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Church and university in Scotland:

Challenges and prospects

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Abstract

This paper was originally delivered as the third D. W. D. Shaw memorial lecture at the University of Aberdeen on 27 May 2024. It examines the shifting patterns in the relationship of church and academy in Scotland from the establishment of the four ancient universities to the present day. Despite historical changes, most notably the Reformation, the church and the academy maintained a cooperative relationship in the shared project of producing a well-educated clergy. Yet this has altered significantly in recent decades. Contributory factors include a steep decline in the number of ordinands, the emergence of religious studies, and diverging economic circumstances. The paper concludes by examining future prospects for theological education, addressing critical questions concerning the academic pursuit of a confessional Christian theology amidst rising secularism and alternative approaches to the study of religion.

In memory of Bill

Professor D. W. D. (Bill) Shaw was one of my former teachers. Dean and Principal at both New College, Edinburgh and St Mary's College, St Andrews – perhaps a unique double – Bill was an accomplished theologian, university leader, and churchman. He was respected and liked by his students, many of whom still testify to the encouragement and support he gave them.

I first came to know Bill when I arrived in Edinburgh as a BD student in 1977. We remained in regular contact until shortly before his death in 2020 at the age of 92. Bill led a remarkable life. As a child, he crossed the Atlantic at the beginning of WW2, the ship having to take a zigzag route to avoid German U-boats. With his mother and siblings he made it safely to Canada. He studied modern languages in Cambridge and then law in Edinburgh. A distinguished sportsman, he was Scottish squash champion for three consecutive years in the 1950s. After study at New College he entered the ministry, serving as associate at St George's West in Edinburgh. In 1962, he was invited by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to be an ecumenical observer at the first session of Vatican II. He was one of the last survivors along with Hans Küng, George Lindbeck, and Joseph Ratzinger. Above all, Bill had a great gift for friendship and remained in contact with many of his students to the end of his life. I recall a memorable sermon he preached at King's College Chapel on the text from John 15:15, 'No longer do I call you servants but friends.' He himself exemplified a Christlike quality in his offer of friendship to many people. After meeting Bill for lunch, which I regularly did, I always felt better about myself. And I know many others who can offer similar testimony.

The subject of this lecture, which I'm honoured to deliver in Aberdeen, is one that mattered much to Bill as a servant of both the church and the university.

Historical notes

The University of Aberdeen was founded at King's College in 1495. I was fortunate to be in post when the quincentenary was celebrated in 1995. Amidst the festivities, we were frequently reminded of the foundational purpose of the institution. This was to provide a better education for clergy. Bishop Elphinstone enlisted the support of the Pope and King James IV to this end. How fitting therefore that the tower of King's should feature the cross and the crown, these together symbolising a partnership of church and state.

Bishop Elphinstone persuaded the Pope that the north of Scotland needed this institution. There were some districts so distant and geographically separate from other centres of learning that the natives remained 'rude, unlettered and almost barbarous' with scarcely any persons fit for preaching the Word of God and administering the sacraments.[1] This was surely much exaggerated – Aberdeen was already an important centre of international trade – but as a tactical ploy it worked, and the charter was duly granted by Pope Alexander VI in Rome. Aberdeen was the third of the medieval universities of Scotland, following St Andrews and Glasgow. Two others would follow soon after the Reformation – Edinburgh (1583) and Marischal College, also in Aberdeen (1593). Marischal and King's were eventually united to form the University of Aberdeen in 1860. This enabled Aberdonians to celebrate the 400th anniversary of one institution in 1993 and the 500th anniversary of the other just two years later. A good time was had by all.

The foundation of Edinburgh University by the town council has sometimes been represented as a more civic and therefore secular event. The college after all had no dedicated chapel, unlike the other three universities. Yet this is a misleading depiction. The town council was a staunchly Presbyterian body working in close partnership with the church. The college functioned initially as a small theological seminary, its first Principal being the distinguished theologian Robert Rollock. Students were expected to worship in the local parish church, of which the Principal eventually became the minister.

In 1960, the anniversary year of the Scottish Reformation, Professor J. K. Burleigh noted that the Reformation in Scotland intensified the need for an educated ministry.[2] Now permitted to hold only one living and expected to reside in the parish of the church to which they had been called by the people, ministers were closely associated with the local congregations in which they exercised a ministry of preaching and teaching. The attention given to these functions of the ministerial office required an educated clergy which was the task of the universities. We should not be surprised therefore to find that the *First Book of Discipline* (1560) was much concerned with the reform and welfare of the Scottish universities as places intended for the education of clergy, lawyers and doctors. The *First Book* recommends study of the catechism, grammar, Latin, Greek, logic and rhetoric, followed by specialist study in divinity, law or physic (medicine) until the age of 24 by which time the student should be fit to serve either the church or the commonwealth.[3] These high standards were not always maintained, particularly as result of insufficient numbers of students capable of benefiting from lectures in Latin. But they do reveal the way in which theological education was valued after the Reformation with the assumption that church and university were united to serve a common purpose.

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[1] See Leslie Macfarlane, *William Elphinstone and the Kingdom of Scotland, 1431–1514: The Struggle for Order* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1985), 293.

[2] *Life and Work*, August 1960.

Following the Reformation, two developments were to prove significant. The first was a shift from the old regent system, in which tutors taught the entire syllabus, to the emergence of a specialised professoriate. Chairs were dedicated to the study of different disciplines, this generating experts in a range of subjects. While raising educational standards, this development risked a loss of institutional commitment and cohesion, as professors increasingly identified with their guild. The same tension persists to the present day. Is our greater loyalty to the institution in which we work or to the subject that we study, teach and research? Some of us might answer that question differently depending on the day of the week. A second shift is that universities gradually became powerful institutions in their own right rather than mere agencies of the Presbyterian church. With their own resources, influential teaching positions, and some autonomous powers of government, the universities would increasingly become influential in shaping Scottish culture and public life. But we should not exaggerate this. The partnership with a powerful national church was always evident. All appointments were subject to confessional tests. The churches had a measure of control over the chairs in the Faculties of Divinity and the examination of candidates to ministry. In terms of numbers and finance, the Church of Scotland was for centuries a much bigger beast than any of the universities.

The European Enlightenment is sometimes presented as a secular and anti-clerical movement that diminished the authority of the church in favour of greater intellectual freedom and autonomy. Yet the Scottish Enlightenment was largely a Presbyterian movement. Several of its leading figures were eminent clergymen, though they distinguished themselves in fields other than theology. Francis Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, Adam Ferguson,

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[3] James K. Cameron, ed., *The First Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1972), 58–62; 137–55. See also D. F. Wright, “Education, Theological” in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 278–85.

Hugh Blair and William Robertson were all ministers of the Kirk but rose to eminence in the study of philosophy, social science, literature, and history. Edinburgh outshone Oxbridge at that time. The outlier was David Hume. Though the doyen of the Scottish Enlightenment, he stands apart from the other leading figures, with the possible exception of Adam Smith, for his religious scepticism.

The theology that dominated the Kirk during this period is often described by that elusive term ‘Moderate’. While this does not designate a single theological party, some pervasive features were apparent. The stress on morality and manners, a commitment to the principle of patronage whereby landowners could appoint ministers to charges, a reluctance to affirm some of the earlier tenets of Calvinism such as total depravity and substitutionary atonement, and an emphasis upon the practical rather than the speculative. These tended to be the hallmarks of a Moderate sermon, which Thomas Chalmers likened to a winter’s day – clear, cold and short.[4] But the hegemony of the Moderates ensured a close alliance of church and university – this is described in Richard Sher’s seminal work.[5]

The Moderates may have been the dominant party in the General Assembly for much of the eighteenth century, but evangelical opposition was always present and grew in strength into the nineteenth. Moreover, it is estimated that around one third of Scots were already worshipping outside the established church by 1800, even before the disruption of 1843. This ecclesiastical pluralism produced a number of independent theological colleges also capable of producing eminent and influential scholars. To these we can add the three Free Church establishments in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen, all products of the Disruption – New College, Trinity College, and Christ’s College as they later became known. Each performed strongly through the second half of the nineteenth century, their scholars at times outshining those in the universities, particularly in biblical studies.

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[4] See Stewart J. Brown, “Moderate Theology and Preaching *c.*1750–1800”, in *The History of Scottish Theology*, Vol. 2, eds. David Fergusson and Mark W. Elliott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 69–83.

[5] ‘Whatever else they may eventually have become, the Moderate literati of Edinburgh were originally and fundamentally churchmen, and for that reason their values and beliefs cannot be fully understood outside the context of eighteenth-century Scottish Presbyterianism.’ Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 324.

William Robertson Smith, a product of Marischal College and one of the most brilliant scholars of the late Victorian period, taught Old Testament at the Free Church College in Aberdeen.[6] The building in which he lectured at Albyn Place bears a plaque in his honour. After his deposition by the Free Church General Assembly, he became Professor of Arabic in Cambridge where he turned his attention to the comparative study of religion. In a lecture in Aberdeen to mark the centenary of Smith's birth, Charles Raven of Cambridge remarked, 'You threw away a pearl. We picked it up.'[7] Smith's career represents tensions between church and academy which remain with us today.

Despite these dramas of the Victorian period – Smith's heresy trial was one of several that took place – the churches gradually made their peace with biblical criticism and Darwinian evolution.[8] By the end of the century, the Church of Scotland had recovered from the trauma of the Disruption to become the largest of the three Presbyterian groupings. The United Presbyterian Church and the Free Church formed the United Free Church in 1900 to be followed by union with the Church of Scotland in 1929. This two-stage movement towards church union produced a resetting and reinvigoration of the alliance between church and university. The three church colleges merged with the Divinity Faculties of Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh. (There had never been a Free Church College in St Andrews.) Regius chairs were 'de-regiusized' to signify the spiritual independence of the Church of Scotland from the crown and the state. Appointments to chairs were to be made by committees containing equal numbers of representatives selected by the church and the university – the so-called 'six and six'.[9]

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[6] See Willliam Johnstone, ed., *William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

[7] Charles E. Raven, *Centenary of the birth on 8th November 1846 of the Reverend Professor W. Robertson Smith*: [orations delivered at] *the University of Aberdeen, 8th November 1946* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1951), 3.

[8] See A. C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk: Victorian Scotland's Religious Revolution* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1983).

[9] For a full account of the process see Douglas M. Murray, *Rebuilding the Kirk: Presbyterian Reunion in Scotland 1909–1929* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 2000), 189–204.

When benchmarked against the aims of church union, all this worked quite well. A close alliance of the Church of Scotland with the academy was entrenched. Most of the professoriate were drawn from the ranks of the clergy. Church representatives played an active role in appointment to chairs. The church continued to pay a significant portion of professorial stipends though this was soon to be diminished by inflation. Many of the students in the four faculties were ordinands with the result that these places of learning functioned largely as seminaries for second-degree BD students. School leavers and postgraduates were less well represented, with the exception of one-year visiting American students, particularly in Edinburgh.[10] I recall one such visitor who declared himself to be a keen squash player. Bill Shaw, the Dean of the Faculty now in his fifties, proposed a game. The student was embarrassed at the prospect of humiliating this ageing, arthritic academic. It turned out that Bill, as a former national champion, didn't need to move much on the squash court. The student of course was thrashed. He said later that the most humiliating moment was when Bill asked if they might take a break while he went outside for a smoke.

The mid-twentieth century period of close cooperation between church and university reflected the somewhat Presbyterian character of the universities. A remarkable local example was Sir Thomas Taylor, Principal of Aberdeen from 1948 until his death in 1962. A distinguished advocate, academic, and one time Labour party candidate, Taylor was also an elder of the Church of Scotland who took active part in ecclesiastical affairs. His annual sermons at the Kirking of the student council in Aberdeen were published as a collection in 1960.[11] He also served on the executive committee of the WCC from 1948. (I guess that Vice-Chancellors had more time on their hands in those days.) In Taylor's time, the universities trained doctors, lawyers and teachers for the professions of Scotland. The work of the Divinity Faculties was similarly understood in terms of its contribution to a recognised profession. The membership of the Church of Scotland peaked in the mid-1950s at around 1.3 million which makes it unsurprising that the alliance of church and university should have appeared impregnable to many.

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[10] In 1936/37, there were 367 students training for the ministry of the Church of Scotland across the four universities – a startling total by today's standards. See Murray, *Rebuilding the Kirk*, 202.

[11] Thomas Murray Taylor, *Where One Man Stands* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1960).

Recent changes to the church-university partnership

Much has changed since then. To record the shifts that have taken place over the course of my own career is a relatively straightforward task. This confirms the theory of Callum Brown and Hugh McLeod that secularisation has been a comparatively recent, sudden and swift process in the UK since the 1960s.[12]

New College in Edinburgh still functioned largely as a seminary when I began my theological studies in the late 1970s. There were almost 100 ordinands, including many from the Church of England studying at Coates Hall. Some of the lectures would begin in prayer and end with a benediction. Clerical collars were a common sight. Robust discussions between liberals and evangelicals were a daily occurrence. Yet some changes were already apparent. Women were arriving in greater numbers, though still in a small minority. While the Church of Scotland had welcomed the ordination of women in 1968, the initial take-up was relatively slow. The Faculties had started to become more ecumenical in the make-up of the staff body. Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Baptist and Methodist scholars now held positions in Scottish Faculties, even though few were appointed to established chairs.[13] This greater ecumenical and gender diversity may actually have strengthened the partnership between church and university at that time. But other trends were more fissiparous. Religious Studies gained a foothold with comparative religion now taught and degree programmes in RS rather than Divinity introduced. Many of those teaching RS espoused a more phenomenological approach which self-consciously eschewed all confessional commitments. With the growth of RS in secondary schools, more first-degree students were recruited to study in the Divinity Faculties. And by the close of the twentieth century, a steady decline in the number of Church of Scotland ordinands had already become apparent, doubtless reflecting the absence of younger people in the churches. A quick scan of the statistics reveals that numbers held up until around 1990 with about 180 students in training. Thereafter, this figure drops by approximately one half each decade. In 2023/24, the Church of Scotland had 29 candidates in training for the full-time ministry of Word and Sacrament, a decline from the high figures persisting through much of the twentieth century. Having once constituted a large majority of the student population, ordinands may now be 2–3% of the student cohort at most. These have not been replaced by students training for ordination in other churches, with the consequence that the church-university partnership has been significantly weakened.

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[12] Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000* (London: Routledge, 2001); Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[13] The furore at the 1979 General Assembly following the appointment of a Roman Catholic to the Thomas Chalmers Chair of Systematic Theology at New College is hard now to comprehend. Ironically, James P. Mackey, the chair-holder and later Dean, was to prove highly effective at maintaining a Reformed presence within the Faculty. See Stewart J. Brown, “Presbyterians and Catholics in Twentieth-century Scotland”, in *Scottish Christianity in the Modern World*, ed. Stewart J. Brown and George Newlands (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 255–82.

The economic imbalance of church and university has also been reversed. This may be more significant than we immediately recognise. In terms of numbers and finance, the church was a much more powerful outfit for several centuries. Yet this has dramatically shifted. Here is one statistic. The annual turnover of the central body of the Church of Scotland is just over £50 million today. Compare that to the University of Edinburgh, the turnover of which is now around £1.4 billion. The universities are big business – the church is small beer.

One should be wary of generalising about the Scottish universities. The four ancient universities have different characteristics and strengths, to which we should add the Highland Theological College of the University of the Highlands and Islands which offers programmes of study to a widely dispersed constituency often via mixed-mode forms of delivery. But what seems generally to be the case is that there has been a shift to recruitment of school leavers. We sometimes forget that a BD was only available to graduates until about the late 1960s. By contrast, a degree in Divinity or Religious Studies is now mostly taken as a liberal arts degree by a younger cohort. Often this will be pursued with an admixture of courses in arts and social sciences, and sometimes as a conjoint honours degree. The most popular undergraduate programme at New College in Edinburgh is the joint philosophy-theology degree. Today's graduates follow a much wider diversity of career paths, very few entering full-time employment in the church. Universities enjoy a much greater degree of autonomy in filling posts. Will Storrar and I were probably the last chair-holders to be appointed by a committee of 'six and six'. Both in Aberdeen and Edinburgh, where I held posts, I was interviewed by groups of 14–15 people. But, since 2000, church involvement has been reduced at most to one observer and often this token representation is altogether absent, despite the statutory legislation. Given the lack of financial input and ordinand numbers, it would be pointless for the Church of Scotland to insist on the status quo ante. The universities could simply bypass the process by filling newly-created posts that were not subject to the legislation of 1932.

A further feature of the dissociation of church and university may be the loss of several generations of public intellectuals within the Faculties of Divinity. Many of these were clergy practised at communicating with wide audiences. A prolific author of over 80 books, William Barclay in Glasgow wrote commentaries that were widely used across the world. J. S. Stewart in Edinburgh was regarded by many as the greatest preacher of his day with several collections of his sermons appearing in print. John Baillie's *Diary of Private Prayer* was translated into multiple languages, and it continues to sell in its updated form. Today's professoriate cannot match these achievements. (Tom Wright, formerly of St Andrews, may provide an Anglican exception that proves the rule.) Is this change on account of our need to write for increasingly specialised academic audiences? Or has that wider Christian public addressed by our predecessors ceased to exist?

Renegotiating the relationship[14]

In light of the above analysis, we might ask whether we have come quite suddenly to the end of a partnership that has been evident in Scotland for over six centuries. Is the church-university relationship in as ruinous a condition as the ancient cathedral in St Andrews which was but a stone's throw from Bill Shaw's home? Perhaps not. The most paradoxical fact is that today, notwithstanding all these changes, there are more people teaching and studying in the Scottish Divinity Faculties than ever before. We may call them Schools or Departments under the new terminology, but they retain something of their earlier identities. (I predict that the term 'faculty' will eventually make a comeback when a new generation wants to reinvent our structures.) As universities have grown, so have we. And much of this success is largely the result of graduate student numbers, particularly from overseas. A paradox of modern Scottish life is that the decline of the churches has coincided with the rise in theological study within the universities.

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[14] In what follows, I have drawn upon material from *Reformed Humanism: Essays on Christian Doctrine, Philosophy and Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2024), 241–52.

Nevertheless, we face a formidable series of arguments on both sides in favour of dissolving the relationship of church to university. But, paraphrasing Edmund Burke, I believe that if an institutional arrangement is worth preserving then we should be prepared to reform and revise it.

Scepticism can take both external and internal forms. An externalist argument is that we live in a pluralist society in which all faiths are treated as equal under the law. Published recently, the findings of the Scottish census of 2021 indicate that 51.1% of Scots now identify as belonging to 'no religion', a rise of almost 15% in a decade. This has prompted calls from the National Secular Society and the Humanist Society Scotland to remove the teaching of religion from our education system, though exactly what this means remain unclear. For many, theology suddenly seems a less familiar and natural part of the landscape. Within a predominantly Christian society, its presence in a university may once have seemed unremarkable. But now that it has ceased to be the default option, its case requires some careful consideration. Have we become strangers in our own house? This anxiety is compounded by a recent dip in the number of school leavers in the UK wanting to study Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) in UK universities. After an upsurge in the early part of this century – perhaps 9/11 had some relation to that – the number has now fallen back, partly it seems on account of fewer A-level candidates in TRS. By contrast, philosophy has grown increasingly popular in schools and universities.[15]

A more internalist critique comes from the study of religion itself. For some scholars of religion, theology has been the problem. Slanted towards a Christian, clerical and male elite, it distorts the proper academic study of religion and tends towards the denigration of faiths other than

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[15] See the recent analysis commissioned by the British Academy: *Theology and Religious Studies Provision in UK Higher Education,* https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/theology-religious-studies-provision-uk-higher-education/.

Christianity.[16] The emergence of 'religious studies' or the 'study of religion' as a field distinct from theology has been apparent since around the 1960s with the formation of departments and centres of study devoted to the non-theological study of religion. This can be conducted in philological, historical, philosophical and phenomenological approaches that resolutely bracket normative assumptions and claims.

These are formidable arguments. So why continue with teaching and research in Christian theology? One answer to this question is simple, if utilitarian. Christian theology will flourish in the university for as long as there are people who wish to study it.[17] There might be two explanations for this. The first is that although Christian affiliation is in rapid decline in Europe, especially amongst younger generations, it blossoms in other parts of the world, thus ensuring an international constituency, particularly within our graduate programmes. In an increasingly secular Britain, it's easy to forget that around 85% of the world's population adheres to one or other of the world religions. Secularisation does not appear to be taking over on a global scale – it looks more like a regional phenomenon in the former heartlands of Christendom. The success of our Divinity Schools in recruiting disproportionately high numbers of doctoral candidates testifies to this.

A second explanation for student demand, particularly within our Masters programmes, may be an intellectual curiosity no longer encumbered by expectations of conformity to ecclesiastical standards of orthodoxy. Although not entirely absent from university life, intellectual contempt and indifference are being replaced by puzzlement, surprise, and even appreciation of religion in some quarters. Gen Z may not be rebelling against ancestral forms of Christianity since they never knew much about these in the first place. Yet the questions posed by faith, the questions it asks, the answers offered, the canonical texts, its societal influences – these are of growing interest to our students. If questions about spiritual meaning and religious truth emerge in other disciplines but are suppressed or ignored, then students will find their ways to the study of theology. One current feature of taught postgraduate recruitment is the steady number of students 'converting' to theology from other fields. Books are now being written about the renaissance of Christianity in our society.[18]

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[16] This is argued in a nuanced article by Denise Cush, "Religious Studies *Versus* Theology: Why I'm still Glad That I Converted from Theology to Religious Studies", in *Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education*, ed. Darlene Bird and Simon G. Smith (London: Continuum, 2008), 15–30.

[17] Admittedly, recent evidence suggests a worrying decline over the last decade in numbers at A-level and undergraduate courses in theology and religious studies. Whether this can be halted or reversed is currently an open question, though the resurgence of the classics over the last 20 years may offer some hope. See above, British Academy, *Theology and Religious Studies Provision in UK Higher Education*.

This takes us to a more substantive kind of response. The study of the Bible, church history, and theology are necessary to understand our past – its literature, political institutions, laws, and culture. You cannot properly study the Middle Ages, the Reformation or the Enlightenment without knowing a good deal about theology. Moreover, if theology is concerned with some of the most fundamental questions that face us, then it would be surprising were it excluded from academic life. Why is there something and not nothing? Why are we here? What is a human being? What wisdom can be gathered from longstanding spiritual traditions and their classical texts? What makes a life worth living? – a question that we've pondered amidst lockdown restrictions. How should we face death? Why are the sciences so successful? And Bonhoeffer's oft-quoted question: Who is Jesus Christ for us today?[19]

To suppress these normative questions or to refuse to entertain them in an academic context will result in a narrowing of focus. Simone Weil described herself as occupying a boundary between the church and the world. She wrote of the ways in which questions about ourselves, the world, God, suffering, and love are all deeply intertwined.[20] These questions do not admit of ready answers, but in pursuing them we are drawn inevitably into theological territory. To suppress or bracket deep existential questions in an academic context would result only in a confected avoidance, even an ideological curtailment of free enquiry, though in fact it would not be long before they resurfaced in other disciplines.

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[18] E.g. Justin Brierley, *The Surprising Rebirth of Christian Belief in God: Why New Atheism Grew Old and Secular Thinkers are Considering Christianity Again* (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 2023).

[19] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Who Is Christ for Us?*, trans. Craig L. Nessan (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

[20] Simone Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God", in *Waiting on God* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), 83–142.

Theology alone cannot deliver all the answers. Despite inevitable tensions, it will remain in conversation with other approaches, methods of enquiry and their findings. The juxtaposition of theology with biblical criticism, church history, and religious studies can work well. Most of our predecessors would have assumed that; indeed, they would have had difficulty recognising the division of labour in today's academy with its guilds and carefully regulated boundaries. At its best, theology functions alongside other disciplines neither in subservient adherence to intellectual fashions nor in dictatorial mode. And this is part of its excitement as we see the syllabus increasingly engage with science, healthcare, literature, art, and popular culture.

Should this be a confessional enterprise? Yes, but not in a partisan or sectarian spirit. The judgement of theologians will reflect their own confessional commitments, though these must be open to challenge, correction, and adjustment. The centuries-long history of our Chairs of Divinity suggests that theology is mobile. It is not mere repetition, clarification, or retrieval of what was accomplished in the thirteenth, seventeenth or twentieth centuries. Interrogation of earlier expressions of the tradition is necessary. Without its historical focus and attempt to articulate a living, breathing tradition, theology lapses quite quickly into a more abstract philosophy of religion. There is a constant return to the canonical texts of the discipline in the conviction that these can illuminate the present. Yet this conversation with the past is always critical and constructive. Few of us believe what was once taught about predestination, hell, other religions, the suppression of heresy, and the inerrancy of Scripture. And the diversity within Christian theology has probably never been greater than it is today, given that the majority of Christians now live outside the west.

In following Jesus, the Christian is committed to seeking the truth wherever it is to be found, to the logos that is everywhere in the world. Simone Weil writes, 'one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.'[21]

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[21] Weil, *Waiting on God*, 36.

An obvious objection arises to this. Why privilege the study of *Christian* theology in our universities? The only answer that can be given to that question is along the lines already offered. The study of theology has been around for as long as the university and of course this has historically reflected the Christian culture of our society. And if there is a continuing demand, then under the appropriate conditions, the case for the supply persists. But we can and should recognise that the religious character of our host society has changed significantly. Different theologies and worldviews deserve expression in our universities – Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and others. The voice of Christian theology will have increasingly to be heard in conversation with other normativities – this is both a necessary and an exciting venture. In the future, Christianity will increasingly be studied in a multi-faith context, not in monotonous isolation. And theology will need to grapple with the diversity within Christianity itself – its global contexts and multiple socio-political challenges call for significant adjustments to our syllabi. My plea is not for the maintenance of a teaching programme but for recognition of the mutual benefits of the church-university partnership.

What might theology offer the wider university and our host society? Here the question of relevance can become acute, especially given the dangers of intellectual isolation. Yet theology may be more embedded in the academy than some appearances may suggest. I'm continually impressed with how many of my colleagues are engaging with other scholars and discourses in the university. We bring something to these conversations, and the future health of the subject will require a capacity to work not only with the theologies of other faith traditions but also with our partner disciplines in the university. I often urge graduate students today not to become too narrow in their intellectual interests or in neglecting opportunities to discover what is happening beyond their own field. We should not sit at home or in the library because someone is reading a paper at a research seminar which has no immediate appearance of relevance to our own field of study.

These reflections are offered in response to a possible secular critic. Since studying philosophy in the 1970s, I have always assumed that this critique would be the most familiar and formidable challenge to be faced. But now I detect a threat from elsewhere, namely the church. Anxiety about traditional models of theological education is acutely felt as ordinands train for different forms of ministry in a society that has largely seceded from its earlier Christian affiliation. Instead of maintaining an already Christianised society, the churches face a tougher challenge of missional engagement, service and outreach within a rapidly changing context marked by indifference, loss of institutional attachments, and unfamiliarity with the rituals, practices, and beliefs of Christian faith. Might an apprentice model of ministry work better? Candidates might be better placed in parishes, working alongside other ministers, and gaining their theological education through day-release or distance-learning modes. Would this give them greater resilience and a spiritual formation that is difficult to provide in a university setting? I do not doubt the greater need for resilience and spiritual formation in this altered setting, nor the need for changes in ordination training. Lacunae and poorly-fitting elements in any form of ministerial formation are not difficult to detect. Yet there remains an advantage in being exposed to current teaching and research in the theological disciplines and in mixing with students from a wide variety of backgrounds in the university. The university can itself be viewed as a microcosm of our wider society in which ministry is to be exercised. And the church will be enriched by exposure to scholarly excellence in the study of religion.

I often recall an exchange that took place during a review at the Church of Ireland College in Dublin some years ago. Arriving at Trinity College, the Archbishop of Dublin was asked for his views on the quality of an educational programme that involved church candidates spending some of their time studying for a university degree. He said to the review body something along the following lines, and here I paraphrase: ‘I don’t much like having to write a large cheque each year for our ordinands to be taught here, but I’m unwilling to tolerate a situation in which these people are preaching to congregations better educated than they are.’ And, while much Christian theology will continue elsewhere, for example in church colleges, most of the teaching is likely to be undertaken by people who have obtained their doctorates in a recognised research university.

The pursuit of Christian theology offers an entry into the deepest and unavoidable questions that confront us as human beings. That will ensure an abiding interest on the part of students. It also provides a set of skills that are as adaptable as any in a liberal arts education. And its research and teaching, enriched by location within a broad-spectrum university, can provide multiple points of constructive contact with civic society. These are aligned with the mission of the modern university. I have always thought it a mistake to adopt too defensive a posture on the place of theology in the university; even writing a paper on its relevance causes me some unease. Does this arise from fear of extinction? One valuable lesson I learned from teachers like Bill Shaw is that you shouldn’t apologise to anyone for studying theology. Instead, you immerse yourself in the life of both your discipline and your institution, believing that you have the capacity to make as constructive and scholarly a contribution as the next person. Get stuck in and never apologise for being a theologian or a person of faith in the university. That’s my parting message in honour of Bill, our cherished teacher and friend.