

# KING'S THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

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the United Kingdom can match. Members of the Faculty are involved in several new published ventures and in important research work.

Many of our graduates will go on to theological Colleges of the various denominations to complete their training; many will enter the teaching profession where there is an acute shortage of well-qualified R.E. teachers. The

new degree should prove to be particularly attractive to ordinands and to prospective teachers, but it will be flexible and broad enough to cater for the interests and needs of many others, including those students who want to study Theology simply because it is an interesting subject which provides a rigorous academic training.

## THE GOSPEL IN A SECULAR CULTURE: CHRISTIANITY AND THE MODERN UNIVERSITY<sup>1</sup>

Colin Gunton

The word *crisis* is at present trivialised and over-used. It is best restricted to areas of thought and action where there is a serious breakdown of confidence or coherence. But it may be that in the two aspects of human activity that this talk seeks to relate the word is employed justifiably. In each area there exists a crisis of confidence; in each the crisis has something to do with modern culture's view of truth and the values of the intellect generally.

If theology has a contribution to make to modern culture, especially as it is represented in higher education, a large part of it will lie in its ability to evoke reflection on the nature of truth and its relation to life. That is not to say that truth is theology's or the university's sole concern, but that it is there that the interests of the two overlap most obviously. And if the much-quoted dictum that the most effective way to destroy civilisation would be to destroy its universities has in it any grain of truth, the topic may be of greater importance than may appear to those with no direct concern for, or interest in, those institutions.

To begin very generally, it must be recalled that the modern university is a secular institution, in the neutral sense that it is a part of what is now - to use the unavoidable cliché - a post-Christian society; one whose fundamental drives, aims and mythology owe little consciously to the institutionalised religion of the past. As part of the educational system of that society, the modern university can be said to

have two aims that live side by side in what has become a rather uncomfortable marriage of convenience: on the one hand, academic excellence for its own sake; and on the other, the training of personnel, within the atmosphere generated by the pursuit of excellence, for running government, the law, the economy, industry, administration and the rest. What has Christianity to contribute to all this? First should be said something that is scarcely problematical, but should be mentioned because it is sometimes suggested that it is the only contribution: the work and attitudes of all the individual Christians who work and/or study in the different parts of a university.

But when we think of Christianity as a collective—as a community possessing a modicum of coherence of thought and action—the question becomes complicated by two factors. The first is what might be called the social, cultural and political dimension. Over the past few centuries, and perhaps over the last one hundred years, Christianity's role in British society has been radically changed. It has, no doubt, played a large role in the development of those institutions which now attempt to do without it, such as our democracy and schools. But now it is only in the most tenuous relationship to institutions like universities. Such is the impression gained by a chaplain from overseas, who has written of his impression of the almost complete indifference of British students to the Christian faith. What does Christianity have to

say to students -- and to administrators and staff -- in that kind of atmosphere?

The second factor that has to be taken into account is that of belief. Christianity is not a system or a ready-made philosophy that can be set out and its implications read off for this and that, like a repair manual for a car. It has to do, with the action and demand of God now, with particular people at a particular time. Christianity is not a system but a gospel about the reality of a God who is present to his world in ever unpredictable, because gracious, ways. Therefore to ask someone to speak on this topic is to ask him to be a prophet. But the two factors I have mentioned make prophecy even more precarious an activity than usual. We have moved from a society in which Christians were too confident that they knew the answers to one in which they are not sure whether they have any answers at all. So, we have to go back to the basics, to the fundamentals. But what are they?

Christianity has to contribute to the university the same as it has to contribute to anyone at any time: good news. That news takes a double form. First, it is about God in his action in Jesus Christ, action that has past, present and future forms. The aspiring prophet is above all concerned with the second of those three tenses, to discern and declare what the risen Christ is doing at the heart of the life of the university. Second, the news is not just about God in Jesus Christ. It is about this divine action directed as it is to the chaos of human life that tries to organise itself apart from God, that will admit neither its need nor the grace that outweighs human need and sin. That is to say, it is action directed to man as he is, religious or secular, Jew or Greek. The act is one of grace and judgement. That is not to say that God is gracious to some and judges others, but that his grace is a radical grace, restoring men to himself but only at the cost of laying bare their shortcomings and refusal of grace. Or, to put the matter more positively, it is grace that shows up individuals and institutions not only in their shortcomings but also in their possibilities, their capacities and openings. God meets us all, where we are, with his gift and enabling.

Alongside that general account of the action of God, let us look again at the situation of the modern secular university. The first thing to realise is that the much discussed secularity is

important, but not necessarily dispiriting. The God who comes in Jesus is concerned not just with religion, but with all of human life, as the best of the so-called 'secular' theology has taught us. And that includes the ordinary academic life of a secular university.

However, at the present time ordinary academic life, as it was once known, is not easy to realise. On the one hand, there is shortage of money. It is often said that an institution must either grow or decline. Universities have for years expected to grow, in numbers, funds and areas of study. There is now, in many areas, and with catastrophic suddenness, an active cutting back, with the almost inevitable loss of morale and confidence. What has the gospel to say to that? On the other hand, there does seem to be in academic circles a loss of interest in the primacy of truth and the priority of excellence. This is not to suggest that universities should rise loftily above the needs of society. But when usefulness is the only criterion for an activity; when academics become cynical about the possibility of truth or of right political action, and subordinate all to the needs of the moment; or when students are encouraged, if they are, to study for the larger meal ticket that results; when all this is so, or even suggested, what hope is there for our society? Of course this is not the whole story. But as our society becomes more complex and organised, the dangers of cynicism and relativism, of amorality and the quest for expansion whatever the cost become the greater. What has the Christian gospel to say to all of this? At least five things can be suggested.

1. Such a message as we have will concentrate on the notion of truth. This is not to claim that Christians are certain of the truth, or even that they possess it in a way that others do not. We have already seen that that approach is an improper one. Rather it is that the concept of truth is important for the Christian. Because this is God's world, which he has created and saved, the attainment of a measure of truth is possible, and not only that, but useful as well. Truth for the Bible is not simply an abstract conception, and enables us to see that there need be no separation of academic excellence from human usefulness and need. Divine truth, real truth, is truth that saves, and this means that he who seeks for truth for its own sake may also be the

one who best serves human need and interest. This is the reverse of the modern tendency, which is to suspect that only the useful is true. But because Jesus is God's true word to us, we can confidently remind ourselves that truth is useful because it is true and not the other way round.

2. Another way of saying the same thing is that we may have excellence without that bogey of the modern liberal, elitism. Truth is given to the humble, those who follow it rather than grasp to exploit. If the university merely serves man's assessment of himself, it may pander to all that is wrong with modern life, and in particular humanity's self-destructive attempt to lord it over the creation and treat the cosmos merely as a source for the satisfaction of human needs (or supposed human needs. Who really *needs* ever greater wealth, mobility, etc?). One who serves rather than exploits the truth should not be afraid to tell it, to dissent from some of society's most cherished demands and beliefs in the name of a wider view of things. Of course, this is dangerous and easily confused with the kind of naive radicalism sometimes preached by the disciples of violent dissent. The Christian in the university may have to join the protests, if not their form. But his can only be the protest of the forgiven, of the one who confesses a share in the exploitation and the greed and the oppression. Truth is not given finally and completely, but only to the humble and the penitent, to those who listen again and again. A university will never achieve its end, not because there are limits to the possibilities of its expansion, but because it will never have the truth under its control.

3. Truth as the Christian sees it is that which enables mankind to separate appearance from reality. I have already made an allusion to the discernment of true and false needs, but this understanding of the truth is also important when we are faced with the need to cut back financially. To lose some of our dearest programmes and plans is not in itself a sign of failure and decline. Daniel Jenkins has recently argued that we should not be afraid to claim and develop a proper sense of success. There is nothing wrong with success, for God gives us

maturity and the proper success which goes with it. But one of the gifts of maturity is that which enables us to distinguish not only between truth and falsehood, but also between true success and mere worldly acclaim. The cross tells us that what seems like failure is often success. There is no direct correlation between financial resources and official approval, on the one hand, and true success on the other. Our morale and activity should not depend solely -- though it must in part -- on the framework within which the work is carried on. Financial restraint may be an enabler of a proper choice of priorities.

4. The general point is this: the truth claimed for the gospel is a truth which saves, because it meets men where they really are, yet without either attempting to bring them into line by compulsion or accepting their own valuation of their need. God is for man, but not on our own terms. So it is that the university serves the needs of men -- for education, training for life, including jobs, economics and other utilitarian matters -- but never at the cost of failing to tell the truth about the wider context of human life, that without which it is no longer truly human. The very breadth of university studies should be a reproach to those who would see human life too narrowly, but also and especially an enabling of those who would see further than the ends of their noses. This is a paradigm case of truth that does not impose itself from the outside, but comes alongside people where they are. Christianity can remind the university of what is its own discovery and most precious possession, its traditional vision of the breadth of truth.

5. But the chief point is still to be made, and that without which the others are mere rhetoric. Christianity does not have to offer the university a lot of advice -- though there seems to be a terrible lot of it in the past few pages -- but rather to point to the Lord who is there in the midst, whatever Christians may or may not do about making him known. Let me conclude with some words preached by Professor Gordon Rupp in a Presentation Day service in the University of London. His theme: 'My Son, seek wisdom's discipline while you are young, And when your hair is white, you will

find her still...' (Eccles.6:18). 'But this is a church, and we cannot leave this matter of wisdom even with the sublimest thoughts of Solomon. A greater than Solomon is here, and Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed in robes like those for whom the divine wisdom was made flesh in him who is the living word. The connection between Christ and a university is not a matter of explicit creeds or confessions, or dogmatic tests or liberty of thought, still less a matter of counting Christian votes or heads. In Him who is the Word of God, the whole life of a university consists, is held together. If men study poetry or the songs of man, the mysteries of speech and the diversities of tongues, these words are the echo of the one Word always speaking, always creating; if they handle the material fabric of the physical universe, measure

it in the round or in the infinitely small, they are coming closer to Him in whom was life, and the life of men. What is in history and nature and in the hearts and minds of men comes from Him and moves towards Him... giver of all gifts, king and lord of all.'

#### NOTES

1. A version of a talk given to a chaplaincy consultation in the University of London, November 1977.
2. B.K. Tettey, 'Reflections on a Ministry among Students', *International Review of Mission* LXVI, April 1977, pp. 146-9.
3. Daniel Jenkins, *Christian Maturity and the Theology of Success*, London: S.C.M. Press, 1976.
4. E.G. Rupp. 'Apprenticeship to Wisdom', *The Kingsman: the Magazine of the Theological Department of King's College London*, 1972-3, p. 26.

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