, relating it to the divine image, to love, to the overcoming of fragmentation, the fulfilment and reconciliation of people, the liberation of mind and heart. The point of a university is to foster the honesty of public discourse, and to do so by taking seriously a whole range of intense and, yes, specialised research activities. The point of a Christian university is to relate that to the doctrine of human nature created in the image of God.

So to my third and final consideration about the point of an Anglican university, and the rationale of Anglicans committing themselves to higher education in the way represented by the colleges and universities of the Anglican Communion Network. It is a very great delight to see so many members of that network here today for this special event, and a great delight to know that this conversation this afternoon will be accessible to institutions across the world committed to that network. But to answer the question about the point of an Anglican university, it may be necessary to step back a little and ask one of those almost unanswerable questions, which is: what exactly do we mean by "Anglicanism"? That's a question which would keep us here for the whole weekend, I suspect, if we gave it full rein, but I'll try to be as chaste and restrained as I can in responding to it.

My first point is that Anglican identity, historically, has two very important and fruitful characteristics in the context of this discussion. Anglican identity is rooted in a very specific history and culture. The Church of England grew up because this country was at a certain stage of its political and social and cultural evolution. It evolved its own style and language and approach to Christian theology in the crucible of the social and political upheavals of the Tudor age. It carries on its face and its body the marks, the scars you might say, of the conflicts out of which it comes.

But that rootedness in a specific history and culture also means that it is part of the Anglican identity to be suspicious of centralisation and pyramidal, hierarchical control. There's something about the Anglican identity which is always deeply suspicious of centralisation. Even some innocuous and I would even say quite positive developments like the Anglican Covenant in recent years have been accused of promoting a centralisation alien to the Anglican spirit. I think that's a mistake, but I can understand where it comes from in terms of our history.

That means that the Anglican family worldwide, the Anglican Communion, is basically still a voluntary association of local churches. They recognise in one another just enough of the authentic teaching of Christian doctrine, and the authentic practice of Christian ministry, to stay in relationship with one another. Just enough, and sometimes that just enough goes very close to the wire, as we have seen in the last decade or so. Yet mutual recognition is still a reality. Even if we are not yet globally covenanted to one another, there is a sense in which, while marriage may be a long way off, the engagement is still evolving.

Anglicanism, therefore, as a global phenomenon attempts what may look almost impossible – and may indeed feel, to those in certain positions, almost impossible at times. It attempts to take completely seriously the imperatives, the invitations, the perspectives of countless local settings, and it denies itself the shortcut of a single universal executive. It exists by and it flourishes in honest conversation. It is a family of churches which seems to be very deeply committed to allowing and encouraging different members of that network to ask questions about other people's questions, as

well as other people's answers. It's willing to explore, within that context of broad recognition, exactly why the questions are as they are here, and here, and here; whether in New York, or Manila, or Chennai, or Nairobi.

A family in which we continue to ask questions about one another's questions, within an overall framework of recognition and indeed "passionate patience" (if I can pick up the phrase, not my own originally, which Bishop Henry took up earlier) – if that's what we are as Anglicans, we are actually operating a model which has a good deal in common with what a good university looks like: recognition, but also the freedom to challenge. A freedom to challenge, because we somehow trust that the mind and heart of the other are working within the same framework and engaging with the same reality that we are. To ask those mutual questions within a recognised field of shared faith, that surely is what the distinctively Anglican perspective and tradition has to say in relation to the work of intelligence as it goes forward in the university. Anglican identity, in short, is well-equipped to realise and to nourish this particular approach to intelligence, and to intelligent diversity, and intelligence in public life.

If that then is how the Anglican university fits in particularly within the context of the Christian institution overall, if it brings to that conversation a special historical commitment to be wary of centralisation, interested in the criteria of recognition, and patient with diversity, we would expect the Anglican university to be a richly flourishing reality. And so, by the grace of God, it is – across the world, in so many different environments.

When Cardinal Newman in the 19th century wrote his celebrated essay on *'The idea of a University'*, he did so not simply out of a narrowly or an abstractly theological set of concerns, but out of a set of experiences of the intellectual life which had their heart and their impulse in one particular Anglican university of his day. The University of Oxford at the beginning of the 19th century was in many ways an extremely hierarchical, inflexible, and rather dull place. But there were one or two settings within that university where this capacity to ask fundamental questions of each other, this expectation of intelligent public discourse as the result of university education, were a reality. Newman's experience of Oriel College in the 1820s is part of what goes into *'The idea of a University'*, the idea which he attempted to realise in such a very different environment in Catholic Dublin many decades later.

But perhaps this ought to lead us on in conclusion to some reflections on what in particular, what in practice, an Anglican university looks like. What makes it recognisable as such, what aspects of its life we might want to lift up, focus on, and encourage if we want to keep alive the composite tradition that I've been outlining? In good sermonic fashion, I offer you three brief concluding reflections on what I think an Anglican university needs to have around for it to be credible as Anglican.

The first thing is that I believe such an institution needs public acknowledgement, both in its personnel and in its public symbols, that Christian faith is a living resource. Personnel: because that means having around people who are identifiably Christian and pastoral, theologians and clergy. They need to be part of the map, part of the furniture. They need to be visible there as representing the trust that the tradition out of which this institution comes is pastorally and humanly present today as a resource. Then symbols: the fact of a dedicated place of worship, visibly near the heart of an institution, once again says: we will assume that the space we are giving to one another and our diverse intellectual enterprises is properly represented by physical space, accessible to all, which

stands for the wellspring from which this institution draws inspiration. A public acknowledgement, as I said, through personnel and through symbols that the Christian faith remains a living resource.

Secondly, the Anglican university needs a policy of sustaining active and critical dialogue with local churches. If an Anglican university is drawing on the riches of an Anglican and Christian tradition in answering the question, “What should a university be like?” then that university must be in dialogue with its ecclesial environment, with the Church around. Of course, those churches will be extremely diverse in how seriously they take the work of the university, and this dialogue may at times be frustrating and complicated. Yet that is part of the calling which I believe is intrinsic to the role of the Anglican university. Churches, if they are involved in any sense with educational institutions (and not only universities), need to acknowledge explicitly and take seriously what that relationship means. The sad truth is that very often in Anglican history here and elsewhere, churches, having set up, nourished, and in some ways supported educational institutions over many years, forget mysteriously that they have an on-going responsibility to engage. It took us a long time in the Church of England to remember that our church schools here were not just a faintly embarrassing, historical legacy, but an immense treasure and opportunity. For that to happen required a real and demanding conversation between those most involved with the churches and those most involved with their educational life. I believe the same is true of the level of higher education.

The third element, again part of the Anglican legacy, is a real commitment to engage with the actuality of local culture. The last thing an Anglican university can afford to be is a ghetto of outmoded religious styles. An Anglican university ought to be listening to and absorbing very deeply and very seriously what the culture is about. Not uncritically, not in a way which simply reproduces the fashions of the day, but it ought to have its ears attuned to the culture in which it lives. It ought not to find the frontline of culture a strange place to be. By “culture” I don’t simply mean the high culture of the day, or what the Sunday supplements think of as culture. I mean also the very specific questions that arise in the localities where students live and work; the very particular questions of the country and a region which define the priorities that most people recognise.

Today we’re celebrating 50 years of Christ Church Canterbury, and I pick out those three elements of the life of an Anglican university, because all of those seem to me, happily, to be illustrated generously and fully in the record and the practice of Christ Church Canterbury. Christ Church has always been committed to that public acknowledgement of the resource of the Christian faith. A boldly imaginative chapel stands very much at the centre of the buildings of Canterbury Christ Church, to tell us why it is there as a university. It has been serious about its chaplaincy provision and its theological teaching.

Secondly, because of this institution’s involvement with education over so many years at every level, that dialogue between the local churches and their institutions has been an inescapable part of how Canterbury has approached its mission. In recent years, more and more, there has been committed thinking-through of what that might mean, a commitment to explore new ways in which the church schools of this region and this country can work better in tandem with the whole definition that we offer of the Church’s mission. And as part of that, this institution has also shown its commitment to educational institutions of every kind across the world. One of the most effective and powerful ways in which Canterbury Christ Church witnesses to its roots and its vision is in the partnerships that it’s fostered with so many Anglican and other institutions across the world, promoting also dialogue and relationship with churches across the world.

Thirdly, I'm struck every time I engage with the life of Canterbury Christ Church by the degree to which this institution has its finger on the pulse of life in this part of England. The training that it offers for nurses and social workers and police, the training it offers to those who are most at the cutting-edge of society's problems – it illustrates what it means for a Christian and Anglican institution to be engaged with the culture as it really is locally. You'll see why earlier on I said I wasn't simply talking about "high culture" but about the culture of East Kent, the culture of where we actually are and the priorities people actually feel. The fact that Christ Church has so clearly and boldly positioned itself in the public life of East Kent is one of the great triumphs of Christ Church's recent and on-going profile.

That, of course, brings me right back to my starting point. Through this engagement, Christ Church demonstrates that it knows what the point of a university is: to foster public intelligence, to enlarge and enrich the lives and the minds of those who are at the cutting edge of the problems of society. It shows that it knows what it understands to be the point of a Christian university. It recognises there are very diverse kinds of intelligence and that all of them reflect the image of God in humanity. It demonstrates its commitment to human enrichment of the most lively, far-reaching kind. It shows that it knows what being an Anglican university is about, because it manages mysteriously to be both credibly local and credibly global. In all those ways Christ Church illustrates the focus, the direction of these remarks about the Anglican university.

I strongly suspect that Christ Church is not an ideal institution. Experience suggests to me that Christ Church may have in it dysfunctional elements, conflictual elements, more and less successful elements. It's a human institution, after all; it's not the City of God. But in all the ways I've described, it has shown what it believes it is answerable to. And the vision it seems to hold itself answerable to is that vision of higher education that I've tried to sketch this afternoon. A vision which is deeply serious about producing an intelligent public discourse, deeply serious about the roots of everything, in the interweaving of intelligence and love that makes us reflect the image of God. Deeply serious about balancing the global and the local, being profoundly rooted in the issues that affect people's lives here, and yet hospitably open to the variety of challenges and perspectives that come from the global Anglican family, and the global human family.

We have a great deal to celebrate in this half-century of Christ Church's existence, and I believe we also have a great deal to celebrate in the legacy it represents. A legacy of a Christian and Anglican theological understanding of higher education which is already, I believe, and can be even more so, a transforming presence in churches and societies around the world. I hope and pray that that future will be fully and richly realised by all the institutions of the colleges and universities of the Anglican Communion Network

© Rowan Williams 2012