



Ethics in Conversation

A Jewel in the Crown of North America: Christian Higher Education

Craig G. Bartholomew

Introduction

Moving back from Canada to the UK, I am struck by one profound and truly remarkable difference between North America and the UK / Europe. Across North America, and in the USA in particular, there are, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 600 Christian-affiliated institutions of higher learning. Taking into account the difference in quality of such institutions, North American students can choose to attend a University or College in which the range of university subjects are taught from a Christian perspective. In the UK and Europe parents and students do not have this choice.

So many questions arise at this point: is this really the case? What about all the Anglican universities in the UK? How did such a situation arise? Is there really such a thing as a Christian university? Does it matter? I cannot begin to answer all these important question in full, but will attend to most of them as this article unfolds.

Mind the Gap

Before we get to the above questions we need to pose a fundamental question, namely, *what*

is education, and does the adjective “Christian” before “education” make any difference? Is there a gap or significant difference between Christian and non-Christian education? Or is the very idea of a gap pure fantasy and delusion?

Although there is more to education than this, I define education as *the formation of the mind*, so that the person and student is equipped to function well within a society and to contribute to its flourishing. Of course, there are other factors in education such as learning to socialise, developing a range of skills, becoming imaginative, etc., but, especially when it comes to higher education or university education, the formation of the mind moves front and centre. Defining education is not easy, but assume for a moment that this definition is correct, and then ask yourself: “Does Christian faith or the gospel affect the formation of the mind? Alternatively, is faith limited to our devotional and church lives so that education is a neutral



activity in which one can simply assume the rules of the university and of your discipline and learn the truth about your chosen discipline whatever your faith commitments?"

As far as I can see from their websites, *all* the Anglican Universities in the UK strongly assume that the latter question should be answered in the affirmative.¹ Take the prestigious example of Christ Church Oxford, for example. According to its website:

Although the Cathedral continues its work and has its own rhythms, the life and work of the college is *entirely separate*; there is absolutely no expectation that members of Christ Church should belong to the Christian faith or attend the Cathedral services (though some go to admire the architecture and to enjoy the marvellous music and singing at the services).²

[Emphasis added.]

There is no indication on any of the Anglican University websites that Christian faith is formative of the actual content of education and that an Anglican University might help you explore, say, sociology or psychology or philosophy from a distinctively Christian perspective. For these universities, faith apparently involves an inclusivism of all perspectives, which reduces to a secular curriculum the same as one might receive at any public university.

Now, it should be noted that some forms of Christianity do indeed affirm the neutrality of education, apart from the study of theology and religion. One thinks for example of many in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas. James Turner,

a Catholic historian at Notre Dame University in the USA, in a fascinating dialogue with the Evangelical historian Mark Noll, for example, argues that the one thing he learnt from Aquinas is that "Faith gives no *epistemological edge*."³ I define epistemology as how we go about knowing something so that we can trust the result, which means that epistemology is foundational to any subject we study. For Turner faith provides no advantage or added impact to the 'knowing' involved in any university subject. We need simply to follow the rules of our discipline and should arrive thereby at the truth.

Amidst the turmoil of our Western cultures today, and thus of our universities,⁴ such a neutrality-view is, however, becoming harder and harder to maintain. Christians – and others – will first encounter this in the policing of views. Increasingly, for example, any critique of gay lifestyles or wariness of gender fluidity is being ruled out of bounds. These are, however, only surface phenomena of a far deeper problem. Students at UK universities will soon find that they are exposed to a bewildering variety of secular approaches to the world: Marxist, postmodernisms of various types, naturalist, historicist, Freudian, etc., the one exception generally being a Christian approach. To such an extent has this secular diversity become the case that in 2003 in the USA Gerald Graff published *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*. Graff tells how in

³ Mark Noll and James Turner, *The Future of Christian Learning: An Evangelical and Catholic Dialogue*, ed. Thomas A. Howard. (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 106. Emphasis original.

⁴ There are a large number of books on the crisis of the university. Most recently I have read Thomas Docherty, *The New Treason of the Intellectuals: Can the University Survive?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

¹ <http://cuac.anglicancommunion.org/members/institutions/europe.aspx> [accessed 30/1/19].

² www.chch.ox.ac.uk/house/about-christ-church [accessed 30/1/19].

the 50s he took courses in romantic literature and introductory sociology back to back. Like a volley ball he was bounced back and forth between incommensurate paradigms or worldviews, but as he notes:

What was striking about my experience ... was how little cognitive dissonance there actually was. Since the perspectives of the literature and sociology courses never came together to be compared and contrasted, they remained in separate mental compartments, leaving my exposure to divergent viewpoints incomplete and unconsummated.⁵

In a chapter entitled “The Mixed-Message Curriculum” there are sections with headings like “The Student as Volleyball,” “Contradiction and Compartmentalization,” and “Redundancy Lost.” Graff asserts that:

Clearly, it is crucial to begin providing students with a *more connected view of the academic intellectual universe, one that lets them recognize and enter the conversation that makes that universe cohere and relates it to the wider world.*⁶

[Emphasis added.]

It is intriguing that already in the fifties Graff experienced the fragmentation in the university that we associate with “postmodernism.” Alas, the problem has got worse and not better. In a vivid evocation of our crisis the Catholic philosopher and ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre compares the contemporary ethical landscape to one in which shards are scattered around; ethicists try and connect these shards, but they have no understanding of the traditions

in which they are embedded.⁷ Similarly Oliver O’Donovan imagines our time as one in which icebergs are to be seen all over the place, but we have no idea what binds them together.⁸

Not only do I think the neutrality view is wrong, but in our context it simply does not work anymore, if it ever did. Furthermore, if students need a more coherent view of the world, which one is it to be? So, what to do?

The Problem(s)

The problem with even raising this issue of Christian higher education in the context of the UK is that there are no examples to point to, and thus it is not surprising that we think the Christian University is irrelevant, is not a possibility, or simply does not exist, so that as Christians we simply have to do the best with what we have. In the USA George Marsden published a wonderful book entitled *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*.⁹ A UK version would have to be entitled something like *The Unknown Idea of Christian Higher Education*. I grew up in South Africa and have often seen ostriches. But imagine trying to persuade someone who had never heard of or seen a picture of an ostrich that such birds do indeed exist. It would be a challenge, to say the least. This is one reason why the plethora of such institutions across America are so important. In the last year, for example, I gave the annual Worldview lectures at Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU).¹⁰ As you can see from their website OBU provides courses in the range of disciplines. What sets it

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).

⁸ Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), xi, xiii.

⁹ George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ www.okbu.edu/ [accessed 30/1/19]

⁵ Gerald Graff, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 65.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

apart from the public and Anglican Universities in the UK is its mission:

As a Christian liberal arts university, OBU transforms lives by equipping students to pursue academic excellence, integrate faith with all areas of knowledge, engage a diverse world, and live worthy of the high calling of God in Christ.¹¹

And OBU is not unique in this respect. North America is home to many, many such institutions where highly qualified faculty are employed and paid to teach and research from a Christian perspective. Such institutions remind us, amidst the hard secularism pervasive in our societies, that it does not have to be this way when it comes to university education. There is indeed a way of doing high level, rigorous university education in which Christ is central and in which all the resources of Christian faith are brought to bear on exploring the many different dimensions of God's world.

A second problem that has to be overcome is the common sensibility that faith is a private issue and has nothing to do with the public spheres of life. This view developed in modernity with *the privatisation of religion*, which reduces faith to a private matter freely to be pursued in one's private life and leisure time, but to be kept out of the great spheres of public life, where neutral reason is to reign supreme. Such privatisation of faith is certainly not true historically of Christianity, but sadly it has readily been embraced by far too many Evangelicals who attend church on Sunday and Bible Study on Wednesday, engage fervently in evangelism, but never imagine that their faith

has anything to do with work, business, politics, journalism, science, economics, education, etc. In my view the problem with such a sacred/secular dualism is that it personifies the title of a book by J. B. Phillips: *Your God is Too Small!*¹²

Mine the Gospel

There are a thousand ways to explode such a privatisation of religion. One is the doctrine of creation. One's approach to most university subjects is radically altered through exploring the world through the lens of creation rather than approaching it as a random product of the evolutionary process. Another is our view of the human person. Approaching humans as made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28) has major implications for disciplines like psychology, sociology and politics. Allow me, however, to take an utterly central example, the gospel.

The word "gospel" (Greek: *euangelion*) is normally translated "good news". However, it is not good news in the everyday sense, even as magnificent as England winning the soccer world cup. The Christ event is good news in the sense that it changes everything. In Christ God has acted decisively in history to reassert God's sovereign reign over the entire creation and to open the way for the entire creation, including individuals, to exodus from sin and judgement into the kingdom of God which will culminate in the new heavens and earth. This leads us to a huge view of Christ with major implications for how we go about knowing the world. One of the great Christian thinkers of the 20th century, Lesslie Newbigin, summed up the epistemological implications with his statement

11 www.okbu.edu/about/mission.html [accessed 30/1/19]

12 J. B. Phillips, *Your God is Too Small* (London: Epworth, 1952).

that “Christ is the clue to all that is.”¹³

Indeed, a seminal insight of biblical wisdom is that if you start at the wrong place in your quest for knowledge your acquisition of knowledge will always be skewed in one way or another. If Christ really is the clue to all that is, then we need to pursue that clue with all the rigour we can foster. The question then becomes *how* are we to do that in higher education when Christ as the clue is largely ruled out by the universities in the UK, with some exceptions in certain Theology departments.

An answer surely, is that we need some Christian universities comparable to those in North America, where faculty are paid to research and teach from a distinctively Christian perspective. This is decidedly not a call for Christian scholars to evacuate our public universities, but it is a recognition that we need spaces in which the Christian tradition is allowed to come to fruition in all disciplines in the university, in the confidence that the light of Christ illumines all areas of life so that Christian scholarship has the potential to shed light on the great challenges of our day to the benefit of all citizens of the UK.

Of course, such institutions will only emerge when parents, students and churches start to recognize the urgent need for them, and thus actively call for and support their establishment. One would hope that the present crisis in British universities, the hard secularism and the triumph of political correctness would be a wake-up call in this respect. North American Christian higher education reminds us that it is quite incorrect to lament our present situation

and to slump down into the “TINA” view that “there is no alternative.” There is indeed an alternative if we have the will and faith to work towards it.

Ways Forward

In the interim what can be done? Here I mention only two initiatives related to KLICE. As part of our new vision we have established the KLICE Research Institute, composed of some ten scholars from various disciplines who meet one day per month, to work together on the Christian foundations of academic work and to elevate one another’s scholarship to the highest level. This is a small but real attempt to pursue Christ as the clue to all that is. Secondly, we are delighted to be working in partnership with several other organizations to get alongside postgraduate students at British and European universities, helping them to explore the relationship between their subjects and their faith.

None of this is quick, but requires slow steady work in the long obedience in the same direction. Nor is it by any means the only task the church has to deal with today, but it is an essential task if we take the welfare of the UK and the freedom of the church seriously. In conclusion let me give you an example of what can emerge from Christian colleges and universities. In 1986 Time magazine reported that God was making a come back in, of all places, philosophy, and it referred to Alvin Plantinga as the leading Protestant philosopher of religion today. Since then we have witnessed a truly remarkable renaissance of Christian philosophy which continues to flourish today. What is less well known is that Alvin Plantinga was then on the faculty of Calvin College, a

13 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 103-15.

Christian university in Grand Rapids and his alma mater. Two other high-profile philosophers associated with Calvin College are Nicholas Wolterstorff and C. Stephen Evans. Without the space created for rigorous academic work in a Christian perspective this renaissance would never have taken place. The UK and Europe are at present deprived of such spaces, and this needs to change.

At present we send our children to study

Rev. Dr Craig G. Bartholomew is the Director of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics and Senior Research Fellow at Tyndale House, Cambridge, UK.

under what are often the best secular minds of the day in institutions that are far too often hostile to the gospel. In Canada I had the privilege of teaching at an undergraduate Christian university for some thirteen years and I asked several of my former students to reflect briefly on why it was important for them to study at a Christian university. I am grateful to Ben Gale for curating their responses.

Why is a Christian Education Important?

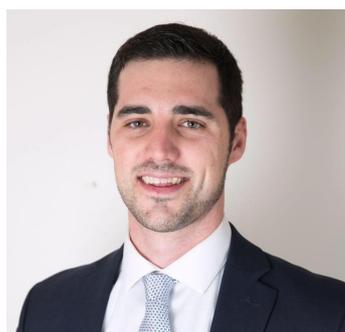
Mark Standish

I wasn't exposed to Christian education until my undergraduate years at Redeemer University College. Without realising it, my understanding of studenthood and education began to shift and grow. In examining this experience, I've come to believe that I was transformed by Christian education by something so simple: care. When I came to Redeemer, I felt as though professors cared and were interested in me and that made me interested in what they were teaching. Then I realised that I was interested in learning. Finally, once I began to learn more, I found that my voice was capable and important. Therefore, at the heart of good, Christian education, is care. This care springs from the fact that teachers hold tightly to the truth that their students are made in the image of God. With the imago dei as their starting point, they care to unpack the potential lying dormant in their students.



PJ Buys

As a former pro hockey player, and now current head coach & CEO of a company, a thoroughly Christian education provided me with the confidence necessary to move forward in the face of continual trial and adversity, and find success. Knowing that I am a child of God made uniquely with infinite value



by a Creator of power who loves me provides superior psychological and personal motivation to share life and love to others, whereas my secular contemporaries are driven by self ambition and aggrandizement of self, where they attempt to construct their own identity and meaning on their career and success in a world that is metaphysically meaningless. Christian education taught truth, values, and meaning in a world deprived of all three.

Melissa Payne

Being a former student at a Christian Liberal Arts university, I can sincerely say that those four years were some of the most formative years of my life. It is of great importance, I believe, to have an understanding within ourselves of the ways in which our faith and areas of study integrate together. Having a Christian education allows us students to live more holistically, not living dualistically in the ways we critically think and live. Faith and spirituality are not separate from other areas of our lives, but rather everything we do comes out of the worldviews that we have. A Christian education invites students to see God in all of life, expanding their wonder and awe of creation, and role that they play in it.



Ben Gale

The thing I most appreciated about going to a Christian university was that I didn't have to pretend as if deeper meanings about God, life, and who we are supposed to be were absent from my studies. Going through secular education taught me that my curiosity should have limits when it came to exploring ideas past the point of materialism. A Christian education gave me the community and encouragement where those questions were the starting point. 'What is justice?' 'What does this mean for how we should live?' 'What does this say about who God is?' These and more were explored within every discipline, and flourished in every class. A Christian education gave me an environment where my intellect and faith were encouraged to not just coexist, but to grow together and strengthen each other.



Ben Gale majored in political science and psychology at Redeemer University College

Response

Kay Carter

To many British ears the idea of a Christian university is so alien it can sound a little preposterous. While we might agree that Christian-ethos pastoral care is a good idea, so long as there's no meddling with the courses, bringing the Christian worldview to bear on the academic disciplines is a much more

uncomfortable proposition. First there are practical questions about whether young people would face employment discrimination with a degree from an overtly Christian university, in a culture that lacks clarity about the role of faith in the intellectual life. Then there are doubts about whether a Christian worldview would

make any discernable difference to the study of “fact-based” STEM subjects. This is before we go anywhere near hoary old chestnuts such as Biology being taught by somebody with explicitly Creationist beliefs.

There are also social implications for Christian universities. UCCF and the country’s Christian Unions do an extraordinary job of presenting the gospel to thousands of people at a uniquely enquiring time of life, but this work depends on Christians joining mainstream universities, not being syphoned off into faith establishments. Conversely, university is where many Christians learn to contend coherently for their faith amid conflicting worldviews. It’s hard to imagine this being so effective in a common room full of Christians, even Christians of different stripes.

However, despite the hurdles, the idea of Christian higher education demands to be taken seriously. The academic “splintering” described by Craig Bartholomew, above, does not take place in a vacuum. All is not well within our undergraduate population, with escalating mental health problems and record levels of suicide. Outside of the universities, the ills of academia have a tendency to trickle down to the rest of society. It’s not surprising, then, that the political arena – where the intellectual ideas of our time are forged into real-world policies – is becoming increasingly and worryingly acrimonious.

Into this fragmentation, the Bible holds out the offer of a unifying purpose, or telos, that

encompasses all creation, giving meaning to every human life and setting out our responsibilities and privileges as stewards of Creation. It reveals the eternal backcloth to every single strand of human enquiry, whether musical, linguistic, scientific or theological. It provides unchanging principles to guide academic enquiry – most notably that Truth is a good in itself – while insisting on love, no less, for those with whom we disagree.

Of course a Christian university is not a panacea for all our academic ills. Universities, even Christian ones, are human institutions and will make mistakes, never living up to the biblical ideal. However, to arrive at a position where a Christian university is even thinkable would mean having overcome at least some discrimination against the Christian worldview, having thought through a Christian approach in every faculty, and having found the faith to believe that our world really is crying out for remedies that only Christ can offer.

When the Romans wanted to build a straight road, they lit a fire at their appointed destination and used it to set their course. A Christian university may not be a cure-all, but if Christians fixed their eyes on this goal and began to take steps necessary to achieve it, the very process could be transformative for Britain.



Kay Carter is Director of Communications for Tyndale House, Cambridge, UK.