The Location of Theology: Church or University?

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1. Introduction

The wide variety of settings in which Christian theology is pursued today entails that there is no simple answer to questions about its rationale and relevance. Responses will vary according to the context in which such questions arise. Theology has been taught in the ancient universities of Europe since their foundation, this reflecting the age of Christendom, whether before or after the Reformation. The first chairs to be established in the sixteenth century were often in theology. But, even here, there have been some notable differences between, for example, Germany, Scandinavia, and the UK. What seems relevant in one place may appear eccentric in another. Even within the UK, there are significant differences. And these are amplified if we consider the variety within world Christianity today. In what follows, I shall explore this historical background before considering contemporary arguments for and against the place of theology in a publicly-funded university. Though I will conclude by considering the wider global situation, I remain conscious that this reflects my own career and context. Many of these assumptions may appear parochial to an international audience.

Whilst Christian theology has often been pursued in the universities of Europe, this has never been its only setting. Seminaries, monasteries, religious houses, vicarages, and manses have all been the locus for important contributions to the discipline. We should guard against any assumption that theology cannot flourish without a university home. This diversity may actually be increasing in our own day with the advent of online and distance learning programmes. These locations of theological study have varied, but so too have the media.

David Kelsey in Yale has claimed that contemporary models of theological education need to negotiate between ancient ideals of *paideia* (a system of personal development) and the modern paradigm of professional training, for example in law or medicine.[1] When we consider the contemporary university both models are problematic for related reasons. The academy has ceased to be a place that cultivates a religious or spiritual identity. Students are expected to display their academic competence in a range of subjects, rather than demonstrate their spiritual development. There are no confessional tests or requirements in religious formation; indeed, many begin and end their studies without espousing any religious faith. Meanwhile, degree courses in theology recruit large numbers of students who have no intention of seeking ordination. No single vocational or professional route is being taken. Some may and will be better formed for the tasks of ministry, but this cannot be assumed of all or most of the student body.

[1]Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin*, 199–220.

In a societal context of religious decline, we hear questions about the 'relevance' of theological study, often from exponents of other disciplines. Yet the concept of 'relevance' has raised some hackles in recent discussion. Few people are attracted to an institution that is anxious about its own future; similarly, few are likely to be persuaded to study a subject that constantly frets about its relevance and is unsure of its place. Nicholas Wolterstorff has complained about strategies of *adaptation*. He writes: 'The theologian looks around for developments in the contemporary academy that seem to be generally esteemed, and tries to sail a bit of theology under those colors.'[2] Sometimes this has resulted in theologians following intellectual fashions in philosophy in the hope of gaining a measure of academic respectability. Speaking as a philosopher, Wolterstorff deplores this as a failure of nerve and a dereliction of one's responsibility to the faith community in which Christian theology finds its primary location. On the other hand, he argues against *protectionist* strategies which tend to isolate theology, leaving it incapable of interacting with the cultural mainstream. For these reasons, it is encouraging to find the distinguished Chinese scholar Yang Huilin arguing that theology can offer resources in dealing with the fundamental questions of meaning that our universities face even in a secular and non-confessional setting. 'At times, the very quintessence of the humanities will be all the more manifested when it encounters the ultimate theological consciousness.'[3]

In what follows, I shall assume that the arguments presented today against the ongoing pursuit of Christian theology in the academy are broadly similar in a European context, despite local variations. These arguments come from two sides – one is largely secular and sceptical, the other is ecclesial and confessional. In what follows, I shall respond to each of these, while offering in a middle section a less defensive approach to what theology offers the university.

2. Secular Scepticism

A position that has sometimes been argued is that we live in a pluralist society in which all faiths are treated as equal under the law. The taxpayer does not fund higher education in order to promote the cause of any single religion. Therefore, to embark upon a confessional theology in the academy is in effect a breach of contract with the funding agencies. Other considerations can be advanced to support this case. These include the increased secularization of European societies where churchgoing is now as low as 2% in some quarters. Given the age profile of adherents, these numbers seem set to go in only one direction for the foreseeable future. This creates some unease, particularly in older universities in which Christian theology has always been taught. 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 it has ceased to be the default option, and its case requires some careful consideration. Have we become

[2] Wolterstorff, 'To Theologians: From One Who Cares about Theology but is Not One of You' (2005), 83.
[3] Yang Huilin, 'The Public Face of Theology and the Theological Concern of Humanity Scholars', in David Jasper and Zhang Jing, *Between Different Cultures: Essays in Conversation with Yang Huilin* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2025), 9.

strangers in our own house, former owners who now find themselves cast as embarrassing tenants?

Why continue with teaching and research in Christian theology? One answer to this question is simple, if somewhat utilitarian. Christian theology will flourish in the university for as long as there are people who wish to study it. One of the paradoxical features of theology in the UK today is that there are more people studying the subject at graduate level and teaching it than there was in the heyday of Christendom, even as churches empty and close all around us. 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 society, we may find it easy to forget that c85% of the world's population adheres to one of the world religions. Secularization does not appear to be taking over on a global scale – it looks more like a regional phenomenon in the former heartlands of Christendom.

A second explanation for student demand, particularly within our undergraduate and 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. The questions it asks, the answers that it has given, its canonical texts, its societal influences, its historical significance – these all remain of interest to students today. Moreover, if questions about spiritual meaning and religious truth emerge in other disciplines, then students will find their ways to the study of theology. Many come to the subject having 'converted' from other disciplines.

This takes us into a more substantive kind of response. If theology is concerned with some of the most fundamental questions that face us, then it would be surprising if it were 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? Why are the sciences so successful? Or Bonhoeffer's oft-quoted question. Who is Jesus Christ for us today? These questions inevitably take us into the borderlands of philosophy and theology. In the aforementioned essay by Yang Huilin, questions of truth, morality and beauty are identified as encroaching upon the domain occupied by theology. 'Art communicates with humanity's ultimate encounter and self-redemption, in the process of which it expresses the depth of humanity's spiritual longing'.[4]

In more secular contexts today, art can often become a gateway to the theological. Indeed, many students today find their way to theological study through their aesthetic concerns – at least, that has been my experience in Cambridge in recent years. Though the concept of transcendence often proves elusive, it remains indispensable. We need a vocabulary for a domain of experience that exceeds the material and the functional. A song or a painting can

[4] 'The Public Face of Theology and the Theological Concern of Humanity Scholars', 8.

lift us above the mundane concerns of the everyday world. Iris Murdoch wrote of the soaring kestrel suddenly raising her beyond the self-preoccupation of the moment:

> I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared.[5]

Similarly, the awe we experience on a hillside or at sunset in the open country can generate a metaphysical sense of something greater than ourselves though defying our comprehension. At such times, we realise the significance of the present moment in new and arresting ways. Our lives assume a seriousness that we had forgotten or lacked. These 'moments of cosmic disclosure', suggest a dimension that cannot resist reduction to the material or the merely natural.[6] Here the concept of transcendence is closely associated with the language of height – we are lifted up and raised to contemplate what lies beyond us.

A seemingly contrastive approach speaks of God in terms of depth and immanence. Instead of the language of height, God is described as ground of being or as animating spirit. Both the natural world and the arts also elicit this sense of depth. We are taken into a more profound appreciation of what already is present, if only we could recognise and discern it with greater insight. Here Heideggerian language of 'uncovering' seems more appropriate, as also the imagery promoted by panentheism as a doctrine of God stressing the extent to which the divine fully indwells everything.

These notions of transcendence and immanence must be regarded as correlative, even interdependent, for a Christian account of God. Transcendence is strongly reinforced in Judaism and Christianity by the sense of God above us. Residing in heaven, God is high and exalted. While this may be expressed in naively spatial terms, the imagery seems necessary to capture what is involved. Permeating the Psalms and the Lord's Prayer, the evocation of God 'in heaven' posits a transcendent dimension which shapes the God-world relationship. This is reinforced by creedal convictions about the ascension of Jesus. Yet this God who is above us is revealed through what is in our midst. The material world is the indispensable site for our apprehension of God. We do not escape the world to find God; instead, we encounter God in the midst of everything else. To put it another way, God meets us where we are, often surprising us. In these ways, the ideas of transcendence and immanence belong together in a unity in distinction. Bonhoeffer captured this in his oft-repeated use of the image of God as the 'beyond in our midst'. God is found not at the limits set by a theory of knowledge but in 'the middle of the village'.

To suppress such approaches to the awareness of the transcendent and the divine, or to refuse even to entertain them in an academic context would result in a narrowing of focus, even an ideological curtailment of free enquiry, though it would not be long before they resurfaced in other disciplines. Simone Weil, the French philosopher and mystic, 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. These do not admit of ready answers, but in pursuing them we are drawn

[5] Iris Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, London: Routledge. 1985), 82.

[6] Ian T. Ramsey, *Words About God*, (London: SCM, 1971), 202–222.

inevitably into theological territory. To suppress or bracket our deepest existential questions in an academic context would result only in a lazy avoidance.

3. Towards a conversational theology

Theology alone cannot answer these questions. It must travel in conversation with other approaches, methods of enquiry, and their findings. That's why the juxtaposition of theology with Biblical criticism, church history, and religious studies can work well, despite inevitable tensions. Most of our predecessors would have assumed that was the case; 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 works alongside other disciplines neither in subservient adherence to intellectual fashions nor in dictatorial mode. If the latter tendency blighted the past, then the former may be the greater danger today.

These trends will continue and are unlikely to be reversed in any foreseeable future. Plurality and diversity are celebrated as intellectually enriching, socially inclusive, and reflective of our society and world. I welcome these for the stimulus and intellectual freedom that they have offered me in my own time. We might also note that a degree in Christian theology within a multi-disciplinary context can nurture all the skills that accompany the best liberal arts programmes – linguistic, historical, philosophical, literary, and social scientific. As transferable skills, these are developed across a theology and religious studies degree programme.[7]

Should theology 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 quickly lapses 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, human origins, and the inerrancy of Scripture. Meanwhile, the diversity within Christian theology has probably never been greater than it is today, given that the majority of Christians live outside the west.

The study of theology commits us ineluctably to normativity. There is no Archimedean point of neutrality. Every position, including atheism, scepticism and naturalism, is freighted with normative judgements about God, spirituality, religion, the world, and human existence. Theology offers evaluative comments, and ventures truth claims, even when practised in its most deconstructive mode. If it could not do so, it would soon lose its significance and its

[7] See Why study TRS at university? – Theology and Religious Studies UK

appeal to contemporary audiences. A critic may argue that we should confine ourselves to the *history* of Christian thought, but that again would represent some scarcely concealed normative judgements and bracket out some of the biggest questions. It would be odd to include the study of Augustine, Aquinas, and Schleiermacher in the syllabus, while arguing in effect that, if they applied for a job in one of our universities, we would not consider them appointable on account of the confessional claims that they make.

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 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.'[8]

4. Should Christian theology alone be privileged?

Here there is an obvious objection that will already have occurred to you. Why privilege the study of *Christian* theology in any university? The only answer that can be given to that question is along the lines already offered/ If there is a continuing demand, then under the appropriate conditions, the case for the supply persists. Yet we can and should recognise that the religious character of western societies has changed significantly. Different theologies and world views 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, the self-understanding of the church will require to be positioned in a multi-faith context not in mono-faith isolation. Christians in countries and cultures outside the west are better prepared for this and I expect them to play an important role in these comparative projects this century.

A further reason for admitting the study of theology to the university is that it is a necessarily cohesive element in any faculty or school of divinity. What is it that prevents our different disciplines from sheering off in disparate directions whether towards classics, history, philosophy, literature, or the social sciences? Each of us could find a location there, and indeed we already have valued conversation partners in these fields of study. So what holds us together? Might it be a shared commitment to offering some insight into the religious self-understanding of human beings and of the world in which we are situated? This is at root a theological enterprise in the broadest sense. It does not require a consensus in favour of any creed, confession, or worldview – indeed, it may be more invigorating and stimulating if these are contested – but it does entail a commitment to pursuing some questions of perennial importance in the time and place in which we find ourselves.

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

5. What can theology offer the university?

What might theology offer the wider university? Instead of mounting a rear-guard action, can theology position itself at the centre of university life without embarrassment. Theology may be more embedded in the academy than some appearances may suggest. Colleagues already engage with other scholars in the university – in the sciences, health care, Islamic studies, literature, Asian studies, and of course with classics, history and philosophy. We bring something to these conversations, though their potential may not always be fully realised. The future prosperity 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. Graduate students today need to be encouraged not to become too narrow in their intellectual interests or to neglect opportunities to find out 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 does not appear relevant to our own field of study.

Theology also has a distinctive role to play in the wider strategic aims of our universities as reflected in their mission statements. The multi-faceted challenge of global sustainability is one example of how theology can make a contribution with other disciplines and academic bodies. The 2020 Living Planet Report of the World Wildlife Fund states: 'A deep cultural and systemic shift is urgently needed, one that so far our civilization has failed to embrace: a transition to a society and economic system that values nature.'[9] If we are to make such a 'deep cultural shift', then the world religions will have to play an important role by working amongst themselves and with other agencies to articulate a strong sense amongst their adherents of our connectedness to the natural world, to other creatures, and to future generations. The capacity of religion to give normative expression to the importance of our descendants and our temporary stewardship of the planet is well attested. If sustainability is a strategic aim of the university, then it will need to engage with religion along the way. Theologies of creation have an important role to play in shifting perceptions within our faith communities and these are most effectively developed in close conversation with other academic disciplines. The Christian doctrine of creation has historically suffered from two related problems. Either it merely stands as prelude or a scene-setting to the doctrine of redemption, or else it has become too anthropocentrically focussed with its concentration on the *imago Dei*. Attention to our embeddedness in the natural world, the sharing of our habitat, and the significance of other creatures is steadily shifting or being shifted by grassroots theological opinion in advancing a more expansionist account of creation. Again, a theology situated in the university provides valuable links between the academy and an important section of civil society. And, in doing so, it promotes in its distinctive way one of the typical aims of the contemporary university.

6. What can theology offer the church?

[9] Living Planet Report 2020 | Official Site | WWF (panda.org) (accessed 15 December 2021)

These reflections are offered in response to a possible secular critic. Since studying philosophy in the 1970s, I have always assumed that secularism would present the most familiar and formidable challenges to theologians. Yet 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 church faces a tougher challenge of missional engagement, service, and outreach within a rapidly changing context that is 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 in which candidates are rooted in parishes, working alongside other ministers, and gain their theological education through day-release or distance learning modes? Can this generate 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 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. The university can itself be seen as a microcosm of our wider society which is the context in which ministry is to be exercised. The church can and should be enriched by exposure to scholarly excellence in the study of religion.

In any case, the church is always and everywhere a theological community. This remains its primary and first-order setting. Embedded in our prayers, hymns, sacred texts and normative practices are strong if implicit theological assumptions. This is where theology emerges. Without some cognitive commitments of a strong theological nature, the church loses its distinctive identity amidst other voluntary associations. In reciting the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, and the Ten Commandments, we are already deep into theological terrain. These first-order theological commitments require the reflection and enrichment that come from a process of second-order theological reflection of the kind that typically has taken place in monasteries, seminaries, Bible colleges and universities. As such it is an intra-confessional pursuit in which faith seeks understanding. For this reason, the university may be only one amongst several locations for theology. It may not even be necessary though I wish to argue that it is desirable.

A widescale ecclesiastical retreat from higher education would remove theological education from an important part of our cultural mainstream and the advantages of studying in a context enriched by multiplicity of approaches to the study of religion. Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi in the UK, once wrote about the importance of people of faith being saved from believing too much in the wrong things. The critical study of theology in the academy can be an important part of that process.

7. The global diversity of theological education

The preceding remarks reflect a western context in which the process of secularization and advocacy of liberal neutrality have resulted in the contestation of theology in the academy. The challenges are also compounded by attempts to reform the patterns of theological education for ordinands and other church workers in the interests of new missional challenges. But the western churches may have something to learn from trends elsewhere in world Christianity not least in China.[10]

The churches have long been engaged in the provision of education. This predates any ideal of comprehensive state provision. One result of this is the appearance of Christian institutions of higher education in which the study of doctrine and ethics is integral to the curriculum. As a foundational aim, Christian formation is firmly established, occupying an uncontested place in the missional aim of the university or the college.

A secular dissociation of academic study from any theological content may itself by viewed as a western product of the Enlightenment, perhaps even a model of a detached rationality which is now problematic. Other cultures are much less disposed to accept this western model or to worry about its ramifications. This may in part explain the openness to theological study that has emerged in seeming secular institutions in China. The questions of theology together with its classical resources are regarded as proper objects of academic study, these having a constructive potential even for those outside the church. In itself, this may represent an implicit critique of Marx's view that religion is merely a by-product or epiphenomenon of economic alienation. As a more embedded cultural, social and intellectual force, it cannot be assigned a causally ineffective status. The generative force of a living tradition is thus acknowledged, albeit critically. This arguably offers advantages while raising some questions.

The study of theology in this academic context may prevent the discipline from reduction to either historical or social scientific interpretation. Its normative status can be affirmed but in such a way that academic study does not have to be defensive of any single tradition or confessional body. The advantage of this lies in its ecumenical potential. Theology can here be liberated from any denominational allegiance in a kind of trans-confessional engagement that minimalizes the differences that have historically divided churches since the European Reformation. Wisdom and truth are to be sought wherever these can be found. This academic context is one that is likely to prove attractive to students in the future for the academic and spiritual freedom that it affords, especially when these are aligned with serious study of Scripture and tradition. And the aforementioned claim about theology positioning itself alongside other disciplines and forms of knowledge will continue to prove attractive, even necessary, for students in the future. Recent research suggests that, with the exception of Judaism, Christians are the most educated amongst adherents of the world religions.[11] This increasingly learned body of believers will seek theological understanding

[10] In what follows, I am indebted to Jason T. S. Lam, 'The Emergence of Scholars Studying Christianity in Mainland China', in Pan-chiu Lai and Jason Lam (eds), *Sino-Christian Theology: A Theology Qua Cultural Movement in Contemporary China* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 21–33.

[11] See for example Religion and Education Around the World | Pew Research Center. Accessed 16 March 2026.

that is commensurate with the standards of critical scholarship and enquiry to which they have been exposed in the academy.

But can this mode of theological study be maintained without a positive relationship to the faith community and its practices? Is Christian theology not a second-order activity that reposes upon the liturgical, creedal and practical life of the churches? I remain strongly inclined to this view. After all, the great works of theology that provide a resource for academic study were produced by thinkers deeply rooted in the life of the church whether bishops, monks or professors, lay or ordained. Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Schleiermacher, Barth and Rahner were quite explicit about that. Each had a primary location in the life of the church and only secondarily in the academy.

We should not underestimate the desire for theological education and intelligent preaching on the part of the people of God. Jesus was a teacher as well as a preacher. An excessive focus on mission can obscure the importance of teaching within each congregation. For this purpose, a theological education of pastors will be needed. And this will require a capacity to show how Christian faith is consistent with the understanding and knowledge that our people have from the natural and social sciences, and from the humanities. Preachers and teachers in our churches should not be less well educated than the people to whom they are ministering. This is not theological elitism – it's about meeting people where they are and addressing their questions as best we can.

In summary, the pursuit of Christian theology offers an entry into the deepest and unavoidable questions that confront us as human beings. Such questions are embedded in all the major world religions. This pursuit will ensure an abiding interest on the part of students, while also generating a set of skills that are as adaptable as any in a liberal arts education. Enriched by location within a broad-spectrum academic setting, research and teaching in theology can provide multiple points of constructive contact with civic society. There are different contexts within which this can be delivered – colleges, seminaries and universities – and this diversity of locations should be celebrated. Yet the aim of understanding our Scriptures and traditions and showing how these can make sense for the church in God's world will remain constant.