



# Ethics in Conversation

## Christian Higher Education: Another Jewel in Another Crown?

Trevor Cooling

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Editor's note: This article is a response to the discussion of Christian Higher Education by Craig Bartholomew in issue 23.3 of *Ethics in Conversation*, which is available for download from <https://klice.co.uk/s/233-EiC-Bartholomew.pdf>.

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### Introduction

In the Winter 2019 edition of *Ethics in Conversation*, Craig Bartholomew challenged Christians in the UK concerning the absence of Christian Higher Education institutions in this country.<sup>1</sup> And rightly so. There is no comparable college or university to the 600 Christian-affiliated institutions of higher learning that exist in North America. It is also true that the Cathedral Group of universities in the UK (i.e. those originally founded by the Catholic and Anglican Churches) are mostly indistinguishable in their overall curriculum offer from the secular universities that they compete with. James Arthur's classic study<sup>2</sup> that describes the tragic secularist drift in these, is confirmed by more recent studies where it is apparent that many of their academic staff either do not know that their institution has a Christian foundation

or have apprehensions about the idea that it has.<sup>3</sup> Craig Bartholomew is correct; in the UK we have a challenge to face up to.

### The Challenge

Does this matter? The answer is probably not if you believe that the main calling of Christians is to evangelise their neighbours, to be pious in their church life and to be godly in their day-to-day behaviour. Believing this means that the privatisation of faith in the academy really does not matter. The academy is where you are equipped



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<sup>1</sup> Craig Bartholomew, 'A Jewel in the Crown of North America: Christian Higher Education', *Ethics in Conversation* 23:3 (2019).

<sup>2</sup> James Arthur, *Faith and Secularisation in Religious Colleges and Universities* (London: Routledge, 2006). See also Nigel Paterson, 'Do We Need a Christian University?' *Cambridge Papers: Towards a Biblical Mind* 17:3 (2008).

<sup>3</sup> For example, see chapter 6 in Trevor Cooling, Beth Green, Andrew Morris and Lynn Revell, *Christian Faith in English Church Schools* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016).

for professional work; the church and the home are the places for nurturing the life of faith.<sup>4</sup>

Craig Bartholomew's point is that this attitude only makes sense if you believe that education is a neutral activity. His arguments against this idea, and its bedfellow the privatisation of religion, are, in my view, compelling. They do not need repeating here. The research of Christian Smith amongst American adolescents indicates the challenge Christian higher education faces. Smith's extensive surveying led him to conclude that through unconsciously syncretising Christian faith and western consumerism, many young Christians are shaped by what he calls moralistic therapeutic deism.<sup>5</sup> There is no reason to believe that such syncretism of secular culture and biblical Christianity is not prevalent amongst student Christians in the UK. The educational environment that they inhabit is not neutral. There are many schools in the UK that seek to offer a distinctively Christian education;<sup>6</sup> there is virtually nothing comparable at the level of higher education.

KLICE is one exception. It arose as a phoenix from the ashes of the Whitefield Institute, an initiative of the then Inter-Varsity Fellowship (now the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship) established by the visionary Oliver Barclay. The impetus behind the Whitefield Institute was the notion that 'all truth is God's truth';<sup>7</sup> there is no such thing as a neutral academic. Its

aim was to support young Christian scholars in the task of generating distinctively Christian, biblically faithful scholarship in the disciplines of theology, ethics, and education, through doctoral studies.<sup>8</sup> KLICE, and its recently founded Research Institute, revel in this legacy. Deconstructing the notion of academic neutrality and offering an alternative vision are at the heart of the work. There is much to be done. My own foray into this realm has been to challenge those who argue that religious belief is irrelevant, even toxic, clutter when introduced into scholarly activity.<sup>9</sup>

There is no such thing as a neutral academic

### Another Jewel in Another Crown?

In his article, Craig Bartholomew's response to this situation was to say that we 'need some Christian universities comparable to those in North America, where faculty are paid to research and teach

from a distinctively Christian perspective'.<sup>10</sup> As someone who benefitted from the privilege of two years in a comparable institution early in my career, I share this dream.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, it is not likely to happen in the UK in the foreseeable future for economic, political, cultural and practical reasons. However, maybe there's another way? Maybe there is another jewel in another crown that we can seek after?

I suggest there is: it entails strategic investment in community and networks rather than institutions and is characterised by what J. D. Hunter describes as the

<sup>4</sup> The Canadian think tank Cardus provides fascinating and unique insights into attitudes of Christian school graduates in North America where evidence of this approach exists. Unfortunately, there are no comparable data available on British young Christians. See <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/cardus-education-survey/> [accessed 5/6/19].

<sup>5</sup> Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: OUP, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See for example the Church of England vision statement, *Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good* ([https://cofefoundation.contentfiles.net/media/assets/file/Church\\_of\\_England\\_Vision\\_for\\_Education\\_-\\_2016\\_jdYA7EO.pdf](https://cofefoundation.contentfiles.net/media/assets/file/Church_of_England_Vision_for_Education_-_2016_jdYA7EO.pdf) [accessed 5/6/19]).

<sup>7</sup> Echoing the title of the book by Arthur Holmes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> I was fortunate enough to be a recipient. My PhD was published as *A Christian Vision for State Education* (London: SPCK, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> See Trevor Cooling, *Doing God in Education* (London: Theos, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Bartholomew, *Jewel in the Crown*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> I studied for a theological qualification at what was then London Bible College, now the London School of Theology – not a university, but the closest parallel to one that we have in England.

nurture of 'faithful presence'.<sup>12</sup> In scholarly activity this would entail Christian students and faculty in secular institutions seeking to work in a distinctively Christian way by being transformational, offering a better way through faithful presence in the world of mainstream secular academia. However this cannot be done by individuals working alone.

A brief case study may serve to illustrate the point. In the 1990s, David Smith was an Oxford languages graduate working in a secular Derbyshire secondary school as a newly qualified teacher. After a year or so he began to ask himself the question, 'what am I achieving here that is distinctively Christian?' His review of his work led to the disturbing conclusion that he was actually colluding with the pervasive approach to modern language teaching that appeared to be doing little more than preparing pupils to be effective tourists. The prevailing unspoken message conveyed through the learning activities and textbooks was that learning French (or whatever) equipped you for getting what you needed out of these awkward people who did not speak English. It was essentially an approach centred on the self. Finding an answer to the question 'what if Modern Languages teaching were to draw on a distinctively Christian vision for its rationale' became his passion.

Fortunately the young Smith found a small community of like-minded Christians asking the same question. Together they grappled with the challenge, spurred on by the Government's requirement that all subjects on the curriculum should promote the spiritual development of pupils. Together, they offered the secular world of languages teaching a reframed vision for its work drawing on the importance of learning to offer hospitality



*Dr David I. Smith: a distinctively Christian vision for teaching*

to the stranger.<sup>13</sup> That work resulted in a distinctively Christian approach to teaching all subjects on the curriculum which is now influential across the world and has been adopted by the Church of England in its 4000+ schools.<sup>14</sup> This community of scholars was facilitated through contact with a small Christian study centre in Stapleford, Nottingham and through discovering authors like Nicholas Wolterstorff, Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton.<sup>15</sup> Smith then had the opportunity to study at the Institute of Christian Studies in Toronto before undertaking PhD studies at London University supported by the Whitefield Institute. He is now a widely published and internationally renowned academic working in Christian Education.<sup>16</sup>

Smith's story is not told here as a piece of hagiography, but is rather meant to illustrate the potential of another jewel in another crown, namely the transformational impact of small communities of Christian scholars supporting each other in reframing secular scholarship. This approach is not a replacement for Christian higher education institutions, but it is a visionary and effective complement.

<sup>12</sup> James D. Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 95.

<sup>13</sup> David I. Smith & Barbara M. Carvill, *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> See [www.whatiflearning.co.uk](http://www.whatiflearning.co.uk).

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting here that one man, Rev. Richard Russell, gave scholars like David Smith access to a range of Christian writing in the Reformational tradition through running the Christian Studies Centre, operating a small-scale bookshop from his home.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, his recent book *On Christian Teaching: Practicing Faith in the Classroom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018); see also [www.onchristianteaching.com/](http://www.onchristianteaching.com/).

### National Institute for Christian Education Research

The National Institute for Christian Education Research (NICER) based at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) is another example of the model. This small unit with a minimal staffing complement acts as a catalyst within this Church of England founded university, undertaking scholarly work that is aimed at developing the work of Church schools in offering distinctively Christian education. At the heart of its strategy is the creation of a community of scholars spread throughout the UK and beyond who participate in research projects, undertake doctoral study and implement research outcomes in schools. There have been, for example, over 20 students studying for doctorates through NICER in the last ten years. Much of the research entails developing pioneering work in theological hermeneutics and Christian worldview, drawing on the work of leading biblical scholars like Anthony Thiselton and Kevin Vanhoozer. Recent outcomes in which NICER staff have been involved are the development of new approaches in GCSE Religious Studies<sup>17</sup> and of a major resource for teaching Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

Christian  
communities of  
scholarly influence  
within mainstream  
British universities

### Another Jewel, Another Crown?

There are many reasons to celebrate 600 institutions of Christian Higher Education as a jewel in the crown of North America. It is indeed sad that there is nothing to match it in the UK. But should we expend energy on coveting this jewel? Maybe not? Maybe we should focus on the jewel that we already have? That would mean creating more Christian communities of scholarly influence within mainstream British universities with the

task of reframing their disciplines in a distinctively Christian way. That could be a distinctive jewel in a UK crown.

The main resource required will be Christian academics with the missiological skills and resilience required to be effective advocates

and with the leadership skills to enable them to build communities and networks of like-minded scholars. KLICE is well positioned to play a significant role in finding and nurturing these academics. Of course this will require funding; but nothing on the scale of founding a Christian university. This is a jewel within our grasp.

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Bowie & Richard Coles, 'We reap what we "sew": perpetuating biblical illiteracy in new English Religious Studies exams and the proof text binary question', *British Journal of Religious Education* 40:3 (2018).

<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk/>. Stephen Pett and Trevor Cooling, 'Understanding Christianity: exploring a hermeneutical pedagogy for teaching Christianity', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 40:3 (2018).