

The idea of a Christian University, where are we now?

Leslie Francis

First to say thank you for the invitation to be with you for this conference. I feel it's important to me, and to share with other people who have different perspectives who also find it important is a God given gift, so thank you for that.

Quite often I like to speak to my own titles. I was given a title on which to write this essay, "The idea of a Christian university, where are we now?" There's so much, so many different perspectives from which that question could be addressed. So what I did was to do what I advise my own students to do and to design their own kind of sub title.

The sub title is what gives me permission to go away from the title. "A personal perspective from an Anglican empirical theologian", I'd like to put some weight into that sub title and problematic as it is, here what you get is a personal perspective.

What I am known for is statistical tables, opinion surveys, analysis, that's not what I'm doing today, I'm allowing myself to have a personal voice and the reason I suppose I feel I might do that is that eleven years ago there was a book with this title. I'd forgotten what was in it, but I did look through it again on the way down.

What I want to say is not related to that book, but it is related to the title and the structure that I want to work to is this:

- I want to examine some of the problems in the title.
- I want, believe it not, in spite of being an Anglican I kind of look to Jesus and I think we might do that
- I also looked at Anglican history and I'll explain why
- I want to take a step back to what I'm going to call some basic building blocks
- Go back to a gospel mandate and go on to reflect on the notion of the distinctiveness of Christian learning
- Consider an infrastructure that could facilitate the distinctiveness of Christian learning
- A short reflection on the public significance of theology.

I want to examine some of the problems in the title

The problem with the title is that it is full of problems. "*Christian*", a word that we can use but a word that two people are going to use to mean quite different things, some analysis is needed in what we mean by Christian. "*University*", I am afraid is a problematic concept and some analysis is going to be kind of needed in that. "*We now*" is in a sense what's so important because whatever we want to say about "Christian" or "University", has been located in time and space and that was where the introduction was important for us. It is now that we are going to see what those concepts mean.

But then from an Anglican empirical theologian, what do you expect from that? Notice the kind of order which the words are put and I want to give some weight to the word "*theologian*". I often pretend that I am one, but it's a particular kind of theologian I pretend

to be. A theologian who is committed to empirical science. I am not an empirical scientist, a social scientist who looks at church. I am a theologian on the inside who uses social science techniques as a way of looking. And the word Anglican is put there because that's what I am. I'm not claiming that my empirical theology is Anglican - but I happen, as an individual, to be an Anglican. I have care for a little church on Anglesey at weekends. I have been given the title Canon Theologian in Bangor Cathedral.

Look to Jesus

Christian education is problematic, what do we mean by it and that's where I want to bring Jesus into play for a little while. I think it's worth looking at Jesus and seeing what we might learn about Christian education from that perspective. Jesus and education. I want to hold up a model as Jesus as teacher. Don't get seduced by that because I shall take it away shortly, but Jesus is teacher, we read in the Markan narrative about Jesus teaching in the synagogues. We read Jesus teaching by the lakeside and in the Matthean account he goes up a mountain and in the Lukan account he stays on the plain.

He's a teacher and there are things to tell and there are things to proclaim. Proclamation is part of education. But that's not all the story, I want to proclaim Jesus as scientist as a very particular way of educating people.

People come and ask Jesus, "Tell us what life is like when God reigns" and Jesus says "Go and open your eyes, go and observe" - a scientific activity. "Go and observe the sower" - become biological scientist and see how things grow. "Go observe the baker" - it's not just a man's world, it's a woman's world as well. "Go and observe the wedding feast" - become social scientists, see how people behave. There are ways of finding out, they are imbedded in what it is to be Christian, to teach, to observe. Jesus as educator, not simply sending people out to observe, not simply telling them things, but committed to facilitating their own learning. Jesus asks questions of people. It is in the asking of questions that people discover they know the answers. Take that classic story of the journey to Emmaus, where Jesus walks alongside people and the first thing he asks is about their feelings, "Why are you so downcast? Why are you sad?" And they say "are you the only person here, a stranger, who doesn't know what's going on?" and the response is "What things?" It is the questioning and the probing, Jesus the teacher, Jesus the scientist, Jesus the facilitator. There are ways of drawing people out.

But that's not the end of the story. Having spent a week or so in the company of a priest from the Salesian university in Rome and picking up some of the language that I'm not sure is English but it helped him and me to talk to each other. Jesus the formator, Jesus the person concerned with formation. Education is not just about shaping minds, it's about shaping people, about shaping lives, about shaping souls and is done by Jesus calling people to follow him, by calling people to live alongside him, by calling people to be what he is, calling people to eat with him, calling people to shape their lives.

Now if there is a sense in which the Christian University is concerned with education conceived in a Christian kind of way, I'd like it to be seen to be conceived with those things:

teaching, observing, facilitating, forming. “University” is problematic, but there may be a Christian way of understanding what universities are about.

Anglican history

What can we learn from Anglican history? We can learn a lot about mistakes, I take that for granted, but we also need to be informed by what's happened in the past before we can project into the future. What can we learn? We can learn of historical roots, the iconic image of Christ College, Oxford. I was brought up in Pembroke just opposite that and I looked across enviously at the more luxurious building and the quad opposite Pembroke. But as you walk into that building you see there is no problem with any history of a Christian university, church and state, prayer and learning, taking place naturally in one environment because this is what happens in a Christian country. This is what happens when God and state are - but it gets messy. But at least you can see what the picture says. But then what has Anglicanism in England and Wales done subsequently? What can you see as roots of learning?

We can see the great investment in schools, I stole the cover from my 1986 book called Partnership and Education. At a church school you can tell what these buildings look like and we can remember the history, the National Society of 1811, long before the government thought of building schools. But I think of the 1870 Education Act that gives the government the machinery to build schools, but not to supplant church schools, it's to fill the gaps where the churches weren't strong enough to do it. The 1944 Education Act was settled between church and state that enables those two systems to run side by side and not dismantled by the 1988 Education Reform Act. It needs a much more subtle act of government to create academies and other ways of undermining the church school structure for that destruction to be totally perfected.

Building schools is important but what the Church of England hasn't done quite so well is to think about what it's got its schools for. The foundation document by Ian Ramsey, the Durham report 1970, is the classic example of the church thinking, the Church of England thinking clearly about what it might be in education for, but does so without using theological, discourse. It describes, it describes church schools being there as a domestic function to serve the church and as a general function to serve the nation and you may well remember from the Durham Report in 1970, the balance of the voice of that commission said in the secular society in which we are based, that it must be the general function that wins over the domestic. The church is there to serve.

I've kind of challenged that a bit in some of my own writing. Theological Education, a paper I produced in 1990, where I want to change the general function into a theology of service, where I want to change the domestic function into a theology of nurture and then echo what we heard in the introduction to my presentation, I added to it a theology of prophecy.

What is God doing in God's world? What is it that we perceive God doing in God's world and what is it we have to proclaim to that world about righteousness, truth, justice, mercy and love? We need to think theologically about what church is doing in education, both in schools and in the higher education sector. Now I made this diversion into church schools because what we've inherited within the Anglican tradition in England and Wales in higher education

is the heir to church schools. Church colleges were built in the 19th century to provide people to service those schools. You might talk about training teachers and I deliberately used those words and I will qualify those words later, but historically the training of teachers is important and we get again these iconic buildings, you know what a place looks like if you are going to do learning, they look a bit like Lampeter and Lampeter looks a bit like Oxbridge. They have to be built that way don't they? St John's, or Trinity College Carmarthen. Drindod where I served ten (almost) happy years and of course Lincoln where I once applied for a job and didn't get it. Ah it's sad isn't it really? But then these institutions transformed into universities, into the cathedral sector being rebadged, the same three coming up again. The University of Wales, Trinity St David's exactly the same thing as the University of Wales for those who don't know it no longer exists and of course Lincoln. But what is it that this cathedral sector is doing? What is distinctive about it? We do need a knowledge of history in order to plan for the future. So there's my digression into history.

But you see, the church's involvement in higher education has not just come from the source of providing training of teachers for church schools, but also training people to serve at altar and in pulpit. The seminaries have a part to play and are often built by the same people who built the colleges to train teachers. That great building Carmarthen to train teachers, mimicked in Lampeter to train priests. The column college built in the Oxford diocese mirrored by Cuddesdon going hand in hand. Wycliffe Hall and just in order to put the best last, Westcott House where I was trained. But what is this history doing? History now over.

Basic building blocks

Let's go back to some basic building blocks. So from what we've done so far, we've seen the problematic nature of "*Christian*", we've seen the problematic nature of "**University**", we've gone on to look at Jesus and get some model of what Jesus as an exemplar might have to offer. We've set alongside that the history of the Anglican Church's involvement. Let's do some building blocks and go back to identify some core questions.

What are the core tasks for Christians in higher education? That might be a question of some sort of marginal interest anyway to a group that has a name like yours. But it has to be answered in England and in Wales because it could look different elsewhere in different cultural and economic contexts. It's also got to be answered in the context of "*Today*", or better still if we can dream as to what things might be "*Tomorrow*", because part of the prophetic voice is to understand today in order to plan for tomorrow.

I say this as a personal reflection, so in relation to these questions, here are my basic assumptions.

My first assumption is the connection between church and academy is crucial. It's crucial for the health of the church. When church is disconnected from academy, church may become even more rational than it would appear on occasions. It is important for the academy, for a lot of things that go on in the academy can be informed by things that Christians and church think though carefully. My assumption is that church and academy need to be linked.

My next assumption is that Christians are needed across the academy. The idea of a Christian university is not to take out Christians from the secular academy but to do something alongside that. They are my assumptions.

I'm clear that however many of us are in that secular academy, the secular academy is not domesticated by us. There are lots of things that we're going to need, that we're going to want to do. Perhaps even fulfil our idea of what education is about built on the model of Jesus against which the secular academy might prevail. So there are reasons why the Christian university is needed as well as the Christian presence in the secular academy.

The gospel mandate and the distinctiveness of Christian learning

So let's go from those assumptions to some details that are worth exploring. What is distinctively Christian apart from following the model of Jesus that says that education is more than teaching? What's the gospel mandate? What is the distinctiveness of Christian learning? I used the word training earlier on and I said I would take it away. Christian learning and training, I do not see to be synonyms. Training teachers, training priests, no. Learning might be an important word to give real weight to. And what about theology? One of the things I've really rejoiced in when I was working in the theological department at the University of Bangor before the university managers closed it, was turning up to a meeting in which the university had been given fifty research studentships for infrastructure building in a socially deprived area. The vice chancellor concerned with research saw me walking in and laughed and said there's nothing in theology for this and then I realised that they had a Christmas party and they tried to identify the most useless department in the university - theology. I was very pleased to walk away with two of those studentships by actually building the bonds with the local community that other people couldn't build. Theology is not irrelevant but it's not always easy to persuade the secular university that it has relevance. I said I wouldn't mention the diocese of Bangor or Warwick University, but there's a university built in the generation when to study religion was not necessary, no religious studies department, no theology department. These are things to explore. Theology is not to be explored in isolation but it is in dialogue with other disciplines. These are details, let me move on to those details now.

The core gospel mandate. Now this is when you might begin to fall out with me. What is it to be Christian? A controversial question to ask. What's at the heart of that for the university? For me the answer comes in the great work "Teddy Horsley meets Jesus' Disciples" published by CWR Publishing of my learned colleague and co-professor Teddy Horsley. Teddy Horsley has a very clear view of what it is to be Christian. It is Sunday morning and Teddy Horsley is a very excited bear. Teddy Horsley believes that the Christian tradition is something to get excited about. On Sunday morning Teddy Horsley gets up early and goes out with Lucy, Walter and Betsy Bear and they go to church. What will be happening there this week? It could be something exciting happens, something exciting could be happening in a church near you or even in a Christian university near you. It is exciting as questions are raised. Teddy Horsley and Betsy Bear meet with their friends to take part in a play about Jesus' disciples.

Disciple, I wonder what Christian learning is about? Today they choose costumes to become fishermen, tax collectors, carpenters, farmers and even Jesus himself. Jesus calls people to

become what he is. The story all began when Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw boats and fishermen busy at work. The Markan tradition. Some were mending boats, some were selling fish, some were telling tales of storms and of catches beyond belief. (There's just a tiny bit of lost text from Mark that Teddy managed to find.) Simon and his brother Andrew are busy casting their nets into the lake catching fish. Jesus called them, "Come follow me, I'll make you fishers of people". Simon and Andrew came, now there were two disciples. Two people recruited into what I want to call a school of discipleship or perhaps even a Christian university. James and his brother John, the sons of Zebedee, were busy mending their nets ready to set out on the lake. Jesus called them, "Come follow me, I'll make you fishers of people". James and John came. Now there were four disciples entering the school of discipleship, the Christian university and what do they do? Soon after they had been called, Jesus took these four disciples into the synagogue on the Sabbath and there he began to teach.

There's clearly some kind of connection between being called into the school of discipleship and being called into a place where scripture is taken seriously, where the worship of God is taken seriously and where some proclamation, some hermeneutical exercise can take place on scripture, even on the occasion when this just jumping from Mark to Luke happens to be the synagogue in Nazareth and "Today the scripture is being fulfilled in your sight" says Jesus, interpreting and proclaiming.

The four disciples were amazed at what they heard since Jesus taught with such authority and power. Inside the synagogue there's a man possessed by an evil spirit. There Jesus began to cure the sick. The proclamation of the reign of God is not simply a discussion of words but activity in which the reign of God becomes real, where the people of God are made with the word of God. The four disciples were amazed at what they saw, even evil spirits obeyed Jesus' commands. The more exciting things one can expect in the Christian community and in the Christian university. Discipleship learning is not constrained the whole way down the track by the things that are observed by the quality assurance mechanisms.

The story developed when Jesus walked past the tax office set up by the Roman army. Now here is a disruptive act as Jesus disrupts the process of collecting taxes for the occupying forces. There at the tax office, Jesus saw the tax collectors busy at work, raising money to feed the soldiers, a very noble thing to do.

Levi, the son of Alphaeus, was busy counting out the money collected, hoping for a rich profit. Jesus called him, "Come follow me, I will give you a new start in life". Personal transformation is part of what the Christian community and the Christian university may be involved in. Look there are five of them now. Soon after they'd been called, Jesus took the five disciples to Levi's house for dinner and they heard the conversation. The five disciples were amazed to hear Jesus saying "I've not come to call the righteous but to call sinners", to be in the business of transformation.

The story continued when Jesus went up into the hills and called to him those who he wanted as disciples and apostles, note that, that's quite important. The school of discipleship leads into an expedition of ministry and exploration.

Then he called Philip, Matthew, Thomas, James and Thaddeus, Simon and Judas and now there were twelve disciples because Levi has got forgotten and we're not counting him but you know the Markan problem.

The story continues today when Jesus walks through our world and continues with his call, "Come follow me".

Teddy Horsley has been recruited into the school of discipleship and into the Christian university as far as I can see. Men and women, boys and girls leave their busy work to follow where Jesus leads. Now there are millions of disciples. It's Sunday morning and Teddy Horsley has heard Jesus call, "Come follow me". A lot of my thinking over the last decade, I've really wanted to privilege the call to discipleship at the heart of the Christian Gospel and to do so because of the nature of the society in which we live. A society which the Christian tradition cannot be taken for granted. A society in which the story has been forgotten. A society in which a call to follow Jesus is a more radical experience than it might have been because we've got to start by re-telling the story, by re-telling the narrative, making theology accessible.

So what is the distinctiveness of Christian learning?

One of the ways I've explored that in my own work has been through building a BA in Theology for Discipleship and Ministry. Something I would have loved to have done in a Christian university but there wasn't one around that saw that as an essential agenda. Theology for discipleship, now that's slightly problematic isn't it? Surely people who are called into discipleship don't want to waste their time doing a BA? Well how can they engage with the Christian tradition? How can intelligent people make sense of what God is doing in God's world, unless they become familiar with the traditions that the church has and are valued in a theological world? When I floated this idea in the diocese in Bangor in the year 2000, the people who really knew said it wouldn't work. I'm afraid they were wrong.

Prioritising discipleship, why do I do it? A lot of emphasis in church is about ministry. Ministry I see is totally secondary. If disciples are not formed first, ministry does not follow. Discipleship and ministry are not synonyms. Not all disciples are called to ministry. Ministers in my understanding are not formed in seminaries, but are formed in schools of discipleship. If we are to look for a Christian future in which lay people and authorised leaders are working together, then they need to be formed together says my BA in Theology for Discipleship and Ministry and I want to be clear that what I'm doing is discipleship learning.

An infrastructure that could facilitate the distinctiveness of Christian learning

Now this is quite a difficult thing to get through a secular university validating process, but let me talk about it. For learning, as I see it, is not education. Learning is not training. Learning combines education and formation. For theology to be real, for theology to be active, it is not an academic discipline, but it is a discipline that transforms people as well as transforms their minds. The right to discipleship learning. Peter Neil, now vice chancellor of BG University in

Lincoln, is a good friend. Peter, priest, educationalist, once wrote something that I paraphrase as this:

Church goers should be entitled to a level of theological education which includes progression, provides a structure, a vocabulary, a grammar for theological discourse and develops theological competence.

What is the Christian university about if it's not about enabling disciples to become more intelligent and formed in what that core to discipleship is about? So conceptualising a bit more this notion of discipleship learning. Before I built a BA, I built a Master's programme because I don't think you can do a BA if you don't know where it's going. But before I built the Master's programme, I built a Doctoral programme. I don't think you can build a Master's programme unless you know where it's going and I don't really think you can build a Doctoral programme unless you've got a Doctoral school, a school of post-doctoral research that knows what it's doing. This is the kind of thing I'd like to see inside a Christian university, but if you haven't got a Christian university, you have to plant it inside a secular university.

I will tell you a bit more about the BA programme. Six years, do I really expect people in church congregations to give six years of their life to becoming a BA in Theology for Discipleship and Ministry, I do, and they do it. They do three modules a year, six modules for a certificate, six for a diploma, six more for a degree. Conventional structure. The content each year at level four and five, we do three modules in a year, we do one on bible, we do one on church, we do one on world. We look in, we look out and we look to scripture.

I produced a series of books with Darton, Longman & Todd at the beginning of 1999 in order to serve as that kind of educational programme. Books designed for formation as well as for education. My good old enemy Jeff Astley is in the series. Also included is a book I wrote myself which I couldn't get anyone else to publish - so I put it in my own series.

The curriculum has now moved on and last year the first three volumes came of the sequel out. The Learning Church Series published by SCM Press. The first three: Listening for God's call, Conversations for the New Testament, and Doing Theology. The next one in the series is going to press in October and we've got one of three for the following year already underway. There are some important theological principles in this programme, principles informed by Jeff Astley's notion of ordinary theology. Theology says it's not something for the church and for clergy, it's not something for the academy and professors, it is something for the ordinary people of God in making sense of their experience of God and they can make a bit more sense of it if they can get linked up with what it is the academy, and what it is the church, have historically talked about.

There are theological principles of ordinary theology behind this. There are also psychological principles. For those who know me well will know I do a lot of work on psychological type but I think psychological type is an important shaper of the way in which people learn. This is a programme that takes, listen carefully, the theology of individual differences seriously. In recognising that introverts and extroverts are both created in the image of God and they look different and they learn different and it's time the church didn't prioritise one over the other. This also senses into thinkers and feelers, judges and perceivers, learning in different kinds of

ways but made in the image of God. The church and the Christian university needs to recognise the diversity of God own image, Genesis 1²⁷ is the kind of exegesis I would do on that.

So there are theological principles, there are psychological principles and there are pedagogical principles and the pedagogical principles of this kind of manifestation of Christian learning are pretty important. A module that will last nine weeks that take place in local groups across the dioceses of Bangor, they've worked in places like Machynlleth, places like Holyhead. They're scattered. Where two or three, ideally six or seven are gathered together around this kind of material, you get bonding, you get learning, you get formation. They're led by a facilitator, sometimes even vicars can facilitate. The job of a facilitator is not to tell, but to enable others to tell what they've discovered. The Emmaus experience. Each week there's a chance for preparation as the participants read, as they respond to questions, as they rehearse their answers to two of the problematic questions raised from the text and take it to the local education group and the facilitator asks "Well what did you make of it then?" No right or wrong answers but there is human development in human growth and a Saturday school were little groups can come together and see that actually just as Teddy Horsley discovered, there are more of them than you would have thought.

Distinctive discipleship learning. Theological learning coupled with personal spiritual and professional formation, engages conversation between the experience with ordinary theology of the participants and the Christian tradition as valued and discussed by church and academy. That's what I'm trying to do in this manifestation. This distinctive formation is as important as learning. Accompanied journey just as on the road to Emmaus. A chance for people on the platform of this course to be recognised to authorise ministries. Quite disabling for the seminary in the church in Wales. Opportunities to progress to pastoral ministry, preaching ministry, and to ordained ministry, not a prerequisite, not a requirement, but if people are called into discipleship and discipleship learning works, then vocations to ministry begin to follow.

Now this is where the secular university sometimes finds me a bit difficult to work with because I do want some very distinctive assessment taking place for this form of Christian learning. There are three bits to assess each module in this programme. There is a straight down the line academic learning and forgetting any other religious studies or theological course. That accounts for one third of that which is assessed.

Then there's reflection on the learning task. Each week people have come to a local education group and they've reflected. At the end of the period and at the end of the module, they are invited to document the transformatary nature of that reflection. There's personal growth here. And then the third bit - reflection on personal engagement. People training for day ministry will reflect on how the module relates to the placemen they have. Those preparing for preaching ministry will have preached on the basis of that module and will reflect on the strength and weakness of their experience preaching. But here we've got academic learning and formation wrapped up in one bundle and it's been submitted for academic assessment.

This comes as I said from the basis of the MSc and what I'm trying to do in this programme of education for education and formation for discipleship, is to enable disciples to do what Jesus asked them to do. Tell them about what life is like when God reigns, become an empirical theologian, guide and observe, value your experience and reflect on your experience, the development of research-based reflective practitioners and a picture of some of the people doing this. What's amazed me is our local educational groups having the professor of public health in the same local education group as Hugh, who has no tertiary education, valuing each other, sharing their Christian experience with each other and both going through this process and getting a BA Degree. Hugh, my hero in some ways, sitting there, the guy who says "I can't do this stuff, I've never been to college", getting his BA and having retired from his professional work as a lorry driver, being ordained and now in charge of a set of churches on Anglesey and he speaks Welsh, is what we need in that part of the world, but given confidence to respond to the gift that God has given him

Enough of those, but you see there is room for bears in this school for discipleship and there is room for children because the learning is the whole time related where the people of God come together.

How do we get an infrastructure for this kind of stuff to work in church? We won't get it through the cathedral sector I fear and that disappoints me. My vision, working with a couple of hero bishops in the church in Wales, both now not with us, one dead, one retired, gave me the opportunity to try and forge a partnership between Dioceses, the churches' ecumenical validating board, Wales' answer to the ministry division, and Glyndŵr, that new university and the St Mary's Centre. Just a tiny bit of trust funding from a closed Anglican college trust that allowed a vision to begin to take place.

We offered the university a large faculty of people to work with their core staff, their core staff that they pay, but we offered them people who understood and practised religion and theology and the university being new and insecure was quite pleased to add this list of names to its website and to argue that perhaps we were worth giving some opportunity to and has allowed us to run this programme at non-economic cost. But they have got quite an interest in a group of people on their website as a consequence including some of the people we see in this room, but it's quite amazing just how many friends and colleagues are willing to give their time and their expertise to make this St Mary's Centre, which I argue, as a Christian presence inside a secular university, offered the church something, the church might not get elsewhere. So alongside that we've got a couple of bishops in there somewhere, what have we got these days? The Right Reverend Jeff Pevell, probably not that well known to people outside Canada and David Walker is probably better known to those in England as Bishop of Manchester. Both of those guys have done their doctoral research with me and have remained loyal and helpful. David Walker, one of my heroes. But the sad thing for me is that the church in Wales has decided to close this programme, it's caused too much of a threat to the seminary, but in its closure it's now being rebirthed with Jeff Pevell in Queens College, Newfoundland and Queens College seems to be a really exciting thing just like Lampeter in the old colonial days when Canada and Wales were both kind of colonies of England. These institutions were given degree awarding powers.

So Queens College has its degree awarding powers, but where is Queens College? It is on the campus of Memorial University. It's not given itself up to Memorial University, Memorial University awards degrees in everything else, it's got a really interesting school of medicine, interesting to me because one of its expertises is in rural studies and as you perhaps know I'm quite keen on rural theology as Chair of the Rural Theology Association and Editor of the Journal of Rural Theology. Rural medicine and rural theology have something to talk about with each other. But in Newfoundland there is a Christian degree awarding institution on the campus of a secular university and it has its own powers to decide what counts as academic studies. It's not been difficult to get this programme validated there. One day it might come and run a bit in the UK, but who knows?

A short reflection on the public significance of theology

Theology. My question is what is Christian theology? It's not religious studies. It's not detached from the experience of God, you don't have to be a believer to do theology but it's difficult I think to be a believer if you don't do theology, there is a connection between theological science and Christian believing. Theology is not detached from other disciplines, one of the problems of the seminary that Queens College in Newfoundland has got over is being on the campus of the university but being separate from it and Christian theology is not independent from proper academic scrutiny, is never isolated from other faiths. I've been working very hard over the last two years to try and get a new post in Warwick alongside my own that brings in an Islamic theologian and social scientist. I think for the public credibility of religion and the secular university, it's important for that conversation between faiths to be seen to take place as well as the conversation with secular disciplines.

So what does Christian theology offer? A coherent, reasonable body of knowledge? Yes it is, it is a body of knowledge with its own grammar, its own logic, its own internal coherence, just as any other body of knowledge, it's a reasonable account of what it means to be human. What is theology about? God? Yes. But once you've got some belief that human beings are created in the image of God, but a core part of what theology is about is what it is to be human and a great deal of other bits of university actually deal with what it is to be human. You only have to get mixed up with the ethics committees to recognise that. The medical school is unable to avoid fundamental questions about what it means to be human. The social science school is not able to avoid fundamental questions about what it means to be human. There's a reasonable ground for engagement with other bodies of knowledge, the public and social significance of theology is important and I've tried to demonstrate that in some of my own work in the conversation between theology and psychology, the other discipline in which I'm kind of qualified. Psychology and theology both look at human beings, but they look at it through different lenses and I'm convinced a psychologist can actually see more clearly what human beings are like, if at least they're willing to take the mythology of the Christian tradition and test what coherence that may give into seeing what human beings are like and that works quite strongly in relationship to stuff on personality theory.

So what makes Christian theology distinctive?

I see it as distinctive in the same way as the sciences of education are related to practice. Now working in an education faculty it is not surprising that students' understanding of

education is being assessed by their practice as educationalists. You see where this is going with my problem of theology. The sciences of medicine are related to practice and I believe too that the sciences of theology are related to practice and that's why I've built the kind of assessment criteria I have in my BA in Theology for Discipleship and Ministry. It is not just the learning, it's the professional and personal transformation that takes place in that.

Concluding comment

So I'm never sure what to do with this big title, "The idea of the Christian university where are we now?" I thought what I would do and what I have done is to share some personal experience and to do so from the perspective of a theologian who takes empirical science seriously and happens to be an Anglican.

Thank you for your patience.