

## **Wisdom and delight in the university**

### **Abstract**

Recent debate about the public benefit of university scholarship, especially in the humanities, has sometimes been caught in a sterile tension between the promotion of engagement and the preservation of detachment, or between learning for public benefit and learning for learning's sake. The paper traces this tension back to the work of John Henry Newman. By examining recent work on higher education by various Christian theologians (Nigel Biggar, Stanley Hauerwas, Rowan Williams and David Ford), this paper suggests that we should instead think of humanities scholarship as intensively dedicated to the public good, but as serving that good by pursuing both wisdom and delight.

### **Keywords**

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## **Wisdom and delight in the university**

Over the coming year, universities in the UK face the government's assessment of the productivity of their research work – the much-loathed 'Research Excellence Framework'. Since that assessment involves various measures of the 'Impact' of university research on non-academic audiences, debate about the public benefit of our work, and the best ways to identify, describe and measure it, are raging with particular intensity at the moment. Working in a humanities discipline, I find myself surrounded by multiple ideas and claims about the different ways in which humanities scholars are or could be involved in public engagement, whether it is by disseminating research results to interested audiences, marketing those results to *new* audiences, engaging with policy-makers, campaigning to defend the value of the humanities in public, getting involved as catalysts in the intellectual life of our society, becoming 'public intellectuals', or by helping our society build and tend its cultural repository – and so on.

Much of that debate seems to be caught in a rather sterile tension between the promotion of engagement and the preservation of detachment, between learning for public benefit and learning for its own sake. It is my contention, however, that some clarity – and perhaps some wisdom – about how to navigate this tension can be found by delving into recent work about the nature and purpose of higher education, and of the humanities specifically, in Christian theology.

This might at first seem to be an odd direction in which to turn. My university's Vice-Chancellor, Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, recently gave a lecture on the idea of a university (Borysiewicz, 2011). He spoke, for the first portion of his lecture, about John Henry Newman's idea of a university – about his vision of liberal knowledge,

his reserve regarding research, and so on. He noted that *Newman's framing* of the question about the purpose of Higher Education has become our own – that we still, in all our discussions, seem to live in Newman's shadow, perhaps more so now than ever (Newman, he said, was 'one of the most saleable commodities in higher education today'). But then he noted that there was no getting away from the fact that 'deeply held lifelong belief and dedication to theological principles' underlay Newman's account – and that Newman's own answers to the questions he set loose are *not*, therefore, available to us now. Were he to apply to be a Vice Chancellor now, he said, Newman's 'theocratic approach would not even get him onto a recruitment shortlist'. A *modern* Vice Chancellor oversees a more diverse community – in which many differing religious and secular traditions are represented – and Newman's Catholic theology cannot now provide the kind of shared language in which our discussion about the university needs to proceed.

I'm not going to contest that point – at least, not directly. What I do want to do, however, is turn first back to Newman, and then come forward again to more recent discussions of Newman's questions in Christian theology. That is, I'm going to look at how Newman's questions have been answered in recent years by various thinkers who take themselves to be working within a specific tradition of religious practice, belief and debate – and to see whether any of what we find there is illuminating for the questions we *all* now face.

After all, Newman features in current debate as the poster boy for the idea of knowledge for knowledge's sake or learning for learning's sake; he has become the mascot for our resistance to 'impact' – to blunt claims about the *utility* of higher education. In his own words, he insisted that knowledge is an end in itself, and a 'very tangible, real and sufficient end' at that (Newman 1976, 97). He claimed that this is

true even if we discount all the extrinsic ends that knowledge might serve: ‘physical comfort and enjoyment . . . health . . . conjugal and family union . . . the social tie and civil security’ (98). ‘Knowledge’, he said, ‘is valuable for what its very presence in us does for us . . . , even though it be turned to no further account, nor subserve any direct end’ (97–8).

There are two ways, however, in which this claim of Newman’s is more complex than at first appears. First, the idea that knowledge is an end in itself does not stand in isolation, but at the top of a hierarchy of claims about knowledge’s value. After all, Newman insisted that ‘though the useful is not always good, the good is always useful’; it ‘communicates itself’, he said, with an ‘intrinsic fecundity’ (143–44, 103).

If then the intellect is so excellent a portion of us, and its cultivation so excellent, it is not only beautiful, perfect, admirable, and noble *in itself*, but in a true and high sense it must be *useful* to the possessor *and to all around him*; not useful in any low, mechanical, mercantile sense, but as diffusing good, or as a blessing, or a gift, or power, or a treasure, first to the owner, then through him to the world.

(144)

He therefore claims that university education

aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the discourse of private life. (154)

Life securely rooted in the apprehension of truth is not simply a life more knowledgeable, but one more stable, more peaceful and more harmonious. To pursue the sound formation of the mind is at the very same time to contribute to well-ordered individual and social life more generally—and the university can properly be

expected to turn out students who will further this good order. Hence Newman can say,

*If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that of training good members of society. Its art is the art of social life, and its end is fitness for the world. (154; emphasis mine)*

Regard for truth for its own sake must come first, of course, because the other benefits that Newman sees university education producing are benefits *of* the truth—but those other benefits are still real.

So, Newman's claim about knowledge for knowledge's sake does not exclude an account of knowledge's social benefit. If we continue down the hierarchy of Newman's claims about value, however, we find that his claims about knowledge for knowledge's sake also do not exclude an account of knowledge for personal advancement. By means of a liberal education – an education aimed at truth for its own sake – Newman claims that a man 'will be placed in that state of intellect in which he can take up . . . any [calling] for which he has a taste or special talent, with an ease, a grace, a versatility, *and a success* to which another is stranger' (145; emphasis mine). Such education will teach students to 'fill any post with credit' (154) and provide them with 'a faculty of . . . taking up with aptitude any science or profession' (11). It should therefore be no surprise to us to find that the plans Newman set out for the Catholic University which he was helping to create begin with two years of liberal education from 16 to 18 which could then be followed by two years of professional training from 18 to 20 (Newman 1896, 31–2).

So: that is one way in which Newman – champion of learning for learning's sake – is more complex than one might have thought. His claims about knowledge as an end in itself cohere with claims about knowledge's social benefit, and even with claims about individual benefit – about *employability*, for want of a better word.

I'm more interested, however, in another way in which Newman's claims are more complex. If all that I have just been saying has to do with forms of benefit that Newman allows *under* the primary intellectual benefit of knowledge as an end in itself, this is about the way in which that intellectual end itself has *over* it a broader account of full human flourishing.

One of the quotes I gave from Newman above began 'If then the intellect is so excellent a *portion* of us . . . ' – and that is a characteristic phrase for him. Intellectual good is *not* the whole good. However high the natural goal pursued by the university, it is not by itself enough. For sure, Newman can say that 'the intellect, which has been disciplined to the perfection of its [natural] powers' is

*almost* prophetic from its knowledge of history; it is *almost* heart-searching from its knowledge of human nature; it has *almost* supernatural charity from its freedom from littleness and prejudice; it has *almost* the repose of faith, because nothing can startle it; it has *almost* the beauty and harmony of heavenly contemplation, so intimate is it with the eternal order of things and the music of the spheres. (Newman 1976, 124; emphases mine)

But that repeated 'almost' is a serious qualification. 'The radical difference indeed of this mental refinement from genuine religion, in spite of its seeming relationship, is the very cardinal point on which my present discussion turns', he says (164). We will only see the university in its proper place in the hierarchy of goods when we see its pursuit of the (real, irreducible) good of the intellect put into service in pursuit of a still higher good – a 'supernatural' good that the university is simply incapable of approaching on its own.

No amount of intellectual development and perfection can produce religion, Newman says. Knowledge does not break the power of temptation; it does not mend the human heart. 'Knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not

conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largeness and justness of view faith' (110). Intellectual cultivation 'does not supply religious motives; it is not the cause or proper antecedent of any thing supernatural; it is not meritorious of heavenly aid or reward' (161).

Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man.

(111)

Religion, then, is not learning – but learning and religion are not entirely independent. Learning can impinge on religion either positively or negatively.

Under the shadow indeed of the Church, and in its due development, Philosophy does service to the cause of morality; but, when it is strong enough to have a will of its own . . . then it does but abet evils to which at first it seemed instinctively opposed. (174)

In other words, properly steadied by the Church, university education can be a service to religion, and the pursuit of knowledge as a good in itself can become a component in the formation of human beings who have been perfected harmoniously both in that intellectual aspect of their being, and in the still more important moral aspect of their being.

Unsteadied by the Church, however, intellectual development can become positively injurious to religion. For the good of each, thinks Newman, intellectual and religious formation must go hand in hand – or rather, intellectual formation must be guided by religious formation.

Newman's argument is, through and through, an argument for an explicitly and exclusively Catholic University. It is an argument for the necessity of what he calls 'a direct and active jurisdiction of the Church over [the University] and in it' (184). No

wonder our own Vice Chancellor was wary of taking him as a model, and no wonder few of Newman's recent commentators follow him this far – though I should say that if you want a recent, and sober, restatement of exactly this aspect of Newman's argument, you could look to the recent work of Gavin D'Costa in Bristol (e.g., D'Costa 2005).

For my purposes, however, the crucial element of Newman's account is this: he can claim that knowledge is an end in itself *only* because he has a broader picture of human flourishing, and can situate his account of knowledge within that. That is, he can speak about learning as an end in itself only because he has a picture of human being within which the intellectual is one proper – and, in a sense, independent – aspect, with its own structure and integrity and telos; and because he has a picture of how the various different aspects of human being, each with its own structure and integrity and telos, relate to one another. He therefore knows he can speak about knowledge as an end in itself without falling into some picture of ivory tower isolation, or smug intellectual elitism, or cloistered academic selfishness – because that talk about knowledge is for him just one component in a larger structure of thinking about human flourishing.

In a good deal of recent theological writing about the university, that basic point has been taken over from Newman – that it is only possible to talk about the end of knowledge against the background of some larger picture of human flourishing, of the common good. But the larger picture of social flourishing, and the position of knowledge or learning within it, have normally been painted rather differently – often to the point where any talk of knowledge as an end in itself becomes problematic.

A fairly typical example, therefore, of recent theological discussion of higher education can be found in the work of Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and

Pastoral Theology in Oxford. ‘Universities’, he says ‘have never been simply ivory towers.’

They have never simply sought knowledge for knowledge’s sake. And they have no need to apologize for that. Indeed, I myself harbor doubts about the academic’s typical defensive gambit of asserting the intrinsic value of knowledge. It is not that I doubt the intrinsic good of knowledge of the truth. After all, the notion of human beings losing sleep, missing meals, even risking their lives in pursuit of the truth, or in defense of it, is a perfectly familiar one. *But some truths are surely rather less valuable than others.* There is a truth about the number of times that the surname Biggar appears in the Birmingham telephone directory, and not even I can muster a whole lot of interest in that. It is a truth, of course, but it hardly matters. . . . [F]rom the academic, an account is needed of *why what he does matters—and how it matters, how it speaks, beyond the realm of his own private fancy.* (Biggar 2011, 243–44)

One may not have to follow Newman’s Catholic theological vision in order to make claims about the public value of the humanities – but Biggar asks us what kind of vision we do have of what matters and of why it matters. We can’t get far in the debate about the value of the humanities if we don’t ask that question.

If we turn to the work of the American theologian Stanley Hauerwas, we can find this question sharpened into a firm critique of the commonplaces in which our present debates about Higher Education trade. Like Biggar, Hauerwas insists first of all that universities are inherently and unavoidably moral institutions. And, by that, he means that universities in practice inherently and unavoidably provide some kind of answer to Biggar’s questions: they assume, and pass on, some sort of claim about the kind of knowledge, the kind of learning that matters. Simply by existing, by having curricula, by having academic standards, by rewarding certain kinds of work rather than others,

they make claims about value, about what is good; they are moral. '[A]ll education,' he says, 'whether acknowledged or not, is moral formation' (Hauerwas 2007, 46).

However, Hauerwas also claims that universities are not and cannot be *primary* moral institutions. We can properly ask questions about where they fit in the broader weave of our society's life, about the specific contribution that they make – and we can properly ask questions about who in the wider society values universities, and what they value them for. Universities unavoidably stand in relation to some community or communities that they serve – and the moment you take the funding of universities into consideration, and the willingness of parents to send their offspring to be educated in them, any account you offer of the value of what universities do cannot simply be an account of how universities value themselves, but has to be an account of how and why they are or could be valued by those communities. In regard to undergraduate education, for instance, the surrounding community forms young people in certain moral habits or virtues, and it supports the university in taking those already formed young people and developing them in the direction of some end that the community knows how to value. The community, both by providing the initial formation, and by knowing how to value the kind of person that the university forms, is the primary moral context; the university is secondary. Another way of putting this would be to say that, on the whole, societies get the universities they deserve.

Hauerwas, however, regards the moral formation provided by universities today as in significant part a mis-formation, perpetrated on behalf of a morally mis-formed community: the contemporary liberal state. One of the characteristics of the contemporary liberal state is its constitutional inability to recognize that it promotes a particular, contestable moral settlement. (It may be easier to understand the direction from which Hauerwas makes such a claim once you know that he is a pacifist; *of*

*course* the contemporary liberal state, as a form of polity that sanctions and legitimates numerous kinds of violence, looks like a particular, contestable moral settlement to him.)

According to Hauerwas, modern liberal universities on the whole fail to recognize or acknowledge the moral nature of the education they provide – and he detects this failure precisely in their mantras about knowledge for knowledge’s sake. He argues that

The attempt to make truth qua truth the purpose of the university results in the failure of those at universities dedicated to the ‘search for truth’ to acknowledge *whose* truths they serve because they think they serve *no one’s truth in particular*.

(134)

And this kind of failure might also be seen in debates about the public benefit of university education, or of the humanities, that are pursued as if the aim was to look for neutral answers, answers that would make sense to any rational human being, regardless of the particular visions of the common good in which they have been formed. We say that the humanities are valuable – but we need to ask *who* values them, and in the light of what kind of vision of the good life they value them.

A university that does indeed value truth and pursue critical thinking (including critical thinking about the truth of its own dependence) can flourish only if it lives in symbiotic relationship with what Hauerwas, borrowing from Alastair MacIntyre, calls a ‘learned public’ (97), by which he means a wider community which sustains some kind of vision of the good life – that is, a community that can value the university, and has some grounds on which to value it.

Hauerwas thinks this through by considering the relationship between the university and the church. Only if it serves, and is sustained and directed, by communities like a church – communities serious about particular moral formation,

and open-eyed about the particularity of that formation, communities ready to talk about the particular visions of human flourishing that animate them, communities that refuse to regard all such talk as a matter of undiscussable private preference – only if it exists in relation to communities like that can the university make sense of itself.

This is not, however (and despite the claims of many of Hauerwas' critics) meant to detract from the universities' commitment to, and participation in, properly public discourse. Hauerwas thinks that it is simply a delusion to think that honest public discourse is only possible when we ignore the communities, the moral and social visions, from and for which we speak. A university's inextricable connection to *particular* communities, with their particular visions of the good, does not, as Hauerwas sees it, pull that university out of the public realm and into some private enclave. Rather, acknowledgement of, and engagement with, that particularity is a necessary condition for a real public discourse, in which the moral commitments in play are not systematically obscured.

At this point, we can turn to the work of Rowan Williams (former Archbishop of Canterbury and now Master of Magdalene College in Cambridge). In one of his writings about higher education, he looks back not to Cambridge but to medieval Oxford, and notes that far from pursuing any vision of knowledge for its own sake, medieval Oxford

was in large part an institution designed to give a professional formation to the clergy who would shape the policy of a kingdom; and that formation assumed that to govern a kingdom you needed to know how language worked, what the difference was between good and bad arguments, and how you might persuade people to morally defensible courses of action. (Williams 2004)

Such an account of the purpose of higher education has become unfamiliar, he says, and we don't any longer 'think of education as a formation in the kind of reasonable

argument and decision *that will make someone a sure guide to others*' (Williams 2004). Yet Williams thinks we can retrieve something of this vision. He says,

If you're going to be a decision-making citizen, you need to know how to make sense and how to recognize when somebody else is making sense. You need to know what arguments are communicable to other people and what aren't. You need to know how to share forms of argumentation. (Williams 2008)

Understood in this way, a university exists to form people who 'are committed not only to reasoned argument . . . but to a responsibility to the ideal of rational government and rational public discourse'; it exists to form 'a sense of the importance and the vulnerability of reasoned conversation'. But this is not simply a restatement of a neutral account of the importance of sound intellectual development. These things matter because they make 'for a just common life' (Williams 2004). Claims about the importance of making sense, of good arguments, of well-used language, are part of a larger picture of the common good, and it is because they are vital aspects of that common good that they matter.

Such a common life, he continues, will be 'one in which we know how to talk with each other, how to negotiate, to challenge, to argue coherently about what is good for human beings as such'. It will not require any 'method for discovering by abstract argument what is best for everyone'; rather, it will flourish when 'differences can be talked about without being abolished' (Williams 2004) – that is, it will be a common life in which the kind of argument that Hauerwas calls for can be pursued.

Williams further claims that the university serves society not only by forming individual students in habits of reason, but by modelling such sociable reason itself.

A truly functioning university will also, through the encounters of diverse disciplines, model ways in which cultural traditions, religious loyalties and ethnic identities can co-exist, not in mutual indifference, but in a climate of mutual and

honest questioning, in which the various commitments are not automatically opposed but can enrich one another. (Williams 2006)

In order to articulate and develop his account of a university in which different moral visions – different accounts of what kinds of learning matter and why – can be brought into mutual engagement, he turns to the church. He understands the church as struggling very imperfectly – very imperfectly indeed – to live out precisely such a life of mutual engagement:

Christians believe . . . that true public life, life in which humans exercise their innate power and responsibility in consulting and acting together, is most fully realised in the Body of Christ, where the guilt and burden of rivalry, the uprising of person against person which so damages and obscures the image of God, are taken away by the work of Christ, so that the Spirit may make each one a gift to every other.

This vision – and the experience of the life of the church in which it is pursued and in which the constant failure to live up to it must be acknowledged and lived with – is, for Williams, the source from which he learns to articulate a vision of society, and of the university within it, guided not by one monolithic vision of the good imposed on all participants, nor fragmenting into multiple incommensurable visions of the good, but existing as an intensive conversation about the good across deep differences. ‘This’, Williams says, ‘is where the presence of theology, and specifically of theology grounded in living religious communities, becomes significant for the entire university’ (Williams 2004).

In other words, Williams’ account of the public benefit of universities is shaped and animated by his involvement in and commitment to a particular religious community and to a kind of moral and social vision formed in that community. But the vision of the university that he acquires in this way is precisely a vision of an

academic community capable of acknowledging and bringing into serious engagement and argument the *differing* moral and social visions that animate it. That is what, for him, it means for a university to be committed to public reason – and one of the main purposes a university can serve is the modeling and sustaining of just this kind of public reason in the society that it serves.

We have come a long way from Newman, it seems. I want to finish, however, with another Anglican theologian, who joins this insistence on knowledge's orientation to flourishing life together to something that sounds a little more like Newman. David Ford, Cambridge's Regius Professor of Divinity, talks, in his book *Christian Wisdom* (Ford 2007; see also Ford 2003) about learning 'for God's sake'.

To undertake study for the love of God is not, in orthodox Christian theology, like studying for the sake of some particular object or end amongst others; rather it is study undertaken for the love of the one who creates and redeems all things—the one who freely loves the world into being, and who loves the world into redemption, and does so entirely freely, which is to say, for the world's own sake.

To study 'for God's sake' is to undertake study as a form of participation in the love of God who loves creation for its own sake. But that means that to study creation for God's sake *is* to study creation for its own sake—and it means that studying it for its own sake is a matter both of delighting in its sheer existence beyond all use and control and final comprehension (studying for the sake of God the Creator), *and* a matter of studying it for the sake of the fuller creaturely flourishing for which it was made (studying for the sake of God the Redeemer).

To study for God's sake is therefore to study for the sake of wisdom. Wisdom is a deeply ingrained skill, formed in part by extensive experience, that allows people to make good judgments, in the various circumstances in which they find themselves,

about how to pursue the ends proper to the activity in which they are engaged; it is the habit of discerning those ends, understanding their relations, keeping them in view, and seeing one's circumstances in their light. To study for the sake of wisdom is to study for the sake of that discernment and understanding that enable graceful living with one's fellow-creatures.

At the same time, however, to study for God's sake is to study for the sake of that delight which marvels at the ways in which all creatures exceed the plans, programmes and frames of comprehension by which we presently shape our life with them. And this wisdom and delight are co-inherent: to live graciously with a fellow creature is, in part, to live in delighted acknowledgement of its otherness; to delight in the otherness of a fellow-creature is to hear its call to live graciously (rather than rapaciously) with it.

These two are inseparable in any gracious way of living with other creatures before the God who made them and who wills their flourishing. The proper end of university study from this point of view is, therefore, delightful wisdom and wise delight.

Ford makes no pretence that this God-centered account of the purpose of university study will be justifiable to all rational people regardless of the traditions of their intellectual formation, nor that the particular shape of his God-centered account will be justifiable to all religious people regardless of the particular traditions of their religious life. His account is unashamedly theological, and unashamedly Christian – but he presents his account of Christian wisdom concerning universities not as an attempt at a master discourse, but as an invitation to others to understand this tradition more deeply, and to be driven in response deeper into their own traditions of thinking

and judgment in regard to universities, and to be driven more deeply into engagement and argument between these traditions.

So. I have looked at Newman, Biggar, Hauerwas, Williams and Ford. Let me try to gather the threads together. What kind of value might there be in the turn to theology that my talk represents in the context of current debates about the value of the humanities? I have tried to give three kinds of answer to that.

First, there is the possibility of recognizing the way in which our current debates about higher education have theological roots. Some of the questions, some of the concepts, some of the answers we now employ in these debates were borrowed from theology, or were at least influenced by theology. But this is more than a matter of intellectual history – as relevant, perhaps, as noting that some of the words we use in these debates have Norse etymologies – because it raises the question of whether theological assumptions are still quietly being made in our current use of these concepts – and, if not, what has replaced those theological assumptions.

So, we saw that the theocratic element that the Vice Chancellor found in Newman is not there simply because he is theological, but because he is theological in a particular way. He works with a clear distinction between the moral and the intellectual; he works with an equally clear distinction between the supernatural and the natural – and so ends up with an uneasy relationship between intellect, which has its own natural shape, integrity and end, and what he must regard as in some ways the quite different religious/moral/supernatural end of life as a whole. Religion therefore comes in as a kind of external guide to intellect – and, to the skeptical outsider, religion must therefore look like the intellect's heteronomous ruler. Newman's account of the university can seem 'theocratic' because it has this particular theological structure. But Newman's account of the university was able to include the

idea of ‘knowledge as an end in itself’ only because it had this same particular theological structure. He championed that idea not despite but because of the particular kind of theology he had. The question therefore arises, What are we borrowing if we borrow that language?

So, first, this journey into theology may help us recognise the way in which our current debates about higher education have theological roots, and so to see questions about our current usage that might be worth following up. The second way in which this journey into theology matters, though, is because it brings us face to face with a certain kind of critique. In this case, we encountered that most sharply in Hauerwas, although it was there in Biggar and Williams as well, in more muted ways. Hauerwas picked up that idea that our claims about meaning and purpose of higher education make sense in the context of broader visions of human flourishing – of the common good. From the point of view of Hauerwas’s own particular moral tradition, it is obvious, first, that the typical discourse used to support liberal education in a modern university is itself a particular moral discourse; second, that, from his point of view, it is steeped in a deeply problematic morality – a morality that legitimizes and feeds the liberal state, and that ultimately undergirds that state’s right to use violence to protect its version of human freedom; third, that the typical discourse used to support liberal education in a modern university is a discourse that tends to *disguise* its moral particularity, the interests that it serves, in order to legitimise itself; and fourth that we are deeply ill-equipped as universities and as society to acknowledge these facts, and to have a serious argument together about our differing moral visions. And we might therefore add a fifth claim, in the style of Hauerwas: that there is no hope for us in trying to talk more seriously about public engagement, public benefit, and to make

judgments in the face of all the possible accounts of that which face us, if we can't face and discuss the underlying social, moral visions that might make sense of them.

There is a tendency for conversations like that of our first seminar to become bland. We all seem to agree that we are against what Newman called 'low, mechanical, mercantile' accounts of the purpose of higher education, and so we form a motley alliance around the idea that what we do matters in some way that goes beyond that – but we disguise in the process the differing moral and social visions that animate our claims; the differing politics, the differing visions of the good. There is a real challenge here, a critique worth facing, even if one doesn't belong at all in the same moral tradition as Hauerwas.

So, in the first place, this journey into theology may help us recognise the way in which our current debates about higher education have theological roots, and so to see some questions that might be worth following up. Second, it can bring us face to face with a certain kind of critique. Third, though – alongside genealogy and ideology-critique, there is something else. Christian theology is a living intellectual tradition; it is an intellectual space within which it is possible to build things – as Rowan Williams and David Ford do. Yet although they build their articulated visions of the good with unashamedly tradition-specific resources and tools, so that the visions that they develop cannot be taken over wholesale by those who reject those traditions, what they build *can* act as a stimulus, a challenge, a gift to thinking in other traditions. They show you their tradition-specific creations, and ask, Can you build something like this with your own, very different tools? Can you take some or all of this away with you – or does it collapse the moment you move it off the theological scaffolding that holds it up? If it's not borrowable or imitable, why is that – and does answering that help you see why you differ? In other words: the fact that their creations are

tradition-specific – the fact that they are erected on ground that is not shared by all participants – is not a conversation-stopper.

Now, I'm someone who does share a tradition with Williams and Ford, and so I can take on what they have made and work on it for myself relatively simply. And it seems to me, finally, that Ford's ideas in particular provide some coordinates to help us being navigating through the tension that I mentioned right at the beginning, between the promotion of engagement and the preservation of detachment, or between learning for public benefit and learning for its own sake. It suggests to me that we can begin ordering re-order our debates about public benefit around the axes of wisdom and delight – around the idea of a responsibility to aid where we can in the many processes by which people learn to interact more graciously with each other and with the other creatures that surround them, and around the idea that thus process necessarily includes learning to delight in the strangeness, the inassimilability of others.

So, for instance, we might take that idea of helping our society build and tend its cultural repository – one of the ideas that has surfaced from time to time in current debates in the UK – and think of that repository as, on the one hand, our society's repertoire of *moves*, a repertoire of steps available to us as we interact with each other and the world around us – the repertoire from which the choreography of our common life is built. To curate a repository of wisdom is not to tend a dead collection of moral banalities, but to develop a richer, more complex, more discriminating repertoire of steps. We in the university don't create this repository; we don't have any kind of monopoly on its curation – but it is nevertheless in relation to it that our work has value.

On the other hand, our society's cultural repository is a *cabinet of curiosities* – a collection that brings us face to face with the strangeness of people and things, their difficulty, their diversity – because learning to live graciously with other creatures has to include this acknowledgement of their otherness. The underlying vision is still of deepening and enriching the interactions with each other and with the world by which we live – but it is shaped by the recognition that the world exceeds all our attempts to dance with it. The world interrupts us, trips us up, disorients and redirects us, and we will only learn to live graciously with the world if we learn to live graciously with that kind of disruption – and with our own failures to do so.

Whether these specific metaphors of dance and cabinet have any purchase, however, it is the more basic ideas of wisdom and delight that I believe Christian theology has the capacity to put at the centre of our debates about public impact and engagement. And my hope is that, even for those who do not share the theological ground on which the accounts I have been examining are built, these ideas will prove to have some capacity to bring clarity and direction to our discussions.

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### **Biographical Note**

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