

**Developing a Christian Mind: Christianity and the Life of the Mind**  
**January 27<sup>th</sup> 2023**

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**Seeking the shalom of the university**

**The discipleship of the mind: reflections on integrating faith and scholarship**

Description. This lecture outlines the intellectual challenges for Christian scholars and researchers implicit in our calling 'to seek the shalom of the modern university'. It explores why we need to develop a systematic understanding of Christian thought; how that can relate to how we set about research and study; and how we evaluate the wider significance of our work.

1. Seeking the *shalom* of the city

Jeremiah 29: 1-7

- (a) Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar's army in 586BC. Strategy of subjugation – confiscated the wealth of the Temple, royal family and others; forced deportation to Babylon of majority of inhabitants, including most leaders (see vv1,2); 1000 miles away
- (b) How long in exile? Chapter 28 – prophet Hananiah in Jerusalem – tells people that the exile will last just two years – the king and other exiles will return with the Temple treasures – falls to Jeremiah to denounce Hananiah as a false prophet and to warn the people – 'what the Lord says' is that the exile will last 70 years (29: 10)
- (c) So how should God's people in exile conduct their lives? vv 4-7 read; prepare for a long stay, build houses plant gardens; continue family life, marry and have children, for at least three generations; v7a 'seek the peace and prosperity of the city' or NRSV 'seek the welfare of the city', the word is 'shalom' wholeness in every dimension of human life; v7b 'pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers you too will prosper'.
- (d) Astonishing instructions.
  - in OT Babylon epitomises the arrogant pride of the human race in opposition to God – Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 3,4) – recall too Isaiah's excoriating condemnation of Babylon in Isaiah 46 and 47.
  - Babylon: a centre of power ruthlessly exercised throughout the empire; ideology based on idolatry, main deity was Marduk, who had a leading role in the Babylonian creation myths; a centre of trade and wealth, attested by archaeological finds of magnificent buildings and a rich material culture; a centre of learning and science – a god, Nabu or Nebo, patron deity of writers and scientists.
  - what was Yahweh up to? Surely the last place to send a people who had shown a propensity to fall away from the worship of God into pagan worship and practice when they were living in Judah. But Jeremiah is explicit about this: v4 'carried into exile', no accident, what Yahweh intended, and Nebuchadnezzar was his instrument. God had not forgotten them in exile: he was present with them, challenging them to remain faithful to him even in pagan Babylon

1 Peter and other NT texts

[Bruce Winter *Seek the Welfare of the City* (1994)]

(a) language of exile is theme of the apostle Peter's first letter to the Christian believers in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) in 60s AD. 1: 1 'God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout...' and 2: 11 'citizens and strangers in the world', their exile is theological, not geographical.

(b) implications: (i) they do not belong to the cultures in which they are living, but set apart to be distinct and holy, 1Peter 2: 9, 10 'You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God... Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God..'; (ii) they are to abstain from the lifestyles of their contemporaries, 2:11 'Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul', their lifestyles should look different. (iii) as so often is the case with minorities – ethnic, religious, cultural – they are subject to hostility 1: 6 'though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials'

(c) BUT despite their difference, they are to seek the good of the communities where they are living: (i) 2:13 'Live such good lives among the pagans, that they may see your good works and glorify God', or 2: 15, 'For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk foolish people'. Winter argues that language and context is that of 'public benefactors' who played a significant role in Graeco-Roman cities, paying for public works, buying food for the poor, supporting the magistrates in maintaining civil order, for which they received public recognition from the authorities and from the public at large; (ii) engaging in 'good deeds' is enjoined of the *whole* Christian community, not just prominent or wealthy individuals; (iii) purpose is to demonstrate the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and its power to save lives, in a culture which was indifferent at best, and at worst actively hostile.

2. How then should a Christian academic/ researcher/ student relate to the culture of research, teaching, and dissemination of knowledge that constitutes the modern university?

Richard Niebuhr addressed the general issue of Christ and culture in the early 1950s in his book of that name *Christ and Culture*, analysing the variety of models adopted by the Christian church both historically and in different places. In more recent times, James Davison Hunter *To change the world* (OUP 2010) has explored the same question. The contemporary options, in respect of Christians engaging the modern university, appear to be:

(a) Christ above culture. Creation of Christian universities and colleges based on faith commitments – examples are the Christian colleges in the US and Catholic universities across the world. Emphasis on recruiting Christian professors who are willing to sign up to the theological agenda. Can impinge in various ways on the academic programme of the institution: sometimes conceive of their mission as to counter the 'enemies of the Christian faith', by critiquing secular thought. (Note: these institutions are absent from the university sector in the UK and Europe).

(b) Christ and culture in paradox. An approach usually associated with Martin Luther with his doctrine of the two kingdoms – 'the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of this world'. Danger that this easily leads to a divided life: working to one set of values in the kingdom of God, and a different set in the kingdoms of this world. In academic life this can involve total acceptance of the intellectual worldview of the discipline and working uncritically within it: the spiritual and church life of the Christian academic has no relevance to her research, writing and teaching. She may well exhibit Christian values in her personal interactions in the department, and be an active witness there, but her Christian faith has no place in the lab, the library, or the seminar room.

(c) Christ the transformer of culture. A stance which Niebuhr claims has been the theological mainstream of the church since Augustine. It involves neither withdrawal nor capitulation to the secular culture, but what Hunter terms 'constructive engagement'. This is probably the most appropriate model for 'seeking the shalom' of the modern secular university and its academic activities.

We can 'engage constructively' with the University in many different ways: if we have an opportunity to teach, we must work hard to ensure that the students are cared for so that they can learn

effectively; on our course, in our lab or department, or in our college, we must seek out opportunities to serve others; we must also strive to model Christian character so that we can be more effective witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ; and we need to be ready to act as peacemakers. I imagine that you don't need to be told all this. But what might 'seeking the shalom' or 'constructive engagement' mean for our disciplines, our research and study? This has been a concern for many years, and it is the question that led to the development of the DCM programme.

### 3. Developing a Christian Mind

Two key texts:

Mark 12: 28-30. Jesus' response to the question 'What is the greatest commandment?'. The Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4, recited as a confession of faith by pious Jewish people, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength'. Four elements: heart, soul, mind, strength – dimensions of a single unified character. The dimension 'mind' added to the Hebrew text: a Greek word, signifying the cognitive aspect of what it is to be a human being, the capacity to think rationally. Implication: the life of the mind should also be exercised as part of our commitment to serve Christ, and that is particularly significant for those whose particular vocation is to the life of the mind.

Romans 12: 1-2. 'Therefore (*note this is an implication of the previous chapters in Romans*), do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind'. Again, an emphasis on capacity for rational thought, but context is moral or ethical – practical consequences for how we should live our lives. So v3 calls for humility and sober self-evaluation, and vv6-8 are an exhortation to serve others.

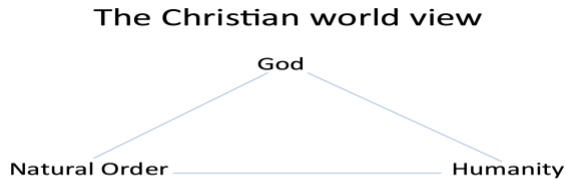
What does this mean for the Christian mind in academic activity?

- a) Consistent Christian discipleship does not permit us to live in two separate worlds – our Christian community and our academic discipline. To do so would be hypocritical – thinking and possibly behaving differently depending on context.
- b) Christian faith is being undermined, not so much in 'New Atheism' as in the underlying presuppositions of our disciplines. In the sciences, we need to be alert: to 'naturalism', human beings are no more than part of the physical world moulded by evolutionary process; to 'scientism', *only* the scientific method can provide understanding and truth about the natural world and humanity's place in that world. In the humanities, the post-modern claim is sometimes made that all 'truth' is relative and a human construct, there is no objective truth to be discovered by academic enquiry. Christian academics need to understand their faith in a deeper/ more systematic way, so that they can identify presuppositions and critique them.  
[Not today's topic, but we also need to attend to apologetics, to enable us to defend a Christian position on creation, theodicy, human nature... not to mention articulating Christian belief in an intellectually sustainable way.]
- c) Christianity is also under attack on ethics and values: sexual mores, beginning and end of life, environment, human nature. There are deeper agendas that inhabit our disciplines: utilitarianism in applied and social sciences, 'anything goes' in the humanities.

Starting point is a systematic understanding of Christian thought – translating faith into a framework that is capable of dealing with intellectual issues. More than Bible knowledge – a worked out theology to sustain faith in an intellectual environment.

(*I find the following more helpful in this regard than the standard theological frameworks*). A triangle of **relationships** between God, the natural order, and humanity: (i) God as the creator and sustainer of the natural order – law governed and intelligible, purposeful and good, and valued for its own sake; (ii) God and humanity – moral order created by God, humanity in the image of God, God's

vicegerents over the natural order, responsible stewards, responsible for other human beings; but (iii) fallen, denying dependence on God and breaking that relationship, relationships with other human beings fractured (breakdown of moral order, exercise of power in place of service to others, lust in place of love in sexual relationships), and with the natural order (exploitation rather than stewardship and care).



This framework applied: how do we know about our world and our role in it? how should we evaluate?

#### 4. Application: how do we know?

Looking for true understanding and knowledge – ‘anything goes’ (if sufficiently clever) is not good enough. God made the world ordered and purposeful – uniformity of causes in the natural sciences, stable patterns of behaviour in the social sciences, moral order in human relationships – there is objective truth to be discovered. The scepticism of Hume is misplaced, and postmodern pessimism about truth is not the final word.

How do we set about the pursuit of objective truth? (i) powers of reasoning a gift from God; (ii) research and advanced study are vocations – a commitment to discovering and communicating truth; (iii) recognise human limitations – we are not omniscient, but capable of self-deception and muddled thinking – so focus on methods of enquiry that allow for findings to be challenged or conclusions constructively critiqued, which is a particular strength of the scientific method.

Challenge is to examine carefully and critically the methods and presuppositions of our disciplines. This is not the time or place to embark on such an exercise: in any case, that lies outside my competence for most of the disciplines represented in this room. But here are two ways of looking at our disciplines that may be helpful to initiate the process:

##### (1) The first is the metaphor of maps

The metaphor of maps was introduced by the philosopher Mary Midgley [see for examples, her [What is philosophy for?](#) (2018) or G McElwain [Mary Midgley: an Introduction](#) (2019)]

Midgley used the metaphor of maps to explore our capacity to capture complex aspects of the reality of the world in which we live. She particularly used this to argue against reductionist accounts.

Maps of Europe physical, relief, soil types, climate, vegetation types, population, economic activities, transport links, political and national boundaries. Each map answers a different question. Superposition of maps to give composite pictures, e.g. maps of relief and national boundaries taken together may help to explain the pattern of railways and roads.

Example of marriage: multiple ‘maps’

Maps within social sciences:

- i. Evolutionary psychology relates sexual activity, courtship and marriage to fundamental biological imperatives of reproduction and survival
- ii. Contract theory (Becker and the Chicago School): marriage as a contract between utility maximising and rational individuals
- iii. Social construction: societies have cultural norms around sex and reproduction that serve to sustain relationships in communities, to prevent sexual abuse and exploitation, and to ensure the nurturing and socialisation of children.

But *other* maps:

- i. Physiology of sex and reproduction as studied within medical sciences
- ii. Understanding of marriage relationships in fiction as studied in literature
- iii. History of evolution of institution of marriage over time, including the roles of religion, legislation, and even land holding.
- iv. The covenant model of marriage in Christian theological ethics.

The necessity of multiple maps:

- (i) Midgley insists that we need multiple maps: scientism is wrong as it fails to account for complexity of life; we need to specialise, but avoid being hubristic about the approach of our particular discipline.
  - (ii) No fundamental principles of comparison or unification across multiple maps. Question of whether different maps might be contradictory in some way. But note that in the mind of God, there is a unity: is our problem that our minds are finite?
  - (iii) We need to think what question we are asking and what approach is relevant to that question. Parable of three people on a cliff top at sunset – a poet, a physicist, and a sensible woman. Different interpretations of the light out at sea: but the only interpretation that mattered was given by the third person – it is an SOS signal.
  - (iv) Note that a theological ‘map’ has as much *a priori* validity as other maps (see Alvin Plantinga, ‘Advice to Christian philosophers, Faith and Philosophy vol 1 July 1984)
- (2) The second may be termed ‘the sociology of knowledge’.

Two seminal contributions: T S Kuhn The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago University Press, 1970); I Lakatos The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes (CUP 1978)

Lakatos. In traditional scientific epistemology, hypotheses can be isolated and tested separately. But scientists typically operate with a cluster of theories – a scientific research programme (SRP). All SRPs have a ‘hard core’ and a ‘protective belt’: the hard core are basic concepts and hypotheses that define the field of study: the protective belt are additional assumptions or conditions that generate hypotheses that can be tested empirically. Testing typically takes place in the protective belt: if empirical observations are not consistent with a theory generated in the protective belt, then it is protective belt theories that will be adjusted, the hard core will not be challenged.

Note that this applies not only in science: ‘schools of thought’ in philosophy, humanities, social sciences.

[A progressive SRP is one that is proving fruitful in generating new theories, and those theories are corroborated, or at least not contradicted or falsified, by the evidence.

A degenerate SRP is the opposite. There are successive empirical failures, despite multiple adjustments in the protective belt.

Scientists will abandon degenerate SRPs over time, and switch (or at least follow the research money) to more successful SRPs. In the process, the hard core may be revisited, and even replaced.]

Kuhn makes a similar distinction, though he does not use the same terminology. He defines ‘normal science’ as that research activity that is addressed to problem solving and understanding within a given theoretical framework or paradigm. ‘Revolutionary science’ is when one paradigm is replaced by another as a consequence of repeated empirical failures. For Kuhn, the academic community plays

a crucial role in defining 'normal science' within a discipline, and in navigating the move to a new paradigm. The move is often characterised by controversy and even conflict in the scientific community.

The researcher will probably never think of abandoning the framework of analysis ('normal science') into which she has been socialised by years of work on taught courses, attending departmental seminars, and the hard graft of reading the relevant papers in the top journals. To do so would be to invite academic suicide, as the social structure of the discipline would ensure that she would never get published, or get a tenure track post at a research university.

We need to be alert to how much: (a) *what* we study in our research, and (b) *how* we study and research, are governed by the norms of the community of scholars and researchers in a particular area or subdiscipline. Reflect on what those norms are, and do not allow ourselves to be held captive by them!

#### 5. Application. How do we evaluate?

Need to be alert to the ethical values implicit (some might say 'buried') in our research.

Not primarily concerned with the methods and/or content that may require ethics approval by the appropriate ethics committees in the University. Important that our work should be subject to scrutiny from others: but as Christians we also need to consult our consciences about what we are doing.

Focus on wider implications/ applications of our research.

An example to get us thinking. The Manhattan Project in the Los Alamos Laboratory developed the atomic bomb that in August 1945 killed a quarter of a million people in Japan, and had long term consequences for millions of others. J Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the Laboratory, remarked to President Truman after the bombing, 'I feel I have blood on my hands'. He later became an advocate for nuclear disarmament, and opposed the construction of the hydrogen bomb, with adverse consequences for his career. Compare the lesser-known Joseph Roblat, a Polish physicist who worked with the British Mission to the Project. He resigned when he became aware of the planning of the military strategists. He went on to be an advocate of nuclear disarmament, and in 1995 was jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize: in his Nobel lecture he commented 'Science became identified with death and destruction'. Perhaps an extreme example: but a former physicist colleague was involved in laser research in the 1990s. He told a group of us that his research was financed by the US military. When we challenged him on whether he was concerned that the research could contribute to more effective weapons, he shrugged off the challenge by saying that his role was to do good science and it was up to others to make the ethical decisions about its use.

More generally, we need as Christians to be alert to the wider agenda within which our research and scholarship is located. In the social sciences and the medical sciences, we need to consider the potential societal impacts. The prevailing model of evaluation is largely utilitarian, especially in regard to public policy. In many situations, cost-benefit analysis may be perfectly sensible but it should not be seen as universal. For example, it may be right to use CBA to evaluate the case for building a new bridge over a river, though we need to be careful that intangible outcomes that cannot be measured in cash terms are not brushed aside. How should we evaluate the ecological impact of a new bridge if the construction will destroy habitats? In medical science the allocation of resources cannot be guided solely by cost benefit: evidently it would not add up to fund the care of the severely disabled or the elderly.

Straying well outside my expertise into the humanities, I speculate whether the evaluation of some literature or of some historical events might properly include some commentary on the moral or material consequences of what is being studied. If so, would it be right for contemporary institutions, such as the Church of England or Oxford colleges, to acknowledge the grievous harms arising from their involvement in the slave trade and slavery, and even seek to put right the injustices that have

been so well documented. Or in literature, would it be right for your critical appreciation to include the commentary that a particular text reflects accurately the brokenness of human relationships and communities? (Note, better not to call it 'sin' as that will ensure that you don't get a hearing!)

If you are puzzled where to begin evaluation, then I suggest that you go back to Midgley's maps. The map that you use in your daily grind in the lab, the library or the computer may not be the right map to use for evaluation. To take cases at random, if you are involved in pharmaceutical research, perhaps you should acquaint yourself with the lives of the potential patients around the world, or with the pricing of new drugs and the ability of poor people to access those drugs. If your physics has applications in space research, perhaps you should ask whether space exploration is an expensive luxury, and whether we should be polluting other parts of the solar system given the mess we have made of our planet. If your interest is in big data and/or AI then perhaps you need to find out about how data is used on the internet, and whether the safeguards currently in place are sufficient to respect our privacy. Apart from anything else, your colleagues may find you more interesting to talk with, and if your questioning is evidently part of your Christian calling, then it may be effective in giving your opportunities to talk about your faith.

#### 6. Concluding exhortations

- Don't lead a divided life of the mind, separating your academic work from your Christian faith
- Make the effort to understand the Christian world view – this will need some hard graft in bringing your theological understanding up to the same level as your disciplinary understanding
- Be alert to the underlying presuppositions of your discipline as reflected in its research methods
- Don't be afraid of exploring other 'maps' relevant to your subject of study
- Remember that research and academic study are seldom value neutral.