



Why Theology should be taught at Secular Universities

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The ancient Universities were founded in large part for the training of Christian clergy, and were for many years religious foundations, often limiting both teachers and students in all subjects to members of the Christian faith (and one version of it at that, though the version changed after the Reformation). So one simple answer to the question of why theology is taught in Universities is that European Universities were founded by the Church, and a major part of their original aim was the training of clergy. For many years, however, there was no subject called 'theology'. Peter Abelard perhaps first used the word 'theology' in the eleventh century, but it did not become a separate subject until the nineteenth century. The teaching of 'sacra doctrina' was part of the syllabus for a general education. It provided a training in logic, metaphysics, languages, literature, law and history, as well as a formation in the Christian faith. What more could one want in a good liberal education? There was not felt to be any need for the compartmentalisation of knowledge that is such a marked feature of University life today.

All that presupposed that the Universities were Christian institutions, largely concerned with training people for positions in the Church. Things have changed considerably, and modern British universities are no longer funded by

the Church, nor is the training of clergy a major part of their activity. In Britain there are many avowedly secular Universities, and it may seem particularly hard for them to justify the teaching of theology. I hope to show, however, that it is not at all hard. Indeed it is hard for them to justify not teaching it.

Theology, however, has always been a controversial subject. When theology was proposed as a separate academic subject for a degree in Oxford in 1870, Canon Pusey opposed it on the grounds that it might mean the Bible was taught 'like any other book'. He could see that the academy had become a place where ruthless criticism, as long as it was reasoned, was actually welcomed. As J.S. Mill argued, argument and criticism are among the best ways of establishing truth, for if belief-claims are meant to be based on argument or evidence, they must be tested as strongly as possible. In the area of the humanities, that is done by presenting and re-presenting various points of view, and letting arguments take their course.

Pusey, who also opposed the 1859 publication 'Lux Mundi', a volume that contained some moderately critical ideas by a group of Oxford Anglicans, was not in favour of opening the Bible and Christian doctrines to this process of criticism and argument. He thought that Christian truth should be expounded clearly and defended stoutly. He thought, more profoundly, that Christian theology could only be taught by those who loved the Christian faith, who practiced it in their own lives, and who could bring others to a lively experience of faith by their example.

Lest this should too quickly be dismissed as an archaic view, consider an analogous case, perhaps that of music. It would be plausible to say that, even as an academic subject, one aim of musical studies is to encourage the love of music, to achieve a high level of musical skill, and to appreciate music more fully. It might seem very odd to say that music should be taught by those who dislike it intensely, who may be tone-deaf, or who are purely interested in technical or historical questions, and not at all in the beastly noises that musicians make.

In literary studies, too, should it not be part of any real educational discipline to increase the understanding and love of literature, and to distinguish literary excellence from the drivel that most of us produce when we sit down to write?

Even in history, which may be thought just to deal with facts, a good educational aim is to make students aware of the complexities of making historical judgments, to free them of prejudices, misconceptions and stereotypes, and to instil in them a sensitivity to human motivations and relationships that may enable at least some of them to make historical judgments for themselves.

There are skills of musicianship, literary appreciation and historical research. Some of those skills presuppose a love of their subject-matter, of music, literature and the stories of human lives. Argument and criticism are part of these disciplines, but it is rightly hoped that sensitivity and appreciation will be honed so that the student will be able to distinguish the beautiful, the perceptive, and the discriminating, and to admire and love it. Such an education is truly humane, and concerned with that intellectual training in intellectual and imaginative skills which is necessary in any developed culture.

Why should it not be so in theology? Should it not seek to increase understanding and love of Christian faith, to distinguish profound faith from superficiality, to correct misconceptions and stereotypes, and to instil a real sensitivity to religious motivations and experiences? The analogy with other humanities is not absurd, and Pusey was right to fear that if Christian faith became a purely academic study, one solely concerned with the abstract arguments of theologians, the linguistic or literary structure of the Bible, and the history of Christianity, with no attempt to cultivate and communicate a sense for Christian insights and experiences, something would be lost.

There is a major difficulty, however. Music and literature do not make truth-claims?at least, not of a very obvious sort. History does, but nobody denies that humans have a history, and that some things pretty certainly happened in it?Rome fell, Britain had an Empire, the Bastille was stormed. With theology it is otherwise. Many intelligent people deny that Christianity is about anything at all. All its truth-claims fail. There is no God, there are no miracles, Jesus did not rise from the dead. Perhaps he did not even exist. So Christianity is palpably false. Not only that, it may be

harmful?repressing women and animals, and breeding intolerance and violence.

Would anyone wish to advocate a sympathetic understanding and deep appreciation of something that is false and harmful? Obviously not. So some would argue that a sympathetic training in Christianity is obnoxious. Music and literature are not obsolete, but perhaps religion is. So any study of it should be only as a historical relic. We do not want to encourage people to have 'religious feelings', which would be dangerous and delusional.

Those who have visited the American Academy of Religion know that many religion departments in United States universities are virtually at war with Divinity schools, where theology is taught. It seems to be a motto of some American religions departments that if we are to study religion properly we should not believe it. We may seek to explain its existence, or treat it as a sub-discipline of anthropology?describing the strange things that some people do. But it is taken for granted that religious claims are false and irrational. In such departments it is heresy to be a religious practitioner.

That may be an extreme view. A less extreme version of it is that religious belief cannot be required of a student or teacher of any religion, so that the attempt to increase appreciation for religious life, sensibility and discipline cannot be a required part of any syllabus. For religion may be founded on a series of mistakes and delusions.

Where such an opinion is held by many intelligent and morally committed people and supported by argument, it must be taken seriously.

If Christianity is to be taught in secular Universities, it must be taught as the ambiguous and disputed phenomenon it is in such a society. That does mean, as Pusey feared, that it will be open to criticism as false. It does mean that we cannot any longer have as an educational aim simply an increased respect for and appreciation of Christian truth. Nevertheless, it is still of great importance to try to understand what it is about religion that has attracted the total commitment of so many people, what it is in it that they see as good, indeed as the best they know. It is still important to see the complexity and diversity of religion, so that we do not dismiss all forms of religion at one stroke, as though they were all alike. It is important to distinguish the good from the naive, the profound from the shoddy, and so to develop discernment of what is regarded as excellent in religion. It is important that we correct misconceptions and stereotypes, and that we criticise intelligently and with sophistication, with a clear awareness of the presuppositions of our own beliefs, of the standpoint from which we criticise religion, and the sorts of justification that can be given for that standpoint. What we can aim for is a deeper understanding of what leads people to have Christian faith, a deeper knowledge of what the major theologians have said about faith, and a deeper feeling for the very various sorts of experiences that religious believers have. Religions are such an important and vital force in the modern world that it would be a dereliction of intellectual duty if its claims were not taken seriously, investigated carefully, and evaluated with reasoned criticism. Where would this take place if not in a University?

The intellectual qualities of discernment, appreciation, criticism, and informed and reasoned evaluation, exercised upon widely accepted, though disputed, and socially influential truth-claims concerning disclosures of what purports to be the ultimate reality, supreme objective value, and final goal of existence?there could be no more important in tellectual discipline, both for the training of the mind in intellectual virtue, and for helping individuals to come to instructed decisions about their own ultimate values and goals. In a secular University it is hard to defend theology as a formation in Christian faith. But theology as 'discourse about the gods', as a discussion of the ultimate goals and values of individuals and societies, as a careful and critical examination of reasoned claims that there is a transcendent spiritual reality, and that its nature has been disclosed at various points in human history, is an essential study for any educational institution that claims to impart knowledge and enlarge understanding of human existence. That the truth-claims of any religion are disputed both by other religions and by the non-religious, is itself a fact of great interest about the human mind, and of major importance in seeking to understand and palliate some of the major social and intellectual problems of the modern world.

Theology became a separate academic discipline in Oxford, but Pusey managed so to influence the teaching of it that

it became primarily an exposition of the Anglican Faith and the 39 Articles of Religion. In Scotland it was, naturally enough, the Presbyterian faith that was defended, and Lampeter served as an Anglican outpost in Wales. But that situation was bound to change. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries theology departments were opened in a number of English Universities. The Free Churches and the Roman Catholic Church both established an academic presence in a number of Universities, including Oxford and Cambridge. Since theology was a subject usually offered to all undergraduates, it inevitably became more ecumenical in outlook. It could no longer be an exposition of the beliefs of one church, an internal academic discipline of a religious institution. Such a view was not inappropriate when the Universities themselves were founded and supported by religious institutions. It became untenable when Universities became secular bodies, containing people of many faiths and none.

This history accounts for an instability that still exists within theology. Some see it as properly the systematic exposition of the beliefs of one religious organisation. John Henry Newman's defence of the Catholic University in Dublin, in 'The Idea of a University', assumed that the Catholic faith was simply and obviously true. There was knowledge of God and of the true revelation in the Catholic Church, and so it would be wrong to omit this department of knowledge from a fully rounded University education. In modern British society, however, this claim to knowledge would be widely disputed, and has arguably become a minority opinion. The idea of theology that I have briefly canvassed?though it is only part of my final view?as a critical appreciation and sensitivity to religious insight and experience?as anathema to Newman. It was, he thought, a Protestant heresy. Catholic faith was about intellectual truths. I think we would be more disposed today to say that Catholic faith may indeed contain truths, but they are seen as falsehoods by a great many people. They lack the overwhelming evidential or argumentative force that is needed for established knowledge. They are widely disputed by informed and intelligent people. A university, that should indeed provide knowledge of every major department of human life, would be lacking in width of vision if it taught only one version of Christian faith, and that version as known to be true. We may rightly say, however, that many religious faiths claim to have knowledge about God or a supreme spiritual reality, usually founded on revelation. Much of Newman's argument can still stand, if we insert the word 'alleged' into his sentences. So when he says, 'Religious doctrine is knowledge', we must just remember to say, 'Religious doctrine is alleged knowledge'. That will be true, and theology differs from religious studies largely in this, that religious studies brackets out, or sets aside, questions of the truth and rationality of religious beliefs. Theology takes those questions as its central concern. In its study of revealed texts, of the development of doctrines, the writings of great thinkers, and the history of institutions, it always concentrates on what can reasonably be affirmed as true.

On this view, it can no longer be taken for granted that all teachers and students will accept the doctrines of a specific religion as true. So a different view of theology has grown up, as a study of religious beliefs by and for people of any or no religious commitment. Thus it is normally not permissible to limit teachers of theology in Britain to adherents of one religious viewpoint?though there are some major exceptions to this principle?I was one of them. And it is not permissible to limit students to members of one faith. Even Friedrich Schleiermacher, often called the father of liberal theology, thought that theology was the articulation of the beliefs of a particular religious institution. His own theology he thought of as an exposition of the dogmatic system of the evangelical protestant church. But in his 'Speeches' of 1799, he spoke of religion as something that exists in many particular forms, and tried to give an account of its general character. In his work we see a tension between giving an apologetic for one religious group, and providing a descriptive study of many religious groups. To complicate matters, his apologetic was in fact an original and often surprising interpretation of Calvinism, a personal interpretation of a tradition of which (some would say) he had a most unsound grasp. Another tension exists, between someone who seeks faithfully to defend doctrines received from an authoritative religious group, and one who seeks to give an original and creative interpretation of a growing, changing, tradition, but is ready to revise as well as to defend or simply re-present what is given on authority. So theology may mean: a defense of the authoritative declarations of one religious group, or a personal exposition of one's own beliefs about ultimate reality and value, or a description of what one religious group, or perhaps of what many religious groups, believe. The first interpretation is quite implausible for any secular University. The second is so individualistic that it hardly seems appropriate for it to be financed by a public educational institution. These interpretations have become obsolete in non-denominational Universities, though it is to be hoped that there will be available authoritative

expositions of the beliefs of religious groups, and lively defences of personal religious (or anti-religious) viewpoints. Such expositions increase the sum of human knowledge, and such defences should inspire questioning and debate. It is important, however, that what is taught, even if including elements of apologetic, should be justly presented, and that full weight should be given to opposing positions.

Some of the best known atheists in academic life today are not concerned to produce a balanced view. Daniel Dennett, one of America's best known philosophers, in his philosophy lectures argues forcefully and vehemently in favour of materialism and against religion. It may be said that he does present different points of view, and is open to argument. But he ridicules Cartesian dualism mercilessly, he makes it unmistakably clear that he thinks materialism is both true and important, and makes no bones about trying to convince his hearers that this is so. This is on the boundaries of acceptability, as long as opposing views are given equal time, though it is still regrettable that ridicule and rhetoric often replace careful exposition and argument.

Academic opponents of Christianity are sometimes not concerned in the slightest to understand Christianity at its best. On the contrary, they look for the worst—which is easily found—and dismiss it without any study of the psychology and history of faith, or of the writings of major theologians and philosophers of faith. It is that view that is not worthy of being present in a University, and that is a standing disgrace to academic life. If a Professor of the Public Understanding of Science publicly misrepresents, ridicules and stereotypes Christian faith, what sort of understanding is he advocating? He is advocating ignorance, lack of research into things that one dislikes, and ridicule and polemic as appropriate intellectual attitudes. Theology as a rational activity is important in Universities if only to counteract such views. But argument itself must be welcomed, as religious truth-claims are highly disputed, and need to be carefully weighed.

The fact that alleged religious truths are disputable and disputed is no surprise to theologians. Wherever theology is free of the constraint of having to conform to an authoritative set of doctrines, it immediately becomes clear that each theologian disagrees with every other, that Catholics do not agree with Protestants, that primitive Methodists do not agree with Wesleyan Methodists. Disagreement is the life-blood of theology, and to admit atheists, Buddhists and Hindus into the fold of theology is little more than an extension of the range of disagreement about truth that is already a marked feature of theological existence.

The positive argument for admitting them is that, in discourse about the gods, or, to reformulate that in my own terms, about the existence of a spiritual reality of ultimate reality and value, it is important that our knowledge should be as accurate and as extensive as possible. If we ask whether a transcendent spiritual reality exists, and is disclosed at various points in human history, we need to know how it has been perceived in the widest context, and what sorts of reasons and arguments have been used to support or deny its existence. On this matter, Newman's views were much too restrictive. Catholic faith makes claims to knowledge, but those claims are not evident to all. They are widely disputed, and in examining the grounds for dispute, we need to learn the views of Protestants, of atheists, of Muslims and of Hindus. As we widen the net of knowledge-claims, we come across new ranges of argument and bodies of alleged knowledge. Theology may be practised within and on behalf of a religious institution. I have no objection to that, though I would say that it is still important to obtain a correct and appreciative knowledge of other traditions, so that limitations of outlook may be overcome, and misunderstandings of other outlooks may be corrected. But in a secular University (where 'secular' is taken to mean, not anti-religious but not committed to the beliefs of any one religion), theology will be the study of truth-claims about spiritual reality, and it is then helpful to assess such truth-claims over the widest possible range.

There is a current view in some circles that it is impossible to assess the meaning and truth of religions or traditions other than your own, or to compare the truth-claims of different faiths. It has been said that we all necessarily stand within some specific tradition, and the best we can do is to expound that tradition, or to look at other traditions from within our perspective and, bluntly, preach to them if we feel moved to do so. In any case, we have nothing to learn from alien traditions, for they form incommensurable forms of life and thought, self-contained conceptual schemes, and it is unwise to try to take out isolated parts of them and incorporate them into our own scheme. There are a

number of reasons why this view is mistaken.

Crucially, it is virtually impossible to define what 'a tradition' is, or to draw its boundaries clearly. Are we to speak of the Methodist tradition, or the Western tradition, or the liberal tradition, the semitic tradition, or are we allowed to speak of the human tradition? There are human groups that share a common language, some that have similar educational systems, some that share a political system, and some that feel strong kinship with others?often for no good genetic reason. In religion, I am an English-speaking Anglican Protestant, but for most of my life I had greater knowledge of certain Indian religious doctrines than I did of Christian beliefs. I have no difficulty with German or French theological writings, so while I see that there are different moods and ways of expressing thoughts, I do not believe that any linguistic term is strictly untranslatable, however ugly and prolix the translation must be, annotated with many comments about verbal connotations and cultural history. I think I now understand many Catholic theologians better than most non-academic Catholics do. If there is a breakdown of communication, it is with fellow English speakers who seem to me to write gobbledegook about theology. But they belong to the same church, and so I suppose to the same 'tradition' that I do. Human minds are often opaque to one another. But I realise that with enough patience and application?perhaps by attending a few courses on post-modernism?the conceptual gap can be overcome. I know that because I once wrote a research dissertation on Heidegger, while being a pupil of Gilbert Ryle, so I inhabited two conceptual schemes at the same time. At the moment, I inhabit the religious world of a specific sort of Indian thought?that of Ramanuja and the Vaishnavas?as well that of Anglican Christianity. I can tell the striking similarities and differences between them, and while it is obviously important not to take over terms from one discourse and incorporate them crudely into another, it is in my experience as easy to compare them as it is to compare Lutheran and Catholic doctrines of the Eucharist.

There is no need to be locked into an allegedly identifiable religious language-game. I do, of course, have a specific historical situation, and that affects the things I know, the people and books that have influenced me, and the sorts of problems I find with my faith. I am very lucky that I can easily widen the range of my knowledge and experience. I can practice as a Buddhist, a Hindu or a Christian without moving from Oxford. If asked what tradition I belong to, I would find it almost impossible to say. I am closer to many Buddhists than I am to some Christians. I understand the beliefs of fundamentalist Christians very well, and could use their linguistic style if I chose, yet their beliefs are completely alien to me. And when a Buddhist speaks of mindfulness and of dukkha, suffering, I can understand why that translation might be misleading, and in what ways, and can come to understand quite well what is being said. If I doubt that, I can ask one of my Buddhist students, and be re-assured.

We do not exist in a world of closed conceptual systems, doomed never to communicate. We may choose not to communicate, or we can learn new languages, concepts and ways of speaking. Moreover people do, and I know large numbers of Christians who are also Buddhists or Hindus. There may be groups that disapprove of them, but it is silly to say that people with dual religious membership cannot understand themselves. Of course we have our own beliefs about whether there are ultimate goals and values, and if so, what they are. But those beliefs can change, and they are likely to be more informed the more we know about the beliefs of others on similar subjects. Human knowledge has grown most rapidly and creatively by interaction with disciplines and perspectives hitherto unknown to it. We should expect this to be so in matters of religion as well as in the sciences.

In its long history, Christianity has learned much from Platonic philosophy, even using concepts alien to Hebrew thought-forms to formulate its major doctrines. It learned much from Islam, as the writings of the Greek philosophers were translated from Arabic. It has learned to reformulate its doctrines in the light of the evolutionary worldview that owes much to Darwin. Today even those who say it has nothing to learn from 'outside' have learned this from French linguists and philosophers and from a misinterpretation of Wittgenstein. From a theological point of view, to say that God has revealed nothing distinctive to any religious group but my own shows an intellectual arrogance and a determination to remain ignorant that is breathtaking.

Until we try, we do not know what Christianity has to learn from other faiths. We cannot issue an edict that faiths are incommensurable until we have done our best to understand them. It is an intellectual duty to find out these things,

and not to decide the questions in advance. But whether or not one faith can learn from or be compared with others, it is apparent to anyone who studies human culture that there are many different religions with many conflicting beliefs. Unless we are going to privilege one religion over others in advance of examining them, it seems that the study of theology, conceived as the critical study of the truth and rationality of religious doctrinal systems, should not in principle be limited to the study of just one such doctrinal system. It should extend over as many as is reasonably possible?and local circumstances and resources will determine what that is. Such a study should, however, be no dry and abstract recital and critique of alleged theoretical truths. To return to a theme I have briefly sketched, it should form part of what Newman called a 'liberal' education, an education in culture. This connects the study of theology with one of the central aims of a University, the development of a cultured mind (what Newman quaintly called the mind of a 'gentleman').

Culture is the training and disciplining of the intellectual and imaginative skills and sensitivities of human beings, as they are realised in various human societies. Of course universities should teach knowledge, but they should also teach understanding and that distinctive sort of creativity that produces or that is necessary to appreciate cultural artefacts in sculpture, art, poetry and music. In such ways people learn not only what has been established as true, but also how to discover new truths, and how to understand old ones. They learn to realise as fully as possible distinctively human skills. Newman spoke of knowledge as its own end, and called this a 'liberal' education - perhaps the only sense of the word liberal of which he was able to approve. But he was not speaking of a bare ability to recite facts. He meant 'to open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactness, sagacity, resource, address, eloquent expression'?in fact, to cultivate the intellectual virtues for their own sake, precisely because they are the expression of the very qualities that make us human.

A liberal education is an education in the capacity to appreciate the most developed products of human culture. It is also training in the capacity to discriminate between profound and superficial, helpful and harmful, reasonable and irrational. And it is a training of the mind that may enable it to form a balanced personal assessment of the goals and achievements of the many forms of human thought and activity that have existed in history.

Clearly the wider our knowledge of cultures the broader and more complete an educational programme will be. It is not enough to know our own culture and its history?though that is an essential starting place. We must see its relations to other cultures, and learn to appreciate them for their strengths, and criticise their omissions. It is of vital importance that we should not misunderstand alien cultural forms, and the test of this is whether we can state what those forms are in terms that would be accepted by their most respected and informed adherents.

We may rightly say that some cultural forms are worthy of appreciation?the music of Bach, the poetry of Shakespeare. Others, however, should be rejected?the ethical views of Hitler or the philosophy of Lenin?so should we learn to appreciate them? I think we should certainly seek to understand them, how they arose, what appeal they had, and what it was like to accept them. But that does not entail personal agreement, and it is important to view them critically?the misunderstandings about race and class, or the disregard of individual human lives that were part of them. Discrimination, appreciation, criticism, and evaluation are the four essential components of a liberal education, whose objects of study should ideally be extended as widely as humanity itself.

Is religion, then, an important part of culture? There can be no doubt that it is. The great Cathedrals, Mosques and Temples, Cantatas and imperishable musical masterpieces, sacred art works and texts are central to the life of almost every human culture. It follows that to omit the study of religion from a University curriculum is to neglect, not some fringe activity, but a major element of what it is to be human.

The only two objections I can think of to this obvious fact is first, that there are too many religions to make such a study feasible; and second, that there is no need to single out religion as a separate discipline. All can be subsumed under history, literature, music and so forth. These objections, however, apply to almost any subject we can think of, and are easily answered.

As to the impossible extent and diversity of religions, that is true?but no truer than the impossible extent of human history, which manages to be a University discipline with few objections. The remedy is twofold: first, try to give a global overview of human religious life, so that individual faiths can be located in place and time. Second, specialise, while not failing to pay attention to wider contexts where that is necessary or possible. This is why we should expect theology in Europe and America, for instance, to concentrate on Christian faith, whereas in Iran we might expect to find, and we do find, the theology of Islam. But these things can change, and in a multi-cultural society we might hope to have a range of theologies represented in a scholarly way, with some interchange of views between them. Whether or not 'religion' can be defined, and treated as a distinct subject, is indeed disputed among experts in the field. But if we ignore the finer points of academic disputation, there is no doubt that we can pick out activities in almost every human society which bear a close analogy to what we know is religious activity?attending places of worship, conducting rituals, saying prayers, passing on authoritative teachings on the nature of reality and the destiny of human beings, and exhorting to follow a certain kind of moral life. If we set out to study the ultimate values and goals of a human group, we will quickly find ourselves discoursing about their gods?or possibly about why they have no gods, so that we need to know about the religion they reject.

To lack knowledge and understanding of religion is to lack knowledge of the most basic commitments that have moved people throughout history, their 'ultimate concerns', as Paul Tillich put it. It is to be condemned to misunderstand and dismiss some of the most intellectually able writings, some of the most demanding moral teachings, and some of the most powerful motivating forces in the world, and in our own history.

Religions typically claim knowledge of important truths, they are highly imaginative, and they differ from one another in ways that often lead to conflict and misunderstanding. To have some understanding of why these alleged truths are thought to be important, to see what drives the imagination of believers, to seek ways of resolving conflict and removing misunderstandings, is to grow in the understanding of human life. Naturally some knowledge of religion is implied in any serious study of literature or history. But that knowledge is too often of oversimplified and stereotyped presentations of religious beliefs. There has to be available in every liberal institution of higher education the scholarly expertise that can seek to discover what religious faith really is, what its problems, its costs and benefits to society are, and what its function may be. Since in the end the core of a religion is its authoritatively defined beliefs (its revealed doctrines, laws or way of life), theology is the discipline that is best suited to provide that expertise.

If theology exists in these terms, its aim will be to produce graduates who are aware of the attraction, the dangers and the profundity of religious belief, and equally aware of its diverse forms and of the strong challenges to such belief that exist in our society. In the case of Christian theology, knowledge of the history and diversity of Biblical interpretation, of the changes in moral viewpoint produced by the Enlightenment (including the abolition of slavery, the revision of strongly retributivist ideas of punishment, and equality of gender), and of the history and diversity of the Christian churches, should encourage a sense of the creative and changing nature of religious belief.

It is a mark of the continuing instability of theology that good intellectually able graduates can still so structure their studies, by careful choice of colleges and tutors, that they evade all awareness of these things, and retain an outmoded idea of theology as the vindication of their own narrow religious views, and stereotypical condemnation of all alternatives. That such people are still widely taken to be typical theologians, rather than dinosaurs of academe, is a measure of the chasm between proper academic theology and what it is often popularly taken to be.

Academic theology in secular Universities is not and cannot be the defence of a particular confessional view. It is a pluralistic, critical and empathetic discipline that enables issues of ultimate human concern to be studied in an informed and scholarly way. It is as such a discipline that theology is essential to the educational programme of any University that claims to engender knowledge, understanding and informed critique of human culture and existence.

Endnotes

- Editor's note: This was the first national annual lecture from the Subject Centre and we were very pleased that Keith Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity at Christ Church, Oxford and author of many books on theology and the relationship between religion and science, was our first guest lecturer
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