Wisdom, Spirituality and Community in the University*

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Entering the third millennium is a turning point for both higher education and our world. In previous times, communities of learning played a significant part in enabling society to develop. Thus when the Roman legions pulled back from provinces like Britain, learning was preserved in the early monasteries through the Dark Ages. At the start of the second millennium universities were founded by religious communities across Europe. New life from the Renaissance towards the Enlightenment and the Industrial Age was increasingly driven by universities. At the start of a new millennium, universities face huge challenges in their relationship with society. How can chaplains and campus ministers help develop community, spirituality and wisdom in higher education today?

COMMUNITY

Community is a difficult word in today's global context. In ancient Athens, community was a relatively small city. The Academy was at the edge of the Agora so its deliberations about truth, beauty and value might inform public debate in the marketplace. No area of life was immune from Socrates' relentless questioning and the entire universe was studied in Plato's Academy. Cardinal Newman declared that a university 'is a place of teaching universal knowledge'.[1] Lord Runcie stated that 'a University is, etymologically, an institution which is *universus*, turned in one direction, focused on a common point'.[2] Equally, college comes from *col-lego*, to read together, to be collected together. Both aspects draw on the origins of universities within religious communities.

This concept of a university to study the whole universe in one direction to benefit society was well illustrated by the Robbins Committee on Higher Education (1963), which set four objectives:[3]

- instruction in skills;
- promotion of the general powers of the mind;

- the advancement of learning and the search for truth;
- the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship.

The ability to think and the transmission of a common culture have always been the aims of higher education. G. K. Chesterton remarked that education is the 'soul of a society' passed from one generation to another, while Professor Dan Hardy sees higher education as 'a means whereby society transcends itself'.[4]

However, British universities have changed enormously.[5] In 1939 Britain had about 50,000 students, which grew to 200,000 by 1969. This rose to half a million by the late 1980s and then doubled in less than ten years to over a million people in higher education, a shift from an élitist group of one in seven 18-year-olds to a mass system of one in three. King's College, London, has grown from a couple of thousand students and a few hundred staff to 18,000 students based on several sites across London – which completely changes what we mean by 'community', 'university' and 'college'.

The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education chaired by Sir Ron Dearing gave four aims for higher education:

- to develop individuals' potential for work and to contribute to society;
- to increase knowledge and understanding – for their own sake and for the economy;
- to serve the needs of the economy at all levels;
- to shape a democratic civilised and inclusive society.[6]

Notice straight away the stress on the economy. Do we value general scholarship, the pursuit of truth for truth's own sake or must all research and study be assessed by 'value for money'? Secondly, while Robbins stressed the 'general powers of the mind', Dearing prefers skill-based approaches. Lastly, Robbins' fourth aim – the transmission of a common culture – is replaced in today's multicultural society with the values of respect and liberal tolerance (section 8). Thus, not only is the 'community' of higher education hugely bigger, but it is very different, no longer a 'common culture' which is *uni-versus*, turned in one direction – but lots of different cultures all going in various directions.

Both of these developments reflect the domination of the marketplace. While numbers have doubled, the 'unit of resource per student' has gone down by some 40 per cent. Government funding has been cut, while bureaucratic interference has increased with Research Selectivity Exercises and Teaching Quality Audits. The key criteria are no longer academic – but of the marketplace. Through its increased size, King's College has become big business: it has the

Queen's Award for Industry and Export for earnings through overseas students, and a turnover of £1 million per day!

The move from a community to a marketplace asks 'who is the customer?' and 'what is the product?' The *Charter for Higher Education*[7] treats employers and society as 'customers' of the university, telling us what 'products' we should manufacture 'to serve the needs of the economy'. Students are raw material, coming into our higher education factory to have 'value added', and to be processed into whatever society is prepared to pay for. Alternatively, students are consumers with their fee allocation, whom we attract with our new improved product, better than that of our competitors. Not all students bring the same income, since there are differentiated tuition fees – and institutions can have extra places at discounted rates! All supermarkets offer such 'economies of scale'.

Thus higher education is no longer a treasure, passed from one generation to the next, with graduates repaying the investment by their contributions to society for the future. Rather, higher education is something I buy for myself, putting myself into poverty and debt, so that I might benefit at the end financially in a job.

This raises questions about 'community'. If the university is now a diverse supermarket, how can it be *'uni-versus'* – turned in one direction? If King's College is now such a large institution on many sites, where does it actually *col-lege*, read together? In a recent briefing for the Bishops in the House of Lords, one chaplain said: 'This loss of a sense of community, coupled with the narrowing vision of Higher Education, is one of the biggest challenges to chaplaincy.'[8] After all, there is no community in your local superstore. Most people go in, when there are likely to be less people, get what they want off the shelves, and check out as soon as they can. Increasingly, students come into universities, trying to fit lectures around their work, get what they need and quickly go away.

And yet, higher education is not a commodity to be purchased like this. Is education simply what students take away from their studies, merely content – or does something happen through the process of meeting with others? Dearing's fourth aim for higher education, 'to shape a democratic civilised and inclusive society', cannot happen as individuals just take what they want and go away again. Somewhere there must be a meeting place, where the 'university' is turned in one direction, and where the *col-lege* reads together.

Can ministry in higher education provide this meeting and raise a prophetic voice about community? If so, we cannot just look back at the old monastic communities. We have to look forward to new ways. Canon John White of St George's, Windsor, sees the Christian faith as more 'about communion, not community'. If community is about residing together, 'communion' is more about fellowship and

relationships. Even pagan critics noted the fellowship of the early Church, how people from different backgrounds cared for one another. The early Church struggled to bring together Jews and Gentiles, and challenged other divisions like male and female, slave and free (see Gal. 3.28). In its theology, and at its best in practice, the Church has never been a club for the like-minded, for people of one class or culture. Is this model of communion, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds, something to offer the modern university to build relationships of learning in the marketplace?

Campus ministry must be directed not at our own faith group or paid-up members, but to the institution as a whole. We bring our faith to the whole university in its work of research and scholarship, teaching and learning. We have to face the implications of new discoveries for faith and society, and the chaplaincy can organize seminars across disciplinary boundaries to enable this, and to build communion. As Timothy Jenkins, Dean of Jesus College, Cambridge, says, 'what is there in the institution to have faith in?'[9] David Ford has asked chaplains to facilitate 'the involvement of God in the university across the whole range of its disciplines, activities and personnel'.[10] Because the minister is often outside the structures or the competitiveness of the internal market, we can be the jester asking the difficult questions – much as the Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* was actually the only one who could tell the King the truth.

In these days of e-mail and the Net, chaplaincy can also offer a meeting place. At King's we organize social 'get-togethers', usually with food and drink, for key academics, counsellors, medics, administrators, student union officers and so forth, simply to meet each other and with us. Often they talk over the phone or e-mail, but have never actually met – and through these events we build communion. Because God values our humanity enough even to take flesh and live among us in Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnation means that for all the wonders of the 'virtual community' we still want to have relationships face to face, in the flesh.

SPIRITUALITY

Here too we find a massive shift in both the universities and in society. Universities may have been founded by religious communities originally, but in the nineteenth century there was a deliberate move to exclude faith from higher education. The universities which mushroomed in the twentieth century were secular foundations. In the 1960s and 1970s everything seemed very 'modern'. There was no place for God on either side of the Iron Curtain: both the modern scientific materialism of the West and modernist institutional

Communism of the East had put men into space. The sky was no longer the limit – we were 'to boldly go where no one had gone before' on the *Star Trek* and there was, in the words of Laplace to Napoleon, no need of the hypothesis of God.

Yet nothing dates as quickly as modernity! Now society is 'post-modern', turning away from the post-Enlightenment rational confidence. The bankruptcy of materialism in the West and the collapse of Communism in the East have destroyed optimism. We have abandoned the trek into outer space for the psychotherapeutic journey into inner space. Even Star Trek's *The Next Generation* of the starship *Enterprise* has a counsellor on board, while the current series, *Voyager*, is stranded in the Delta Quadrant, 70,000 light years from Earth.[11] It is not about going out boldly – but we are lost, and does anyone know the way home? As the Chief Rabbi said in his Reith Lectures, 'we are caught between two ages, one passing, the other not yet born'.[12]

I believe we are not only postmodern, but also post-atheistic. The modern society may have had no need of God, but its collapse has left a spiritual void. If neither science nor politics will improve things, then who will save us? Consequently, any belief rushes in to fill the gap. Chesterton's aphorism that when people stop believing in God, they believe not in nothing, but rather in anything, is coming true with a vengeance. New Age ideas and philosophies have invaded our universities, governments and society, and it is even more marked in former Communist countries. The aching spiritual void must be satisfied. Pascal's God-shaped vacuum must be filled. Augustine's restless heart must find peace. We need spirituality, value and meaning.

Yet spirituality remains a rather vague and nebulous term. Gene Roddenberry, the creator of the original *Star Trek*, was an atheist reacting against his own Baptist background. However, the spirituality of the new *Star Trek* is a postmodern smorgasbord of different beliefs all available on the promenade of *Deep Space Nine*. Here also consumer approaches dominate the marketplace – and it is the same at any freshers' fayre, or student union list of societies in our universities, a bewildering range of endless options and consumer choice available to students.

Furthermore, there is a reaction against beliefs and practices handed down from previous generations. 'Orthodoxy' is a repressive idea, and any suggestion that other beliefs might be mistaken is seen as intolerant. Instead, we have the pick 'n' mix of the cafeteria, where you create your own spirituality with a bit of this and a dash of that. For many students today, spirituality is a lifestyle choice, or even a recreational activity. I choose to make my own meaning, selecting values or beliefs from the postmodern supermarket – and it is relatively true, true for me. Your truth may be different. As

Alasdair MacIntyre in his important book, *After Virtue,* says, 'there seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture'.[13] Moral choices are reduced to expressions of personal preference: I believe this, you believe that. Emotivism is now the dominant ethical system governing individuals' lives.

Yet, is belief or religious practice enough on its own, without regard to what is actually believed? In every other area of the university, the search for truth is a guiding principle. If you believe something in an hypothesis, but your research shows it to be false, you have to amend your ideas. Can we retreat from this shared search for truth in all other disciplines into a totally relative system for faith where all beliefs, however wacky or wild, are equally valid? Can all values be relativized so that the only absolute is the absence of absolutes and the only thing not tolerated is intolerance?

The postmodern resurgence in spirituality presents us with a great opportunity but an equally huge challenge for campus ministry. Faced with this bewildering array of possibilities, should chaplains retreat into serving those who belong to our faith, denomination or group? After all, many face funding problems and pressure from churches. In a market-driven society, religious groups who pay for a chaplain want a return on their investment. Since students, with their debts, will never be great givers, then we are pressured to be recruiting officers for our denomination. The more who join it, the better our report to funding authorities can be – and if students offer for full-time ministry, so much the better! So chaplains will not have time to dialogue with the wider institution, and will be left on the margins as an extra-curricular social activity, a 'haven' to stop our youngsters being 'corrupted' by higher education!

Such an approach to university ministry means that we compete in the marketplace of contemporary spirituality, trying to increase our 'market share'. Some ministers are described by their institution, by their religious authority or by themselves as 'the Chaplain to Brand-X students' – the Chaplain to Catholic students or whatever. Yet chaplains are to serve not just their own 'paid-up members' but the institution as a whole. The spiritual resurgence of the postmodern university offers something much more rewarding and interesting – to be the 'Brand-X Chaplain to the university', the Baptist Chaplain, or whatever – and who knows what we might begin to find out then?

WISDOM

One mark of a university is the ability to award degrees, particularly masters and doctorates of 'Philosophy' – Greek for 'the love of wisdom'. We have noted the importance of Greek wisdom for the

origins of higher education and that the Academy was placed deliberately by the Agora, the marketplace, to inform the life of business and the democratic process of the Assembly.

Since then, higher education has sometimes retreated from the marketplace and the assembly, and been accused of being an 'ivory tower', remote from public life, and the terrifying twist of language which makes the word 'academic' mean 'irrelevant'! Today, however, as with community and spirituality, so too the marketplace has affected wisdom with a vengeance. All the consumer-speak, such as credit-transfer, devolved budgets, quality assurance, league tables and so forth, all confront us with the reality of the marketplace in the university. Far from the academy moderating the hurly burly of the market, now the Agora has taken over the academy. Both society and universities are no longer based on the rationalist hypothesis of Descartes, 'cogito ergo sum', 'I think, therefore I am'. Instead it is 'Tesco ergo sum', 'I shop therefore I am'.[14]

And yet the wisdom of the past warns against this. In the apocrypha, the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach, warns that 'only the one who has little business can become wise' (Ecclus. 38.24b). The problem today is the other way round. The wise have little business since wisdom has less market value – while the stock of technology is over-valued. We may still make people Doctors of Philosophy, the love of wisdom, but Dearing's *National Inquiry into Higher Education* was clear that every course must have its key transferable skills, cognitive skills, specific skills and so forth (Recommendation 21) – while saying nothing about the development of a person as wise. David Ford is clear: 'All the knowledge, know-how, skill and information do not add up to wisdom, and teaching that is not somehow concerned with wisdom is failing in its responsibility.'[15]

Universities may have once been *uni-versus*, turned in one direction, but now we have information overload, and do not know in which direction to turn. Previously, higher education may have saved human knowledge in the Dark Ages, or produced the polymath of Renaissance Man, but no one can know everything any more. Such is the expansion of knowledge that the last person who knew everything probably died in the seventeenth century. The sheer rate of information pouring through the ether means that academics struggle to keep up their specialist research, let alone their subject's general area, much less the universe of ideas. So where does that leave the university and wisdom? As T. S. Eliot put it so well:

> Where is the Life we have lost in living?
> Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
> Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
> (*Choruses from the Rock*, I)[16]

Wisdom is not about philosophical speculation in an ivory tower remote from daily life. In the Bible, wisdom comes down and dwells among us with a human face. Job 28 asks 'where shall wisdom be found?', and in Proverbs 8 a female figure of wisdom speaks in the first person. She was with God in creation: 'I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight' – and since then, Wisdom has brought the word of God to human beings (8.22–36). The intertestamental Book of Wisdom says that 'she reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other' (Wisd. 8.1) and she even sits 'beside God's throne' (9.4).

In the Gospels, Jesus uses similar language, that 'wisdom is justified by her deeds', or by 'her children' (Matt. 11.19; Luke 7.35). Jesus' comment that the ways of God are hidden from those who think they are wise, but revealed to infants through his relationship with his Father, recalls how in Job, Proverbs and Wisdom only wisdom knows God and only God knows wisdom (Matt. 11.25–8; Luke 10.21). His lament over Jerusalem for rejecting the prophets picks up how wisdom sends prophets and her maternal imagery (Matt. 23.37; 1 Enoch 42.1; Sirach 1.15).

Whether Jesus saw himself as Wisdom's messenger, or as Wisdom itself,[17] it is undeniable that as his early followers struggled to understand the impact of Jesus, they turned to these ideas of Wisdom. Thus, Paul says that Jesus is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God', the one 'who became for us wisdom from God' (1 Cor. 1.24, 30). Similarly, Hebrews 1.1–3 uses ideas about Wisdom in creation in Proverbs 8 and of Wisdom as the 'reflection of God's glory' in Wisdom 7.26 to describe Jesus. Thus, Dunn concludes, 'Christ alone so embodies God's Wisdom, that is, God's creative, revelatory and redemptive action, that what can be said of Wisdom can be said of Christ without remainder.'[18] Finally, John's Prologue draws not just on Wisdom, but also the 'Word of God', to declare that God's wisdom and word, his communication and his very self, has taken flesh in Jesus and 'tabernacled', dwelt among us (John 1.1–14). In other words, wisdom has been embodied in our community.

Jesus' life, ministry and example are all hugely important for ministry within higher education today. An incarnational model of chaplaincy says that students and staff are not just consumers or products in the marketplace, but human beings who are precious to God because God values our humanity so much that he was willing to share it. Furthermore, he did not minister just to the good 'paid-up members' of a religious group, but to the marginalized, the poor and so-called 'sinners'. So too if we are to build community in universities, we must minister beyond our own group – and that contemporary spirituality also drives us out into the marketplace, not to compete but to share and live together.

Jesus' self-sacrificial death is also a model for campus ministry: 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son' (John 3.16). Despite how some Christians have behaved over the centuries, Jesus died for the world, not for the Church! Lastly, belief in resurrection reminds us that neither previous Dark Ages nor the bankruptcy of market-driven approaches to higher education have the last word. Christians believe that the Wisdom of God did not just live among us to teach us, but also to die and rise again to offer us new life. A Christian understanding of campus ministry must be energized by this, as we seek to bring new life in the marketplaces of higher education.

CONCLUSION

At this turning point in our culture, is there a new role for chaplains in higher education to enable universities to invigorate society once again? First, campus ministry should not be just for our own groups, or competing in a religious marketplace, but directed to the whole community of the university to develop communion. Second, spirituality today is not just about spiritual lifestyle choices, but faces us with ultimate issues of truth in the university. Finally, higher education must not just be about skills and information but wisdom which must be embodied, to dwell among us.

The Academy has been taken over by the Agora, and consumerism and economics rules. Alasdair MacIntyre compares today with the fall of Rome and concludes 'this time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time'.[19] And yet, Wisdom lifts up her voice in the marketplace and calls us to listen. Jesus invites people to follow his example to build a new community or communion of relationships, with a spirituality grounded in love that we might know the wisdom of God.

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Notes

1 J. H. Newman, *The Idea of a University, Defined and Illustrated* (London: Longmans, 1887); see the Preface, dated 21 Nov., 1852, p. ix.
2 R. Runcie, P. A. B. Clarke, A. Linzey, J. Moses, *Theology, the University and the Modern World* (Lester Crook 1988), p. 14.
3 *Higher Education: The Report of the Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961–63* (London: HMSO, 1963), pp. 6–7.
4 'Theology in the public domain' at 'Reaping the Whirlwind: Embracing the Changes in Higher Education', 1992 H. E. Chaplains' Conference, Hoddesdon, 9 September 1992.
5 For a fuller account of the changes in British higher education and a response to them, see Richard A. Burridge, 'The King's Values? Consumer culture and higher education',

The Inaugural Lecture of the Dean of King's College, London, 9 October 1995; it is available at http://www.kcl.ac.uk/dean.

6 *National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education* (1997), section 23.

7 *The Charter for Higher Education*, Dept for Education, 1993.

8 Briefing paper from the Revd Paul Brice, National Secretary for Chaplains in Higher Education, Board of Education of the Archbishops' Council.

9 See the video *Being There*, produced by the Board of Education, 1992.

10 David F. Ford, 'God and the University: What Can We Communicate?', National Convention on Christian Ministry in Higher Education, September 1999.

11 For further analysis and comparison with the Christian story, see Richard A. Burridge, *2001: A Faith Odyssey* (BRF 2000).

12 Jonathan Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith* (London: Weidenfeld, 1991), p. 20.

13 A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology* (London: Duckworth, 1981; 2nd edn 1985), p. 6.

14 See Burridge, 'The Kings's Values?'

15 Ford, 'God and the University', p. 4.

16 T. S. Eliot, *'Collected Poems 1909–1962'* (London: Faber and Faber 1963), p. 161.

17 See Ben Witherington III, *The Many Faces of the Christ: The Christologies of the New Testament and Beyond* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), pp 48–67.

18 J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (SCM Press 1980; 2nd edn 1989), p. 209.

19 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 263.