

University Chaplaincy as Wisdom in This Place

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There is one central question which haunts the university chaplain: ‘What does faithful witness to the gospel mean in this place?’ Of course, this is a central question in every ministry, but it gains a particular acuity when ‘this place’ is a modern secular Higher Education Institution (HEI) and therefore firmly located within the public square.² It is then necessary first of all to locate ‘this place’ on our theological map, after which we can sketch a model of what it means to bear witness there, and finally consider what distinctive resources the Methodist tradition brings to this ministry.

‘This Place’ – the HEI as secular, inter-faith and Christian

Outside of Oxbridge our universities are largely secular foundations, although there are a significant number of exceptions, some of which are very recent. Chaplains working in those HEIs which are Christian foundations, however, report that their experience is very little different from those of us whose ministry is within the more avowedly secular institutions. There is often great difficulty in finding ways to express meaningfully what that Christian foundation means to the culture and work of the university today.

The historic origin of European universities as Church foundations is well known, but the significant role played by Christians in the creation of the secular HEI in Britain is often forgotten. This can be seen most poignantly in the case of University College London, which is today perhaps the most avowedly secular of our HEIs, holding its chaplaincy at arm’s length. Yet UCL was founded by an alliance of Nonconformists, Jews, progressive Anglicans and ‘free thinkers’ whose intention was to create a public institution which enjoyed religious freedom in contrast to the religious tests which restricted admission at the older universities to Anglicans.³ The redbrick universities of the later nineteenth century tended to follow suit, providing access to higher education free from religious tests. The more aggressive forms of secularity which seek actively to exclude religion from the public space of the HEI were a later development in the culture rather than the foundation of universities. The secular HEI should not then be seen as a space hostile to faith, but rather reclaimed as

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one which has the freedom of religious expression written into its DNA.

HE chaplaincy is first and foremost a faithful witness within the secular space and an affirmation that Christians should feel at home within this space. Secular space is and ought to be plural – an area in which the cultures of faith encounter and engage non-religious cultures. Universities are concerned with knowledge extension (research) and knowledge transfer (teaching/learning), and are therefore places for the rapid interchange of thought and imagination in which the tide of cultural change flows quickly. Chaplaincy in HEIs is about navigating these fast-flowing cultural waters and accompanying others who seek to do so. It requires acts of discernment, careful positioning and a willingness continually to renegotiate those networks and relationships which provide access, visibility, influence and, above all, create the conditions for faithful witness.

Looking at the modern university, David Ford (to whom we shall return later) has described its character as ‘inter-faith and secular’.⁴ Whilst these are places with plural cultures of belief and ‘non-belief’, we have to acknowledge that in the public life of HEIs one narrative is currently dominant and that is the identity of the modern secular research and teaching university which has developed since the Enlightenment.⁵ Given, however, the deeper history of European universities as originally Christian institutions and the brief account of secularism offered above, I would want to argue that we should extend Ford’s description to speak of the secular, inter-faith and Christian university. The window-dressing of academic titles, language and symbols provides plenty of evidence for continuity with that Christian history but the inclusion of Christianity in the threefold character of the university is not merely an historical reference. Rather this threefold character points to the HEI as a microcosm of our society which itself is secular, inter-faith and Christian.⁶ These three characters will, of course, be present in quite different ways in HEIs with differing foundations, but there are ways in which they interact with each other in even the most secular institution.

This sketch of the nature of the university has direct consequences for the lived daily practice of chaplaincy as a form of ministry in ‘this place’. Whilst chaplaincy is most assuredly present to support the Christian community (students and staff) within the university, its primary function is to be present for the whole institution. This institutional presence means that chaplaincies must be looking to the priorities and foci of their particular institution as they frame their programme and consider their styles of working. A university may, for example, be focused on teaching/learning and reaching non-traditional students as part of the policy of widening

participation in HE. Clearly there are strong theological reasons for aligning a chaplaincy with such goals – the search to maximize the God-given potential of each human being and a commitment to social justice in creating greater access to education. On the other hand, another institution may be concentrating on the high quality of its research effort and developing research students – a theological connection can be made between the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and the God who is the source and sum of all truth, into the depths of whose mystery we gaze in the wonder of contemplation. All of these choices can become part of the response to the nature of a given HEI as ‘this place’.

Whilst secularity has emerged as the primary characteristic of the setting for HE chaplaincy a closer examination reveals something more nuanced – a pluralism in which distinctively Christian voices can be heard and distinctively Christian modes of presence are required. Making this presence concrete requires contextual judgements about the styles of ministry to be adopted.

Where can Wisdom be found?

I have suggested that the dominant narrative in the plural university today is one derived from the Enlightenment. This tradition of enquiry holds all questions open and invites continual critical challenge to received answers. In other words it rejects tradition as a source of truth, yet has become in itself a tradition through which truth is sought. Although much altered in some disciplines by postmodernity, a process of knowledge based on observation, calculation and reasoning lives in tension with knowledge through tradition, community, spirituality, experience, value and judgement. The Enlightenment project can easily lead to knowledge without wisdom.

Recent government and sector policy documents on Higher Education show something of this tension between knowledge and wisdom as they struggle to express their values for HE without resorting to purely quantifiable and economic terms. Somehow the public language of Higher Education has become detached from its purposes and aspirations.⁷ David Ford’s magnificent study of Christian wisdom⁸ offers a profound reflection on this issue of detached knowledge and argues for the importance of theology in the academy because of its capacity to re-engage the university with wisdom. Unsurprisingly I want to say a loud ‘Amen’ to that, but there is a problem. Precisely because of its commitment to post-Enlightenment critical processes, academic theology on its own is also in constant danger of detachment from wisdom. The offering of liturgy, the life of a

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Christian community, the concrete expression of Christ's love in pastoral care and public action for justice are not the primary functions of an academic theology department. Chaplaincies, however, are engaged in these outworkings of Christian wisdom and on the whole their HEIs don't just allow, but expect, chaplaincies to have this focus in a way that an academic department never could.

Once again the theological sketch, however brief and inadequate, can lead us into the reshaping of HE chaplaincy as ministry. Universities are concerned with knowledge and their chaplaincies ought to be profoundly concerned with the nature of knowledge too. In order to be actively involved in the university as 'this place', a chaplaincy needs to find ways to relate its programme to the core life of the university in teaching/learning and research and not to be content to be defined solely as a student support service. This is not easy as a chaplaincy is quite definitely not a substitute academic department – but there are ways in. Some individual chaplains may be qualified to offer teaching in particular academic disciplines, others may be active researchers, but all should be able to contribute at points where the curriculum and research programme come close to the chaplaincy's agenda – professional ethics modules, courses in cultural awareness and sensitivity, research ethics committees or programmes making university expertise available to local faith communities are typical examples.

Whilst engaging directly with the teaching/learning and research processes will be very much a question of opportunity, the activity which the chaplaincy itself generates can also model alternative forms of knowledge. In contrast to the more detached modes of knowing typified in the university curricula, chaplaincy programmes focus on the importance of knowing as relationship (through pastoral support, shared worship, community building or inter-faith dialogue) and on the ethical responsibility which knowledge creates (engaging with social responsibility or lifestyle choices). If chaplaincies can embody Christian wisdom through contextualized and embedded forms of Christian life in the university then all the simple daily expressions of prayer, care and relationship building actually become a witness, however modest, to an alternative Christian narrative of the university. With economic realities forcing some HEIs into becoming little more than educational production lines, it sometimes feels like the HE sector is losing its soul. In chaplaincy looking for lost souls is part of our core business and that surely includes finding the soul of the institution itself.

Being Wise Methodists in ‘this place’

Drawing these themes together into our final point we can ask what distinctive wisdom Methodism brings to faithful witness in the university. Three themes seem to suggest themselves as a starting point.

Firstly, I would point to the distinctiveness of Methodism in not making exclusive claims for itself. Methodism responds to a universal calling to mission, but only as one of a family of Christian denominations in fellowship. From John Wesley’s ‘Catholic Spirit’⁹ onward it has been clear that the calling of Methodism was to be exercised alongside, and in partnership with, other Christian traditions and that strict doctrinal agreement was not required as the basis of either Christian unity or action. We do not, therefore, enter the public square as an established church claiming it by right, or as a sectarian group seeking only to draw others to ourselves, but in partnerships: partnerships with other Christian traditions, partnerships with secular agencies with whom we find commonality of purpose and increasingly partnerships with other faith communities. In the plurality of the modern secular university this approach is not just attractive to university managers; it is often the condition of recognition.

Secondly, and equally foundational to Methodism, is our Arminianism. All can be saved. That ‘all’ must not be just the sum total of individuals, but the possibility of God’s redemption of the whole creation. Both the corporate and the individual, the physical and the spiritual, the temporal and the eternal must be part of the ‘all’ if we are serious about the cosmic nature of Christ’s saving actions. Once again this opens the secular space as an arena for God’s action. Arminianism, however, has a second consequence for the role of HE chaplaincy – its emphasis on free will pushes us in the direction of a high view of human nature and therefore of human ingenuity, creativity and striving. Arminianism enables us to give value to the considerable ingenuity, creativity and striving found not just in the university but in the workplace everywhere.

Finally, Methodism is a Charismatic tradition – though a somewhat muted one in that it is the tradition of the reasonable enthusiast.¹⁰ It is a spirituality born out of the experience of a first generation of Methodists who lived through the very core of the Enlightenment Age during which the seeds of contemporary secularity were sown. Clearly this marriage of reason and Spirit-filled experience links us back into the argument about wisdom as the point of engagement between contemporary knowledge and lived tradition, but I suggest that it can also give another pointer. A Charismatic theology cannot limit the action of the Spirit to within the

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church. The wind blows where it wills – and that could even be through the research and teaching of a university. Chaplaincy is one of several ways in which Methodism is connected with what is happening in a place where changes often take place first, and provides the church with a series of listening posts as we seek to examine new developments through the lens of theology.

Methodism was born and baptized at Oxford University. Its first formal shape as the Holy Club was a Christian fellowship within the university and its first members were precisely those who desired to bear faithful witness in that place, not just in their private devotion, but in their teaching, studying, writing and social action. It's hard to imagine a Methodism which didn't engage with the university in these ways. It is a relationship that is close to the very heart of our very identity.

Conclusion

There are dangers in embedding a chaplaincy too deeply in 'this place'. Sophie Gilliat-Ray writes of the process of 'approximation' in which the chaplaincy becomes shaped to mirror the structures of the institution.¹¹ In the past this institutional pressure could form chaplaincies after the fashion of a Counselling Service in order to fit with their model of student support. Today's Chaplaincies are increasingly the university's 'religious affairs office', because this role fits within the structure and needs of the plural secular university. These pressures should not be discarded as negative – they are part of responding to 'this place' – but they need to be managed within a much broader vision of HE chaplaincy. This vision will seek to engage the university as a place of knowledge with the Christian tradition as a source of wisdom.

NOTES

- 1 The Revd Stan Brown is Ecumenical Chaplain at Kingston University, London.
- 2 For a detailed analysis of the conditions for faithful witness in contemporary politics and society see: Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- 3 Paul Fiddes, 'The Place of Christian Theology in the Modern University', *Baptist Quarterly*, 42:2:1 (2007), pp. 71–88.
- 4 David Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 288.
- 5 The advent of the modern university is often traced from the Berlin Humboldt University foundation of 1810. Though the Humboldt model is usually seen as a secular one, Friedrich Schleiermacher had considerable involvement in the discussion over the inclusion of a theology faculty. See Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, New Haven Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 108.

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- 6 Although now slightly dated the 2001 Census produced some interesting data on the balance of contemporary religious identities in the UK: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/religion/> (accessed 16/08/2010).
- 7 So, for example, the 1997 Dearing Report produced by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education was entitled 'Higher Education in the Learning Society'. Twelve years later the 2009 Department of Business Innovation & Skills report into HE was called 'Higher Ambitions – the future of universities in a knowledge economy', marking a shift of language and emphasis from a process of learning in community to knowledge as a commodity in the economy.
- 8 David Ford, *Christian Wisdom*.
- 9 John Wesley, 'A Catholic Spirit', Sermon 39.
- 10 John Wesley, 'The Nature of Enthusiasm' Sermon 37.
- 11 Sophie Gilliat-Ray, *Religion in Higher Education: the Politics of the Multi-Faith Campus*, Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing, 2000.