

ENGAGE 20 : LORD DEARING MEMORIAL LECTURE, 4 NOVEMBER 2009
NO PLACE FOR GOD? RELIGIOUS FAITH IN HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY

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Thank you so much for the invitation to give this first Lord Dearing Memorial Lecture. It is a privilege. As you all know, Lord Dearing made such a contribution to our work. His enthusiasm for education was unbounded, as was his drive to complete many exhaustive processes. He had a remarkable determination to bring the best of education of religious character to a wider number of children, adolescents and families. We are right to pay this tribute.

The title I have chosen for this evening tries to point to the heart of what I want to say: that there is a crucial role that religious faith, faith in God, can play in shaping education, not least Higher Education, today. Faith can help us to shape a true vision of education in its fullest purposes; faith can help to deepen our motivation; it can serve as part of the process of clarifying our objectives and it can provide additional means by which we carry out our calling.

And this is so despite a public voice which seeks to minimise the role of religious faith, at times calling for its exclusion from the public forum, or at other times vilifying religious faith, seeking to discredit it as nothing more than superstitious nonsense.

But most people do not share that vocal minority view. By way of example may I refer to a recent Sunday Programme on which listeners heard the Secretary General of UN, together with politicians, saying how much they esteem the crucial role of the world's faiths in issues of climate change. He stated that faith helps to develop a vision of the problems we face; they bring to that problem a reach not only into most local communities but also into world-wide institutions, in a way which is not to be found in political institutions of any kind; and religious faiths also have an ability to form patterns of living, and to assist in the formation of different patterns which could be more in tune with the needs of our planet.

This is a proper and true esteem of religious faith, in hands of the majority, as force for good.

Looking more widely, at this time all involved in HE recognise that a period of austerity is on the way. Budgets will be reduced as funding streams decrease. The financial crisis is going to affect all we do.

There are, of course, many different approaches to understanding what lies at the heart of this crisis. For some it comes down to irresponsible miscalculation of risk. For others, the roots of the crisis lie in the creation of unrealistic expectation, for example, in the field of home ownership. Others place in the frame undue pressure from governments for dividends on capital, leading to the creation of toxic new products.

What is clear is that the crisis has resulted in an erosion of trust, and not only in our financial institutions, but in other places too. Transactions in the market places are less transparent and this corrosion of trust can lead to a break-down in the cohesiveness of our society.

This is so because trust is an essential cement of our way of life. Trust is a crucial social capital, a crucial social virtue. If we are to progress it has to be generated, strengthened and expanded. This is the crucial challenge we face.

In his book, 'The Home We Build Together', Lord Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, reflects that there are three types of activity to be found in our society.

The first he speaks of is the political arena. Here activity is shaped by the democratic processes, in local, central and international governments. These are the best way of handling power and holding to account those who exercise power.

Then there are the market activities, all the economic transactions, enterprises and trade which are best shaped by competition, for this is, in broad terms, the best way of generating and sharing wealth.

But then he points out that both of these activities depend for their transactions on a crucial degree of trust. Without trust politics will not work. Nor will the economy. Yet neither of these fields of activity are designed to produce or generate trust. They are, in fact, net consumers of a precious commodity.

There is a third type of activity, which the Chief Rabbi calls 'Covenantal activities' carried out by what American sociologists term 'voluntary communities. These, of course, are the activities of charities, local societies, sporting endeavours and, most importantly, educational projects and institutions. In this field of activities people come together to share a project, enter a partnership, and generate a quality of civic life and personal capacity.

These activities, the covenantal activities, are the generators of trust. These have the potential to build trust between peoples, between generations and across different groups in society. They are crucially important for that very reason.

Locating education in this category highlights some important consequences. It highlights, for example, the dangers of pushing education too far into the market place. To do so puts at risk the very heart of education: the educational transaction itself, that network of relationships which are so much the hall-mark of successful education. These are not simply a by product of education, but both an essential means and a first fruit. These are the source of the trust which we so clearly need.

The education transaction is seen in what happens between staff and students, their shared endeavour in learning, in research. This is sometimes spoken of as 'discipleship'. It is a profound bond. It is not the buying and selling of a product. To suggest that it is will corrupt its very essence.

In the same way there is a transaction between students by which they build up an identity and belonging. They are not simply participating in the same market place.

These transactions are precisely the engine of trust, the generator of a social capital which is so important.

Another particular aspect of this picture of education I would like to develop is the importance, in this description, of the self-awareness of the institutions of education, and of their staying true to their identity. This is of particular importance to Church Colleges and Universities. We must not falsify our identity as Church Colleges. We should not pretend to be something which we are not.

Church Colleges and University Colleges carry out their work in the context of a particular faith, on behalf of a vision of life and a community which aspires to that vision. We should not be pushed into denying that this is so.

To promote a Church College is not proselytism, not forceful pressure for conformity. Rather, we give a steadfast, unaggressive, balanced, open statement of whom we are and why we are here.

Clearly there is a political agenda at the moment which can make this difficult. Yet we should not exaggerate that threat. Some wish to neutralise all public services so that they conform to a secular paradigm. But that is a principled and doctrinaire position, not a neutral one, and it should be open to exactly the same scrutiny – in terms of its assumptions, and effectiveness – as religious belief. Indeed in my view the Christian tradition is far more open to reasoned scrutiny, and has been since its first appearance, than the current secular doctrines.

In this sense we must be prepared to argue our case that – in the shorthand of the title – there is indeed a place for God in education.

I would like to do so through an examination of four critical challenges facing education, by surfacing their deeper dimensions and indicating briefly how these root back to religious belief and are therefore best shaped and nurtured by that belief.

These are challenges facing everyone in Higher Education and therefore possible grounds for an open and wide discussion.

The four aspects of education I wish to explore are:

- The challenge of facing pluralism or diversity
- The task of granting freedom
- The commitment to truth as a hall-mark of education
- The importance of teaching solidarity

The first of these, then, is the challenge of facing diversity and seeking cohesion.

Diversity is to be found in every lecture room and every staff room. There is diversity of opinion, ethnicity, culture and belief. Every institution strives to bind together this diversity in a unity of effort, even if not of identity, for the common enterprise of education demands some degree of cohesion. It is impossible to explore a subject intensively without a corporate sense. We cannot strive for excellence simply as individuals.

Colleges seek to build up a sense of belonging between a cohort of students, between a group of graduands, among ex alumni, at least as potential benefactors.

But the real question is about how we view this issue at a deeper level.

In one view, very much over-simplified, differences are a distraction and much better 'flattened out'. The easiest way of achieving this is by limiting their area of expression within an institution. In this view it is better to create a 'neutral arena' in which each person is invited to contribute the functional part of him or her self.

This is a utilitarian approach to diversity and to cohesion. Underlying it is a well rooted instinct that we are fundamentally individuals and need to cooperate only in order to achieve shared objectives.

The alternative vision is that of the person who is by nature a social being. In other words, it is an essential part of our humanity that we belong together. If we are indeed social beings, although not necessarily feeling sociable all the time, then, in this perspective, our diversities are an enrichment of a fundamental unity rather than an expression of our fundamental individuality which is in tension with our unity.

So a College sharing this vision of the person has a basis for its 'social cohesion' policies which enrich those policies with a positive vision, rather than enforce them out of a political necessity or correctness.

Such a College will see itself as a community of persons and will recognise this fellowship of persons (not simply students, graduands, ex-alumni etc) as a necessary part of human flourishing.

In other words, this conviction leads to a way of life which expresses in practice the need for the human person to find fulfilment in the context of relationships and community.

Christian faith deepens this conviction with the revelation that this capacity for community reflects the reality of God, who is understood, in faith, as a community of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As with God, so with us: there is diversity in unity; there is cohesion in mission. This is the nature of God which is reflected in us human beings.

A glimpse of God, formed in faith, strengthens, nurtures and informs an understanding of ourselves and enables us, in our College life, to be committed to the task of revealing the unity in our diversity and enriching that unity with that same diversity.

The second core task of education is that of granting freedom.

Freedom is such a crucial part of the education process: the freedom to explore a subject area with vigour, the freedom to express views and arguments, the freedom to challenge the opinions of others, the freedom to change one's mind and one's behaviour. The ability to 'grant' freedom to students, to staff is crucial.

Yet so, too, is the process of learning how to use that freedom, to recognise that it is not a goal in itself but a process of ending restricting limitations while also accepting limitations which build a greater good.

Today absolute individual autonomy is a goal which some believe to be both desired and attainable. Of course, personal autonomy is linked with notions of equality and it has borne much fruit. It is also seen as a condition for an authentic morality – a self-governing morality. Yet today it pushes many people beyond the frame of any objective morality into the arena of personal choice being equated with moral quality.

A crucial task of education – at every level – is that of equipping people to hold together the desire for personal freedom (which is a good) with the other human goods which make a claim on us.

I cannot say whatever I like if others have a right to their good name; nor do what I like if others have a proper claim on my time; nor take what I like if in doing so I invade the property or personal reality of another.

So the challenge of granting freedom and of exploring freedom, as an essential part of the education process, opens up another assertion about the human person. We are moral beings. We are not morally neutered. Nor are we morally autonomous. Rather we are held in interlocking moral demands which arise from who we are and actually help us to become who we should be.

A notion of the person as existing with no obligations, no responsibilities to others, standing outside traditions and cultures, is subtly quite attractive today. But what it does is convert morality into power – changing what I ought to do into what I want to do, what I can assert, manipulate, seduce my way to – so that the most powerful forget what they ought to do and simply do what they can and desire to do.

I don't think I need labour the point that a College based in the Christian faith has a deeper understanding of the fundamental purpose of human life and therefore of the moral imperatives contained in that gift, and of the relationship between goodness and freedom.

In the end no society – no College – can avoid totally the moral dimensions of the decisions which shape it. Therefore the quality of moral discourse that a society/College engages in, is crucial to its health.

A Church College, with awareness of its tradition and culture, and in the light of revelation, will rejoice in this identity as it fashions its moral discourse and tutors itself in the skills of that discourse.

In this God certainly has a place. Indeed, in the perspectives of faith, God gives vocation, or sense of purpose, to each person. This vocation helps us to identify the good to be pursued in our lives and is the beginning of our moral discourse when we are called upon to defend, explain or explore our particular sense of what is to be achieved in the light of this calling.

The third factor I want to consider is that education, in all of its phases, must be committed to truth. By this I mean that every educational institution is committed to a search for truth, to the task of promoting truth, and to the need to resist improper constraints, be they political or religious, on this search. In practice this will mean that the institution will resist the temptation to economise with truth by reducing it to utilitarian considerations only; it will resist all temptations to falsify evidence of research; it will be set against the use of the work of others as one's own.

Let me say, by way of developing this factor, that the Christian tradition – at its best – not only supports this question but illustrates it.

Standing as it does as one of the founding influences in Higher Education, the Christian search for truth has been and remains today a partner of great importance.

The Church, as I know and love it, is not afraid of truth, not afraid of questioning assumptions, testing aspirations, both within itself and in the wider society of which it is a part.

If the human person is essentially a social being, and a moral being, then the human person is also oriented towards truth, restless in the search for truth.

But, in order to understand this point fully, we have also to resist the temptation of reducing truth to positivist, empirical knowledge. Truth is not only of fact, but of meaning. Truth has a spiritual dimension, for it is capable of lifting us, through awe and wonder, to a contemplation of its depth, of its beauty.

This might come as we look down a microscope, or telescope, at the unfolding of an equation. It does occur when we catch sight of the vastness of nature, the insight of a poem, the beauty of a work of art.

We recognise integrity, wholeness, harmony and we recognise it as truth. This is part of our quest. The moments when we 'discover' a truth, or when a truth 'hits home' in a personal way are moments we all remember and cherish.

If the person is indeed oriented to a search for truth and capable of its appreciation, then an education which is purely utilitarian, research geared solely to profit, truth which is reduced to fact, are betrayals of our true nature.

Here, too, is the place for God recognised as Truth and Beauty.

St Augustine made this point most simply and compellingly. He exclaimed that our hearts 'are restless'. They are restless to know the truth. Augustine completed the picture when he said that our hearts are restless until they rest in God.

The Christian faith is an invitation to explore truth, not an imposition of the truth. This invitation is offered within a community committed to exploration of truth and properly supportive of this great endeavour.

The fourth aspect of education on which I wish to reflect is that of the task of teaching solidarity.

This is what education is also about. Its challenge is not simply to serve social cohesion, or recognition of a common humanity, but it is one of fostering a response to that recognition and a call to see that our greater interest is served in serving one another.

The example of the response of people to the tragic tsunami comes to mind. In response simply to television picture, so many people acted out of an instinctive solidarity and gave generously to aid efforts. Some actually undertook the adoption of children on the basis of what they had seen.

I suspect that, in life, self interest is our starting point. Only slowly do we learn to respond not out of our own need but in response to needs of others. Slowly we are tutored to see that there is

more to be gained for all by standing alongside one another, in solidarity, than by acting out of one's own individual rights.

This is so clearly seen in every fine College, in its charity work, in outreach to the needy, in generous self-giving among staff and students.

This, of course, is the Church's charter, its call. It is the summons of love which offers all to others, standing with them, never imposing or domineering, preferring those most in need, helping them into areas of competence so that they too can make influential contributions to society.

A Church College will naturally focus on this crucially important task, recognising that this call to love is the finest underpinning of every profession.

A Church College will understand that the human person is indeed made for love and called to love.

The model and source of this vocation to love is none other than the mystery of God, God who is total solidarity, total love, and who is made visible in Christ. Indeed we can properly speak of Christ as 'love taken to the end', a truth which is beautifully portrayed in the magnificent Spanish religious art currently on show in the National Gallery. There we see the coming together of love and true beauty in a striking and challenging way.

The human person, then, is a social being, a moral being, oriented to truth and finding fulfilment in love. This is the vision of the person that underpins true education, the commitment of every Church College.

You strive to serve social cohesion, to tutor people in freedom, to search conscientiously for truth and to inspire generosity. This is true to human nature and in this God most certainly has central place, offering to us not only the light of revelation but also the strength of grace.

Perhaps that is nowhere seen more clearly than in the actions and gifts of forgiveness, in which all four characteristics come together. But that is another theme, for another day.

I rejoice in the Christian vision of education and the evident fruitfulness it bears. I rejoice in our Church Colleges and I salute your achievements and thank you for your attention.

+ Vincent Nichols