

“Conceptualizing a Christian University in the U.K.”

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Like many others, I have some experience of teaching in established institutions of Higher Education and also of many new initiatives that are being taken worldwide. I am in favour of a new Christian initiative or Christian initiatives, perhaps one should say, in university education in this country at this time. But by no stretch of the imagination could I say that has to be exclusive or turned in on itself and not in relationship to other universities that exist already and certainly in relationship with those Christians who are there in those outposts, as it were, as far as the Christian faith is concerned. So yes to a new initiative, but no to exclusiveness or to imagine that is all there is to Christians in higher education.

Now before we go on to other things, the question does need to be asked, I know it was asked in your last conference but that was ten years ago at least: What is a university? I mean what are we actually talking about and is the idea of a university mutating? That is also a question that is worth asking. So what is a university? Well I would say that the idea of the university actually is to be found in the word itself to some extent. It has to do with the universe, with universality in one way or another. So it has to do with the study of what is around us, the study of the universe as a whole. It has to do with the wholeness of knowledge rather than just bits and pieces of it and it has to do with universal recognition. Now what was the difference between Paris, for example, the oldest university in our sense of the term, and the various schools that flourished in Padua, Salamanca and in other places? The difference was centred around these ideas; the universality of knowledge, universal recognition, the teaching of subjects and of the curriculum right across the board.

I say this because this is an area which is increasingly contested. Julian Rivers has pointed out, and he may point out again this afternoon, all those challenges about specialisation and instrumentalisation and globalisation which are making universities at least sometimes go in a direction other than the one that I have just outlined. I mean we now have things like a university of law or of science, or even more closely defined, of business. Can that actually be the case, I mean is that a university or is that some other kind of animal?

But if we work with what I have just said regarding a university, in that sense the university is a product of Christian thinking and activity. The academies have been mentioned in Athens or Alexandria, for instance, but they were really for the education of elite young men

who would inherit large amounts of property from their parents and so on. Rowan Williams mentioned, in his lecture in China, the education of the mandarin class for purposes of bureaucracy. Those things did exist, but the idea of a university that was in theory open to all and I mean one of the things that Monasticism did both in the East and in the West was to be classless so people could actually join the monastery and then later on the university and the distinction between those two wasn't clearly drawn until much later of course. People could become learners even from very ordinary backgrounds. So this idea for a community of learning in, this sense, is a Christian idea. We may want to criticise it, we may want to reform it, some people want to abolish it altogether but its historical origins deserve to be recognised.

Now it is quite true that within this context of a university where the whole of the curriculum, all subjects as far as possible, is studied each subject has a certain autonomy. So Sam Berry, for instance, has been very concerned that Christians should not deny a proper autonomy in the natural sciences to those sciences and I too don't think that we should. I mean within the limits of a particular discipline and what it's seeking to do, you don't always invoke ultimate causes and unmoved movers and so forth. It is certainly right to allow a proper independence to the discipline. But in the university, autonomy must go alongside interdependence as well. It is not simply isolation and should not be understood to be such. So people can learn from one another, they can challenge one another. I think if more of that happened across the disciplines, this would be hugely beneficial for the disciplines themselves and we would not have as many of what Marx called 'specialist idiots'. Well that's harsh terminology but the point is if people specialised to such an extent, not only in their discipline but in a particular aspect of their discipline, and are unaware of what is happening in the business of knowledge generally, that doesn't necessarily make them better at their discipline. They may have certain uses, but these will be limited.

So I think there has to be this interrelationship and the question then is if such a university exists, as it should, what is it *for*? What is a university for and the traditional Christian answer was that it is for the acquisition of knowledge. That is an end in itself which is good for human persons. You don't need to invoke any other kind of use, to know more about the universe and ourselves is in itself worthwhile. There's a sustained defence of this idea in John Henry Newman's, *The Idea of a University*. It sounds to us now when we look at the

university scene, 'cloud cuckooland' to some extent because universities are now, even the older universities are now, so oriented to professionalization to specialisation, even to instrumentalisation. But I think we ought to keep in view, this idea that knowledge is something that should be valued for its own sake. Certainly Christians should believe that, to know more about God's world, to know more about ourselves, about our relationships with one another has a value in itself. But yes it can then also lead to usefulness in the world; I mean those two are not necessarily opposed.

Knowledge is good in itself and knowledge as leading to some usefulness in the world can be and should be held together. Some universities now insist that people pursuing one discipline for instance in the natural sciences, should also take another course in philosophy or in sociology or history and I think that's a good thing because it gives people a sense of the breadth of knowledge that there is and of the fragmentary nature perhaps of what they may be pursuing at that time in that place.

Religious studies obviously should have a place in such a curriculum. Religion is not a disappearing phenomenon in our world, it is a massively reappearing phenomenon in many different ways, both desirable and undesirable and it could be very short sighted of any university to think that the study of religion is somehow unnecessary because people who are pursuing other disciplines will find in their work later on that they will need that knowledge and they won't have the knowledge. Religious illiteracy abounds, not only in politics and in policy making, but even in the academic world, sorry to say. How religious studies are pursued I will come back to in a moment, I hope, if I have the time. But that they should be part of this wide curriculum of the university, should be something that isn't seriously contested these days.

But that of course is different from Theology. Should Theology have a place in the university today? I would say yes, partly because of the need to reflect on what some people claim to be revelation. I mean you don't have to accept that it is to have Theology but it is undoubtedly the case that Jews and Christians claim to have a revealed body of knowledge. How that revealed body of knowledge relates to the world as we find it, again Professor Sam Berry talks about the book of the words of God and the book of the works of God- you may want to think of it in that way. Theology has an obligation, both to take into account claims to revelation and how they work out in communities of believers and how they relate to

others who are not in that community. Theology also needs to take account, because of the book of works idea, of what is going on in other disciplines. Somebody had asked this question about why theologians are interested in other disciplines but that it doesn't always work in terms of reciprocity. Well sometimes it does actually, but theologians in any case have an obligation to take other disciplines into account in their work if this balance between the book of words and the book of works is going to be maintained properly.

Now in a Christian university, and of course there have been many Christian universities in the past and there are many today, Theology has another function and that is about world view. One of the great lies, well certainly in Britain, probably in the West generally, is that secularity is a kind of neutrality. I mean this lie has to be nailed; you know secularity is not neutrality. Secularity as it is articulated by those organisations that you were talking about, these are systems of thought, I mean this is a world view; this is a view about the world, about ourselves, about human society. So there is no such thing as a university which does not have a world view. I mean whether implicit or explicit, there is always a world view.

Now I would hope that theology can, as it has in the past, supply a rich world view. We were talking just now about Sir Joseph Needham, who was perhaps the greatest Sinologist in this country for many years- that's not an expert in sin but an expert on China! Needham was Master of Gonville & Caius College in Cambridge, and was often exercised by the question as to why modern empirical Science had not arisen in China because at the beginning of the modern period, China was materially more advanced than Western Europe in all sorts of ways. So why did Science arise in Europe and not in China? And as an agnostic he rather reluctantly came to the conclusion that it was the Judeo-Christian world view that lay behind the emergence of modern Science, of an ordered universe, of lawfulness in the universe, you know all that kind of thing. This theme has been taken up by others like Rodney Stark in his work on the sociology of religious ideas.

So when we say that Theology can contribute to a world view with which a university works, that's the kind of thing we are talking about and what would form the background anyway to such a university and its world view. I think there are a number of things, one is the incredible correspondence that there is between our observation of the world and the way in which the world is structured and that is of course what makes Science possible. The rationality, I mean our rationality and the rationality of the universe as we study it. The

early fathers as they came to people speaking Greek presented this, in terms of Christian apologetic, as the Logos, incarnate in Jesus Christ, who allows us to make sense of the universe which is also structured by that same Logos; the principle of rationality. By the way, this was behind Pope Benedict's Regensburg address that got hijacked for all sorts of other reasons. The claim that Christianity is committed to rationality and this is very important if Christians are going into the business of higher education, a commitment to rationality because of who we are and because of how the world is and the intelligibility of the universe so that it can reveal to us something of God's purposes in his world as well as in our own lives.

Now a Christian world view, informing such a university, would uphold purpose, destiny I think is the word I am looking for, our own and of the universe. A reference to teleology whether of time or of space has been more and more carefully excluded from public discourse. Whether in the natural or the social sciences but in a Christian university one would need to work with this; with purpose of our own lives, of our societies and of the universe.

When Aristotle was rediscovered in western Europe, by the way, the popular account of this that it was the Muslim Arabs who conveyed Aristotle back to western Europe is not totally wrong but how did they come to have him in first place? Greek learning, as a whole, under Muslim Arab patronage, was translated into Arabic either from Greek or from Syriac almost entirely by Christian clergy. Christian clergy do have a use sometimes! This was then conveyed back to western Europe in two ways, first of all by Jewish traders, so the names of Muslims, involved in this process for instance, in European languages are found in an Hebraic form so Ibn Sina becomes Avicenna, Ibn Rushd becomes Averroes and so forth. But the other main way in which it was conveyed to Western Europe was through the Arabic speaking Christian communities of the West, and where were they? Well, they were in the Iberian Peninsula of course! But the recovery of Aristotle gave rise to renewed thinking in Paris and in the other new universities of Western Europe about the human person, and although Aristotle of course didn't mention this, the Christian commentators do, in terms of the *Imago Dei*, in terms of the human person being in God's image, being therefore really an agent. Not just someone passive or something passive on which the forces of nature work, but an agent in the universe and the ideal of agency then leads to the idea of freedom and

that to responsibility, accountability, conscience, I mean all sorts of things blossom out of this idea.

So I would say purpose; agency, freedom is something that must be part of a world view in I would say any university but let's say for the time being a Christian university. Then if we are going to have any kind of effective moral reflection in the university, in terms of what we are doing, then again because of the *Imago Dei*, the idea of inalienable human dignity; dignity that cannot be taken away from a human being, by other human beings. Some years ago there was a Bill before Parliament that was called the Mental Incapacity Bill and somebody pointed out to the government that this was not a very good title so they changed the title to the Mental Capacity Bill, but they didn't change the Bill, the Bill was exactly the same.

Anyway we were having a sort of pre-legislative discussion about it and a lady philosopher, you probably know who it is now, who has been hugely influential in policy making and legislation in this country in the last fifty years, she said "*Of course human dignity can never be taken away from a person whatever their state.*" So I said to her "*Why? On what do you base that?*" And she's said "*Oh well it's the Judeo Christian idea isn't it of being made in God's image*" and so I said "*Well yes I believe that, I'm very glad to hear you say it too!*" Yes, there are these clear moments of disclosure when people are, even in the legislative process today, pushed to a point where we have to involve transcendental principles and the idea of human dignity cannot be based on anything but some kind of transcendental principle.

So again, if we're going to think adequately morally about the human person at whatever stage of life, we have to think about inalienable dignity. We have to think about equality in the Christian sense of common origin. You see that was a thing that worried Darwin very much; that his work would somehow open the way for racism, as indeed it did. That people would begin to see the different races as somehow arranged in an evolutionary hierarchy. I mean Darwin gave enormous amounts of money to the antislavery movement in the US to combat racism. He didn't want his work to be used in this way but so it was in the southern part of the United States and then later on in Europe in the birth of European fascism. But the biblical idea of equality is about the equality of persons, not the way in which it has mutated now into the equality of all kinds of behaviour and lifestyle and so forth. So just as

dignity has mutated into ideas of radical autonomy, equality has also mutated, that doesn't mean that its true Christian interpretation shouldn't be at the centre of our world view.

Now I would hope that a Christian university was articulate about this kind of world view that informed everything else that it did. So what difference would it make in terms of what was taught? Well I would argue against over specialisation, sometimes these are practical matters about what we can teach, what resources we have and so on, but for there to be, in theory anyway, an openness to the wholeness of knowledge and its acquisition and how different aspects of knowledge affect other aspects.

In terms of what this will do to the teaching of subjects, take history, I mean the way in which history is still taught in schools, at any rate in this country, discounts actively any influence of the Christian faith on what might have happened, any reasons with what might have happened that may have to do with people's beliefs. There is pathological, I think is the word, concentration on what is bad, what was done that was wrong rather than on what Lecky calls the perfectly virtuous stages of our history, what are they? So I want to come to Magna Carta but the recent discussion with the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta has consistently underplayed the role of Archbishop Langton in how the barons were corralled, as it were, if that's the right word, how Magna Carta was framed, what its background was with St Anselm and the Charter of Liberties, all of that. What we had was a kind of a revisionist account that Magna Carta was really about the feudal rights of the barons and what a mistake it is to think that it had anything to do with fundamental freedoms and so on.

I'm not saying the barons were not interested in what happened to them, of course they were. But if Langton had not held Rochester Castle against King John for a whole year, we probably wouldn't have had this anniversary. Now isn't it fair at least to acknowledge this? But with slavery- there are reams upon reams of stuff on the appalling scandal of modern slavery, but very little on what Christians did for its abolition. And there is completely nothing about Islamic slavery by the way, from which many of the Westerners had learnt their trade.

So I think history as taught in a Christian university, it would be taught in another sort of way which takes account of moral and spiritual matters which is not sort of reductionist and

Marxist, but is a fuller description of what actually has happened and there is enough documentation and enough background for us to do that; certainly in history. I mean the transmission of Greek knowledge to the West is a classic example of where we are constantly given incomplete information.

What about sociology? Peter Berger's venerable name has been mentioned and venerable because he had the courage to break with the secular mind set of the sociology of religion, as it had been said in the western world for such a long time, which he himself had practiced. But then with *A Rumour of Angels*, he was able to say this is not enough. This is not enough of an account of what actually is happening to religion in various societies, even in the West and in his little book, he points out that indeed there remain in cultures 'signals of transcendence' which a sociologist must take into account in his work, if that work is going to be complete. He mentions here misused revulsion as radical evil and our conviction that the good will prevail. The existence of humour, love and sacrifice can be added to his list. This is also true of the sociology of the family. The sociology of the family was such an important aspect of sociology in this country after the Second World War. A long term and cross cultural study was done in the University of Cambridge as late as the 1990s which pointed out that cross culturally and historically, the family was rooted, was centred around parents and children, even in cultures where there were extended families, parents and children were at the centre of such families, I mean that might give a new twist to the word nuclear. Nuclear doesn't mean isolated, the nucleus is at the centre of the atom or of the cell, not isolated from it.

Another piece of what was done again in Cambridge at another centre was about the effect of marriage breakdown on children. Now these were serious academic studies which have all in the last ten years or so, maybe fifteen years, been intentionally negated by research that is much more questionable, let us put it like that, by assertions that are made, you know 'divorce doesn't affect children adversely', but where is the evidence for that? In addition, that the nuclear families are a recent invention- you know all sorts of things like that, without asking the deeper questions about how people value being related to one another. I chaired the Ethics and Law Committee of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority for many years and one of the questions that kept coming back to us was the need for children to know who their parents were; in particular, who their fathers were.

Until in the end the HFEA had to change its own rules on this matter on keeping donors anonymous to that of them being declared in due course for the benefit of the children.

Now I would hope that there would be in a Christian university an adequate sociology of the family, an adequate sociology of religion which takes account of its cohesive and prophetic aspects in particular societies, at particular times. Now somebody said in the conference last time that what we needed was also an adequate anthropology which was rooted in a paradigm of creation, fall and redemption. Well this is exactly right because one of the problems that we have now is a defective anthropology with which our legislators and our policy makers are working where I'm ok and you're ok, we are just as we were meant to be and there is no need for being forgiven or forgiving.

A couple of years ago I had a debate with Matthew Paris at the Conservative Party Conference, as it happens, and before the debate began he turned to me and said "*Look Bishop, I know what you're going to say, you're going to ask us to repent.*" So I said "*I'm a bishop, this is part of my job*". But we are not taking any moral high ground here. It's me as well as you and everyone else because in my view we are not what we are meant to be, we have departed from to our purpose for being here and what is the harm in saying let us come back to the purpose for which we have been put here? But an adequate anthropology is missing, of course, from our culture and a Christian university should vigorously promote an adequate anthropology.

Philosophy has been mentioned, I mean the USA has had Alvin Plantinga and people like that but the obsession in the philosophical schools and the universities here has been on linguistic analysis to the point of absurdity and we must get beyond that. I mean there have been others and I think again and again if the moral realism of Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Peter Geach had been taken more seriously, we would not have got into this situation where we are simply, on the hoof, reinventing human relationships because we would have seen them as being grounded in the ontology of being human. But constantly to go back to language and its function without any reference to what language is rooted in, has not been enough for us in philosophy any way. With the sciences, well there are so many things to say, I don't want to say them! I am sure there will be other people who will, but whatever view we take of the sciences, we cannot, I hope, in a Christian university anyway, deny purpose, deny agency and deny freedom. Whatever else we say about the diversity of life

forms and how they've come to be, about the emergence of the human person, I mean you know I'm willing to listen to all sorts of things about that, but if it leads to the denial of purpose, if it leads to a denial of agency, if it leads to a reductionist view that, in the end, has the effect of denying freedom, well a Christian university should not have any part in that.

Now if we are going to have a university then that is first of all not exclusive, is related to the wider academic world, respects it and hopefully is respected in turn, which is committed to a wholeness of knowledge, as well as excellence in certain parts of it, which works clearly with a world view that can in one way or another be articulated, that seeks to visit various subjects and to work with various subjects in the light of such a world view. The question is, is that possible to have in this country at this time? I think it is, it does involve a recovery of nerve. I mean one of the things about Christians generally in this country, if you compare them with Christians in other countries, is a loss of nerve.

So we do need to recover our nerve, whether we work in existing universities or in a possible new university and there can be different models for the emergence of new institutions, you are not committed to just one. Leslie mentioned the cathedral sector and there are all sorts of questions as he said about the cathedral sector, but the fact that there are now these new universities that are clearly connected with the churches, not just the Church of England but also the Roman Catholic Church. It is quite remarkable that this has actually been allowed to happen by the academic establishment. Of course there are those pressures of secularisation that are now happening to them and we need to learn from those pressures as well, but they should not be written off I think. Waverley is connected to Roehampton, I notice, and I think there can be fruitful partnerships in that sector.

Joel mentioned the theological colleges in Africa and Asia. Uganda Christian university is a wonderful example of how something founded on quite a modest theological college has flourished as you say, has become a university that is, in some ways, exemplary in Uganda. I gather it's law school is the best law school in the country. I think that can happen here also. I am thinking of Oakhill Theological College which is an Anglican Theological College. Given its proximity to Middlesex University and it's relationships with them, I can see a place like Oakhill gradually expanding the subjects that are taught there, possibly first in relationship to Middlesex and then later on more independently and becoming a university

type institution. The same can be said of the London School of Theology, or of Moorlands. There are examples that can be given- Wycliffe is a permanent private hall of the University of Oxford. I think it could, given the resources, develop into more of the kind of thing that I am talking about than it is at the moment.

Or there can be entirely new freestanding initiatives. I've had quite a lot to do recently with the University of Buckingham and I've always tried to ask the professors who were there at the time, because that's a declining number now, how the university college got the Royal Charter. The answer is, well it's two words- 'Mrs Thatcher'. She got it for them. So who do we know who could get us the charter (this is how the world works)? But I think it is possible to have a free standing institution that does not arise out of anything else, that in due course becomes a university and then of course there is your own model of a university emerging from wider broader involvement with society to meet the needs of the people with whom you are in contact. All sorts of ways in which a university might develop, I think it could be exemplary however it emerges in the context of higher education in Britain today, in terms of its honesty, yes we have a world view, not to pretend that we don't, in terms of its transparency that yes we teach the same subjects that you do, but we teach them in a somewhat different way, you are welcome to criticize what we do, possibly we might criticize what you do as well, but that's a story for another day. In terms of being able to accommodate a variety of views within the university, I mean a variety of Christian views of course. Last year some of us organised a conference called Mere Anglicanism and in the last few years we've started tackling subjects like Science and this has meant that the conference has exploded from being a few hundred to being nearly a thousand coming to it.

Any way a couple of years ago we organised something on Science and we were very interested in Christian evolutionists like Denis Alexander, talking to intelligent design people like Michael Behe. In the past, some on each side have refused to do this, but in this case they agreed and we had a very useful dialogue over several days between these scientists with different views and each side then saying to the other, "we hadn't realised this was your position." Now I think this has a virtue in itself, so yes I mean a world view, but a world view that accommodates a diversity of Christian approaches to a particular subject. But I would also say, given the acceptance of the world view, that it should also include people who are not Christians. You see Forman Christian University in Lahore in Pakistan is

obviously a Christian university excelling in a number of subjects, but 80% of its students are Muslims and quite a large number of its faculty are Muslims. But that's fine as long as it's understood this is a Christian university going about the business of knowledge in a Christian way and it is when that is attacked that we sometimes find its value, I mean at one point FC College, as it then was, was nationalised by the government because they did not want a Christian institution of higher education, but then they ruined it and eventually returned it to the church saying well you run it now! Not having a Christian-based institution, within the mix of Higher Education, revealed its value to many who were not Christian. Its return is also, now, all the more valued.

Well thank you very much indeed, I think you've been very patient, but that is what I have to say about the possibility of a Christian university in Britain today and I look forward to some response.