

## **The Baptist Idea of a University**

Paul S. Fiddes, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford

I have borrowed my title from St John Henry Newman, who gave a series of lectures in 1852, later expanded into his book *The Idea of a University*, in support of the founding of a national, Catholic university in Dublin. I ask my readers to notice, however, that I am addressing the Baptist *idea* of a university, not the idea of a *Baptist university*, which would in fact be a closer parallel to Newman's proposal for a Catholic institution. So I am going to divide my reflections into three parts: what I suggest should be the *basic* Baptist idea of a university, and then its application to the idea of *Christian* university, and finally to the idea of a *secular* university. This last proposal might seem a little unexpected to the planners of our conference. But Baptists *are* involved in public, state universities which operate without religious commitments, and sometimes this is an engagement on a structural and not just individual basis. If the Baptist idea has any value to it, it must be applicable in this context.

But before we proceed on this plan, I should make one other thing clear about my title. When I speak of a "Baptist idea", this does not necessarily mean that the separate ideas that make up this major idea are *exclusively* Baptist. My opening reference to Newman hints that I shall be claiming some of his insights as equally ones that Baptists have held in their history. But I suggest that there is something about the Baptist ethos of Christian faith that prompts the combination of different elements into a particular pattern that we might well call "the Baptist idea of a university".

### **The basic Baptist idea of a university**

#### *(1) The formation of the person*

At the most basic level, Baptists will understand universities as primarily a place for the formation of a human person. The acquiring of certain qualifications for gainful employment is certainly valid, but always subject to the primary reason for the existence of a university. This was a fundamental point made by Newman, who famously asserted that education was an end in itself.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of a university is not in essence to teach professional and technical skills, or to provide qualifications for employment, but rather it is to form a certain

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<sup>1</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 78–9, 83–5.

kind of character in the student. It is, he wrote, to achieve an expansion of outlook, a turn of mind, a habit of thought and the capacity for social and civic interaction with others. He cannot find a single word for the outcome of this formation, but he settles for “enlargement of the mind” or “illumination”.

Baptists bring a certain perspective to this view of education. Their institutes of higher education often expanded from colleges for the formation of Christian ministers, and the Baptist belief that the whole people of God is called to ministry in the church and world meant that this concern for the shaping of the person for a life driven by a vocation to serve God and others was extended beyond the formal office of minister. Further, Newman’s vision of formation tended to be one of individual illumination. Formation for *ministry* can only be about enabling a person to live *in relation* with others, and this includes an awareness of racial justice and economic justice for the poor.

## (2) *The place of theology in a university*

A second level of the basic idea flows from the first. Christian theology must have a place among all other disciplines taught in a university at undergraduate level, as well as being a subject of research. This was also an idea that Newman strongly promoted. He argued that a “university” should be teaching “universal” knowledge, and so it will fail in its universality if it omits one significant area of knowledge—Christian theology. He writes:

religious doctrine is knowledge, in as full a sense as [Isaac] Newton’s doctrine is knowledge. University teaching without Theology is simply unphilosophical. Theology has at least as good a right to claim a place there as Astronomy.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps today we need to add that a university must include all the other Humanities too, but the need to say this would not have occurred to Newman. The pattern of including theology among other disciplines had already been set two centuries before in the educational institutions created by English Nonconformist Christians, including Baptists, called “Dissenting Academies”.<sup>3</sup> From the *Act of Uniformity* of 1662 and its associated *Test Acts* onwards, non-Anglicans were excluded from graduating from the only two universities in England—they were barred from Oxford altogether and prevented from taking degrees at Cambridge. They therefore set up their own academies for higher education. Some academies

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<sup>2</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 40.

<sup>3</sup> For details see the online *Database and Encyclopedia, 1660–1860*, created by the *Dissenting Academies Project* (2006–) set up by the Dr Williams Centre for Dissenting Studies and the University of Sussex Centre for Intellectual History: <http://dissacad.english.qmul.ac.uk/>.

offered a higher education for students with a variety of intended vocations,<sup>4</sup> including the Christian ministry, while other academies specialized in educating *only* those who were to become ministers.<sup>5</sup> The Bristol Academy was the first academy to be founded by Baptists, dating from 1679 (though not implemented until 1720), and it was of the specialized kind, although Baptists participated widely in the other academies founded by Presbyterians and Independents (later Congregationalists). Whatever their scope, all Academies offered a very wide syllabus in the arts, humanities, sciences and theology to all their students, whether they were intending to enter the Christian ministry, law, commerce, medicine or even – in the case of Daniel Defoe – journalism (Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*, was a student at Newington Green Congregational Academy). It is this feature of scope I want to concentrate upon here.

For example, the second-year syllabus of the Northampton Academy in the 1740s, offering education to a wide range of students, took elements from the medieval quadrivium but also included theology. So lectures were given in trigonometry, celestial mechanics, natural and experimental philosophy (including mechanics, hydrostatics, optics and astronomy) *and* divinity. The third year at Northampton was mainly devoted to history, but divinity still held a place. Stepney Academy, which was later re-named Regent's Park College, was a specialized academy for Baptist ministers for its first 30 years from 1810, but in the first year offered classics, algebra and geometry, Latin and English composition, rhetoric, logic, Jewish Antiquities and “as introductory to the divinity course, a series of historical lectures is delivered on the different dispensations of God to man.” I should add that the syllabus for other years also included, besides divinity, such subjects as medical anatomy, astronomy and other natural sciences.

There is a distinct difference in the pattern of education here from the ancient universities, where theology remained a study for graduate students, *subsequent* to an undergraduate course in the arts. The usual, full mediaeval pattern of education which extended with variations into the late nineteenth-century was a seven-year education in the liberal arts, ending with the award of an MA,<sup>6</sup> a short period as a teacher in the university,

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., the Taunton Academy, 1670–1758 (Henry Grove); the Northampton Academy, 1729–1751 (Philip Doddridge), the Warrington Academy, 1757–83 (Joseph Priestly).

<sup>5</sup> E.g., the Bridgewater Academy, 1688–1747 (Presbyterian) and the Bristol Academy (Baptist) from 1679. From the time of the Evangelical Revival, and especially in the nineteenth century, ministerial-only colleges multiplied and flourished.

<sup>6</sup> See T.H. Aston (general ed.), *The History of the University of Oxford* (8 vols; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984–), I, 370–71, 361–91, 475–76. By the thirteenth century the seven-year liberal arts course embraced grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic or logic (the *trivium*); arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music (the *quadrivium*); to this was added philosophy in the forms of natural philosophy, moral philosophy, and

and then further study with specialization in either law, medicine or theology which could lead to a doctor's degree. By contrast, in the Dissenting Academies, theology, the arts and the sciences ran side-by-side more or less from the beginning of a course contracted to four years. The ancient *quadrivium* as taught at the universities was expanded to include more "modern" subjects, such as politics, modern languages, geography and the experimental sciences, and theology was provided for all from either the first or the second year of the course.<sup>7</sup> In the third and fourth years more time was given to specialization so that those wishing to become doctors or lawyers could be prepared to proceed to other institutions for professional training, but divinity was still available.

This multi-disciplinary process may well have been encouraged by the fact that the main medium of instruction in all disciplines was English, rather than Latin, study of English grammar and literature was usually required, and open discussion of issues was encouraged.<sup>8</sup> But, where Newman later was to appeal to a principle of the universality of knowledge for the place of theology, in the dissenting tradition theology had its established position in a syllabus for higher education for another reason: it was simply because the academy included the formation of nonconformist ministers, even where it did not specialize in their formation. This did not mean that students at the academies were all dissenters; many Anglican parents preferred to send their young people to an academy rather than to Oxford or Cambridge because the academies were cheaper, offered fewer possibilities for wasting time in socializing (discipline was stricter), and had a good academic reputation.

A similar pattern of holding together the arts, sciences and theology could be found in the emerging Baptist institutions of education in the USA. A key model which resembled the dissenting academy, was often called the "Literary and Theological School" (L. & T.), which – as its name indicated – combined theology with a liberal arts curriculum as a preparation both for ministers and those aiming for other professions. Pioneered by Baptists in Maine who established the Maine Literary and Theological Institution at Waterville in 1813, it was followed – for instance – by Baptists in Hamilton, New York (1819), Columbia DC (1821), Granville, Ohio (1831) and Michigan (1833). At Georgetown College in Kentucky the

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metaphysics. A BA could be awarded as an intermediate degree after the first four years, but the full first degree was the MA. In the four ancient Scottish universities, a four-year generalist course, strongly based on philosophy, led to the undergraduate degree of MA; see See R.E. Bell, "Scotland's Universities", *Comparative Education* 36.2 (May, 2000), pp. 163-75. While the Scottish universities were based on Reformation rather than medieval theories of education, theology was a further study beyond the MA, as in England.

<sup>7</sup> For further examples of this kind of syllabus, see Parker, *Dissenting Academies*, 54–5, 71, 73, 86.

<sup>8</sup> See Winifred Bryan Horner, "The Roots of Modern Writing Instruction: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain", *Rhetoric Review* 8/2 (1990): 324, 328–29.

syllabus in 1840 included the “Evidences, Principles and Duties of the Christian Religion” alongside such subjects as Greek and Latin, mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, philosophy, literary criticism and political economy.<sup>9</sup> The L. & T. model was also followed in Canada, as at Acadia and in the first generations at McMaster University.

### (3) *The interdisciplinary idea*

At a third level of the basic Baptist idea, theology is not just *present* in the undergraduate curriculum, but is in some way integrated into it in an inter-disciplinary way. Newman again conceptualizes this interdisciplinarity, with his idea of the “unity” of knowledge. All the sciences (or disciplines of knowledge), he argues, are interconnected, and to withdraw one would be to impair the whole. So theology is naturally and organically linked to the other sciences in a such a way that if it drops out, they are harmed as well. No university, he thinks, can fulfill its task of pursuing universal knowledge if it does not draw theology in particular into dialogue with all other disciplines. The principle of interconnection especially applies to theology in his view because he is working with a doctrine of God in which the Creator and Redeemer of the world is present and active everywhere in the universe. Universal divine agency means universal relevance of theology, relevance (as he writes) to “every intellectual creation or discovery whatever”. Newman’s argument runs like this:

Behind the veil of the visible universe, there is an invisible and intelligent Being, acting on and through it. He is ever present to his works, one by one, and confronts everything he has made by his particular and most loving Providence, and manifests himself to each according to its needs ... Even on the unseemly legends of a popular mythology he casts his shadow and is dimly discerned in the ode or epic, as in troubled water or in fantastic dream. All that is good, all that is true, all that is beautiful ... comes from him.<sup>10</sup>

Newman’s vision of interdisciplinarity remains, however, somewhat abstract. In the Dissenting Academies, because of the nature of the syllabus students were in practice required to think about the arts, sciences and theology all at the same time, so that boundaries between them remained fluid. We have, then, the case of a Calvinist Baptist ministerial student at the Bristol Academy confiding to his diary in 1744 that he wants to become “in God’s strength a Perfect and Compleat *Logician*”, and vowing to read Locke’s *Essay on*

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Snyder, *A History of Georgetown College* (Georgetown: Georgetown College, 1979), 22–3.

<sup>10</sup> Newman, *Idea of a University*, 54–5.

*Human Understanding* so carefully that he will “Get a Large Knowledge of Moral Philosophy as founded on Reason and Scripture.”<sup>11</sup>

This diary entry, with its reference to reason and scripture hints at one reason in historical Baptist thinking for an interdisciplinary approach between theology and other subjects. There was a conviction that God had revealed God’s self in the book of nature as well as scripture, and that the human reason had a God-given capacity to read in *both* books. This integrated vision was expressed by Robert Hall, the greatest Baptist preacher of the time, in drawing up a prospectus for funds for the Stepney Baptist Academy in 1810. He wrote: “The light of Revelation, it should be remembered, is not opposite to the light of Reason; the former presupposes the latter; they are both emanations from the same source.”<sup>12</sup> So he stresses that the revelations in the Bible “are addressed to the understanding, the only medium of information, whether human or divine.”

To the interlinking perceptions about the universal activity and self-revelation of God we should add a more modern insight about the porous nature of cultures. The culture of the Christian community, within which theology is formulated, cannot be an area which is sealed hermetically against other cultures.<sup>13</sup> Much of the culture and practices of the church are held in common with wider society, and we can see an overlapping of social spaces in which theology, or the grammar of the Christian community, is necessarily open to the influence of other disciplines and influences them in turn. Theology is bound to be inter-disciplinary: it must be done in connection with the creative arts and the empirical sciences. There is, of course, something distinctive about the style which which the church lives on the boundaries of different cultures: the church and the theology it creates is aware of living in the story of Jesus and in the wider story of the activity of the triune God in the world. There is then an element of closure, a framework of conviction, as well as openness in the approach that theology makes to the general enterprise of living in the world. This is an awareness that theology can gift to other cultures and disciplines, but it must also be aware that it shares a range of images and ideas with them.

There is nothing particularly Baptist about such a perception, but I do want to claim that a central Baptist doctrine is thoroughly in accord with it. I mean the idea of “covenant”,

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<sup>11</sup> “A Student’s Programme in 1744. From the Diary of John Collett Ryland”, *Baptist Quarterly* 2/6 (1925): 249–52.

<sup>12</sup> From Olinthus Gregory (ed.), *The Entire Works of the Rev. Robert Hall* (6 vols; London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1831), IV, pp. 407-14.

<sup>13</sup> See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture. A New Agenda for Theology* (Mineapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 104–19

the belief that a Christian community is gathered by agreement between its members (a horizontal axis), and by agreement with God who makes the covenant through Christ (a vertical axis). Such an ecclesiology is a major variation of the Reformation, and was held by English Separatists in the sixteenth century and by paedo-Baptist Independents as well as Baptists from the seventeenth century onwards.<sup>14</sup> This understanding of community is not regulated by any kind of external authority or canonical law, and so requires an attitude of trust to balance what might otherwise be conflicting forces within it. There are competing claims for authority, such as between the members and officers of a church, or between the local congregation and trans-local unions of churches; these have to be resolved through processes of mutual adjustment and negotiation, and this requires a recognition of the vulnerability of all concerned. This, I suggest, sets a style which is eminently suitable for living on the borders between cultures, existing in overlapping social spaces, and being formed as a person in this sometimes painful as well as exhilarating encounter.<sup>15</sup> Recent Baptist thinking has been insisting that God makes covenant relations of different kinds with all people, not just with the Christian church, and this expansion of vision means that a covenant-style of life can be exercised outwards as well as within the borders of the church.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it sets a context for the universal activity and self-disclosure of God that also lie behind a commitment to interdisciplinarity.

In this overlap of spaces, and in this space of covenant living, two Baptist concerns converge: the formation of *persons*, through their listening to the voices of others, and the place of theology in a University. But how then in, in practical terms, is this open relation between theology and other disciplines, the crossing (sometimes transgressing) of borders, to be achieved in a university? I intend a little later to consider *strategies* which are appropriate to the idea of both a Christian and a secular university. For the moment, I want to make clear that I am not commending the path taken by the Dissenting Academies and the L. & T.

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<sup>14</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “A Fourth Strand?”, in *The Fourth Strand of the Reformation. The Covenant Ecclesiology of Anabaptists, English Separatists, and Early General Baptists*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2018), 1–14; Paul S. Fiddes, “‘Walking Together’. The Place of Covenant Theology in Baptist Life Yesterday and Today”, in Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces. Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2005), 21–47.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 40–2.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Brian Haymes, “Covenant and the Church’s Mission” in Paul S. Fiddes et al. *Bound to Love. The Covenant Basis of Baptist Life and Mission* (London: The Baptist Union, n.d.), 63–75; Fiddes, “Walking Together”, 45–47; Mark Brett, “Permutations of Sovereignty in the Priestly Tradition”, *Vetus Testamentum* 63/3 (2013), 383–392. See also Brett, *Political Trauma and Healing. Biblical Ethics for a Post-Colonial World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 91–109.

institutions, to make courses in theology *compulsory* at some stage of the curriculum. There are other strategies for our own time that accord better with the historic Baptist commitment to freedom of religion. For the moment I simply want to argue that the basic Baptist idea of a University includes the formation of the person, the inclusion of theology among other disciplines at the undergraduate as well as postgraduate level, and the facilitating of connections between theology and other disciplines, whether in the arts, humanities or sciences.

(4) *The weakening of the interdisciplinary idea*

The interdisciplinary idea was, unfortunately, weakened during the history of the development of Baptist higher education. In the USA earlier than in the UK, theological education became dissociated from other disciplines, being generally hived off into a separate institution called a “seminary”. This model was pioneered by Massachusetts Baptists at Newton Theological Seminary in 1825 on the pattern of the Congregationalists at Andover Theological Seminary (1807), and it assumed that candidates for the ministry would first complete a bachelor’s degree elsewhere, perhaps in the former L. & T. Schools which increasingly concentrated on providing a liberal arts course. These Schools either closed their theological departments (as at Columbia) or transformed them into free-standing seminaries which then migrated *off* the liberal arts campus (as at Hamilton, later becoming Colgate).<sup>17</sup>

While some theology has survived until today in Baptist liberal arts colleges and universities through a “Department of Religion”, tragically this has often had little connection with the theology done in the nearby or associated seminary which is devoted to ministerial training at M.Div. level. When about twenty new seminaries were created as a result of the withdrawal of “moderate Baptists” from the increasingly conservative Southern Baptist Convention from 1990 onwards, many of these were placed on the campus of Baptist liberal arts colleges and universities (for example Truett Seminary at Baylor University, Logsdon Seminary at Hardin-Simmons University, McAfee Seminary at Mercer University). However, it seems that the division between undergraduate and postgraduate education remained in place, and I observe that little opportunity has been taken for an interplay between seminary theology and other academic disciplines on the campus.

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<sup>17</sup> At Georgetown (Kentucky), for example, ministerial training was moved to Western Baptist Theological Seminary at Covington in 1845. Other new seminaries established like this included Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1859) and Southwestern Baptist Seminary (1909).

In the UK, the situation changed with the foundation of new, non-confessional civic universities as an alternative to Anglican Oxford and Cambridge in the nineteenth century, beginning with London University. Nonconformists, and Baptists among them, were deeply involved in this move and helped it to happen. At first the result in the Dissenting Academies was to separate theology and ministerial formation out as an optional *later* stage, following a more general arts course in the Academy which was now affiliated to a university such as London. This, ironically, was a kind of return to the old Oxford and Cambridge view of theology as a graduate discipline. Quite soon, however, the Dissenting Academies modulated into purely theological colleges alongside newer Anglican foundations, in which some (though not all) students had taken a first degree in the universities.

In time the theological courses in the colleges themselves became accredited by the universities, some of which had developed a specialized undergraduate degree in theology or religious studies for themselves. This was a highly complicated landscape, due partly to legal restrictions in the UK on any institution naming itself as a university, a status which required an act of Parliament. Two results, however, were that a first degree in theology remained a Bachelor's degree, and that it was generally as specialized as other disciplines were in a UK university. The vision of interdisciplinary theology had been dimmed.

### **The Baptist Idea of a Christian University**

#### *(1) Baptist Christian universities in the USA and the rest of the world*

Baptists in the USA have been committed to the task of building institutions of higher education, providing teaching and research, which are avowedly Christian within a Baptist heritage. In recent years the most thorough discussion of what the nature of a Christian university in the Baptist tradition might be has taken place at Baylor University in Texas. One of its professors, Mikeal Parsons, explains that the word “Christian” addresses the *substance* of Baylor's religious character and “Baptist” addresses the *perspective*—that is, the attitudes and practices—with and in which that substance is expressed (64).<sup>18</sup>

Such Baptist universities are distinctive to the USA. Elsewhere in the world Baptists have been active in founding theological colleges or seminaries for the formation of ministers, missionaries, congregational teachers and other leaders in a church. A recent

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<sup>18</sup> Mikeal Parsons, “Building the Faculty at a Christian University. The Significant Contribution Model”, in *The Baptist and Christian Character of Baylor*, ed. Donald D. Schmeltkopf and Dianna M. Vitanza, 64.

Baptist World Alliance Directory lists more than 240 such institutions in more than 80 countries outside the USA. But the story is different when we make any attempt to count what might be called Baptist multi-faculty universities. We need to be cautious about categorizing several institutions that have the words “Baptist” and “University” in their titles or self-descriptions. The Hong Kong Baptist University now only has a historic and nominal relation to the Baptist Convention of Hong Kong, and the William Carey University in Meghalaya, India, is no longer connected with Baptist churches. The university that William Carey and his Baptist missionary companions actually founded, Serampore College, which was chartered as a university by the Danish Government in 1827, now defines itself as an ecumenical Christian university.<sup>19</sup> Oradea University in Romania offers a very limited range of subjects outside theology, and Korea Baptist Theological University is even more obviously a seminary. By contrast, three Baptist university-level institutions, though innovative and relevant to their social context in offering such courses as technology, medicine, law, engineering, finance, administration and design, offer no arts courses (except in one case, music) and they have no theology or religion department. They therefore fall outside the classic idea of the university I am dealing with in this essay. These are the Baptist Medical Centre University in Paraguay, the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua, and the University of Light (Université Lumière) in Haiti.

This leaves 5 or 6 institutions outside the USA which bear resemblance to Baptist universities or liberal arts colleges in the USA, and most of them have a historic connection to North American missions. I list the Seinan Gakuin University in Japan (1949); Crandall University in Canada (1949); the Central Philippine University (1953); Bowen University in Nigeria (2001); Ghana Baptist University College (2006); and the Africa Christian University in Zambia (2008). The last of these is an institution of the Reformed Baptists and differs from the others which are related to Baptist bodies that have some connections with the Baptist World Alliance.

The low number of 5 or 6 contrasts remarkably with the incidence in the USA. About 75 institutions can be found which self-describe as a “University” or a “Liberal Arts College”, with a spectrum varying from Baylor University with an enrolment of about 20,000 students to the mid-size Missouri Baptist University with 6,000 students and many smaller

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<sup>19</sup> However, the Serampore College Act still requires a majority of Baptist members on the College Council. The Faculty of Arts and Sciences has been affiliated to the University of Calcutta since 1857. Under its Charter (modified under British rule in 1915), the Senate of Serampore College issues its own undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in theology only to 45 affiliated theological colleges.

examples such as Howard-Payne University with about 1,500. These may be reduced to perhaps 50 or 60 when the test of a range of subjects proper to a university is applied. The high number of Baptists in the USA, the less restrictive laws on establishing and accrediting universities generally, and the financial support available in a wealthy economy all might offer some reasons for this extraordinary disparity between numbers in the USA and elsewhere. However, we should observe that many Baptists outside the USA, in countries where Baptists are in a minority and sometimes falsely under suspicion as a foreign group, *prefer* to gain their education in a state, public university and so identify themselves intellectually as part of their society rather than belonging to a free-standing, religious institution.

For the moment, we should ask how the Baptist idea of a university might be worked out in the context of an institution which avows a Christian identity. The conversations at Baylor University—one might even say disputes—from the late 1990s to the present have highlighted two main approaches.

(2) *the atmospheric idea*

The first has been called the “atmospheric” idea, and was characteristic of Baylor from its founding Charter in 1850 until the dawn of the new millennium. The aim is to foster the Christian character of the institution, and to form men and women of “Christian culture and character”<sup>20</sup> through creating a Christian environment, and through professors fulfilling their academic roles “in a Christian manner.” This strategy has sometimes been called the “two-sphere” approach, running together a Christian atmosphere with an academic sphere which in *content* is essentially the same as a secular university, though delivered with a sense of Christian vocation. The professor of history or chemistry teaches the same kind of syllabus as in public universities, while motivated by a Christian commitment. This approach is typical of the vast majority of North American Baptist universities, although the means employed to achieve the right atmosphere varies widely.

Baptist institutions in the USA generally resort to some kind of employment policy for academic staff which is intended to achieve the aim of a Christian environment.<sup>21</sup> Virtually all require candidates to show either a Christian—or in some cases a Jewish—commitment, and some have a quota of Baptists that must be filled. Some, but it appears to be a decreasing number, require academic staff to indicate that they are in sympathy with a

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<sup>20</sup> *The Baylor Bulletin*, 1938–9, 11.

<sup>21</sup> There are exceptions, such as at Campbell University, North Carolina.

particular confession of faith. Boards of Trustees are universally required to be professed Christians, and some have a fixed quota of Baptists, sometimes specified to be in the majority. In Baptist universities which have a close affiliation to their state convention, trustees—or a proportion of them—are elected directly by the convention. Others have cut free from this control in recent years. In terms of student life, attendance at Chapel is often compulsory, but it may be simply encouraged. No Baptist institutions of which I am aware, at least those connected to mainstream Baptist life, require students to assent to a confession of faith, but there are often quite conservative life-style regulations for students who live on the campus.

Reviewing our threefold basic understanding of a Baptist idea of a university, it seems that in the context of trying to create a Christian university, the formation of the person *is* the primary aim, though institutions differ widely (wildly, we might say) on how prescriptive they are about the kind of person they have in view. Examination of mission statements shows recurring elements to be the cultivation of good citizenship and a dedication to serving others. Second, the academic discipline of theology is present in all cases in some form, though it is usually quite elementary, with specialized work reserved for graduate study in the M.Div., and it is not usually associated with ministerial formation. Often there is a requirement for all students to take one or two courses in Christian studies, usually in biblical studies, and this is intended to amplify the Christian atmosphere. There is little evidence that it fosters the third aspect of a Baptist idea that I have identified, that of interdisciplinarity between theology and other disciplines, and it is precisely in this area that Baylor University has proposed an alternative to the “atmospheric” approach.

### (3) *The integrationist idea*

The so-called “Baylor Project”, expressed in the manifesto “Baylor 2012” as adopted in 2001, set out an “integrationist” approach. The aim was for the “intellectual substance” of the Christian faith to shape teaching and research across the whole range of disciplines. In the words of one of its key proponents, Donald Schmeltekopf, “The presumption is that Christian faith—in its scripture, traditions and theology—contains essential knowledge and wisdom that bring enlightenment and understanding to all other forms of learning.”<sup>22</sup> A merely atmospheric approach would, he maintained, result in the slipping of a Baptist Christian

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<sup>22</sup> Donald Schmeltekopf, “A Christian University in the Baptist Tradition: History of a Vision”, in Schmeltekopf et al., *Baptist and Christian Character*, 10.

university into a secular one, as had happened in several significant instances in the twentieth century (Brown University and Wake Forest University are frequently invoked). Another advocate, Stephen Evans, writing a piece called “The Christian University and the Connectedness of Knowledge” drew heavily on Newman’s account of the unity of the disciplines and spelled out that this meant an interdisciplinary thinking. He writes “We need to relate theology and Biblical studies to philosophy, to the arts, and to the natural and social sciences”, and “this in turn means seeing what one does as a teacher and a scholar in relation to the primary Christian story that provides the ultimate reference point for all Christian thinking.”<sup>23</sup>

The proponents of this approach hastened to assure critics that this did not mean a fundamentalist censorship of thinking since the theological narrative they had in mind was of the widest, most catholic kind based on the ancient “Rule of Faith” and the ecumenical creeds. In fact, the Baylor 2012 vision also included the aim that Baylor would secure a place in the first tier of research universities in the USA, and this ranking was finally achieved in 2021.<sup>24</sup>

At Baylor the approach does mean an employment and promotion policy in which the assessors will establish at interview whether a candidate is personally committed to the Christian—or occasionally, Jewish—faith, though without requiring assent to any particular confession. Moreover, a critical point is that hiring or advance will also depend on what significant contribution a candidate can make or has made to the integrationist programme of faith and learning, in undertaking “interdisciplinary or collaborative activities”.<sup>25</sup> However, Mikeal Parsons advised in 2003 that the degree of this contribution would inevitably vary according to the particular academic discipline in mind, and what it meant should be determined by debate in a Baptist way within the various Departments.<sup>26</sup> In fact the policy appears to have been applied in quite a relaxed manner over the past decade.

#### *(4) An inclusive approach to interdisciplinarity*

The Baylor project is impressive, and has obvious resonances with my own proposal that the Baptist idea of a university encourages an interdisciplinary relation between theology and other academic disciplines. The project thus has a strong unifying philosophy of Christian

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<sup>23</sup> In Schmeltekopf et al., *Baptist and Christian Character*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> See Donald Schmeltekopf, “The New Challenge and Faculty Scholarship”, in *The Baylor Project*, ed. Barry G. Hankins and Donald D. Schmeltekopf (South Bend: Augustine Press, 2007), 210–16.

<sup>25</sup> “Baylor 2012”, Imperative III.

<sup>26</sup> Parsons, “Building the Faculty”, 74–6.

education. However, my own proposal is slightly different. It seeks to achieve the same aim without any restrictive employment policy in which academic staff are expected to own a personal religious faith (unless, as should become clear, they are responsible for the formation of Christian ministers).<sup>27</sup> This inclusivity is, I believe, an essential part of the Baptist ethos of an institution of learning.

Here I do not *only* mean the historic Baptist tradition of defending freedom of religious conviction, and the freedom to have no religion at all, though I believe this *should* cause Baptist institutions to hesitate when they make conviction a condition of employment, whatever the law allows.<sup>28</sup> In addition, as I have already suggested, the Baptist idea of *covenant* encourages a living in overlapping social spaces rather than an attempt to create a homogeneous space. Covenant is about living in a spirit of creative tension and negotiation, sharing in the movement of God's life which is like a dance, weaving a pattern and finding what fits in new circumstances. It fits the character of a university as a place of multiple voices and diverse narratives, in which convictions are expressed and contested. Here, in a Christian university, there must be an openness to learning from other religions and from non-religious "spirituality" what it means to live as a disciple of Christ in the modern world.

It is also part of Baptist identity to have experienced vulnerability, being an oppressed minority and living on the margins of society.<sup>29</sup> This experience too can be taken into a university in which the Christian voice has willingly decided not to take the power to force conformity on its staff even in its own Christian community, but to take the risk of accepting diversity.

How, then, might a university retain a Christian identity in these circumstances? Here I want to float a vision before you of an institution that I think does not yet exist, at least not in entirety. Taking our clue from what I have called the "Baptist view", the formation of all students as persons for a flourishing life would happen best alongside the formation of Christian ministers, where educational tools of formation are being developed. A Christian university would thus function best where it includes a track of preparation for Christian ministry which is not sealed off from the rest of the community and its academic enterprise in

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<sup>27</sup> At Baylor, dissent along these lines was voiced by Robert Baird, "An Alternative Vision for Baylor", in Schmeltekopf, *Baptist and Christian Character*, 99–108, and Owen Lind, "The Convergence of Research and Institutional Mission. A Faculty Response, in Schmeltekopf, *Baptist and Christian Character*, 125–38.

<sup>28</sup> Parsons criticizes an appeal to religious liberty when it threatens the "religious substance" of an institution, in his "Building the Faculty", 64–5.

<sup>29</sup> See Paul Weller, "Historical Dissenting Christian Academies and Contemporary Muslim Educational Institutions: Contexts, Comparisons, Resonances and Contrasts", in *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, Volume 32, ed. Ralph W. Hood, Jr. and Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor (Leiden: Brill, 2022)125–146.

a seminary; unfortunately the separation can persist even where a seminary occupies the same campus. The whole university would be financially committed to the task of formation of church leaders, as in the older Dissenting Academies and L. & T. Schools, and this itself would help to keep a Christian identity.

This commitment would also help to ensure there was always a theology faculty in the university, well-staffed with a good range of disciplines within it. The presence of ministerial formation would also ensure that this academic theology was kept in touch with the “everyday theology” of those in the churches, and had a strong element of reflection on practice within it. Finally, Christian identity would be assured by the commitment of the whole university to the opening of boundaries between theology and other academic disciplines. This need not mean a *requirement* laid on students to engage in such courses, though there would be many *opportunities* to do so: the university might develop and fund a research institute in which this interdisciplinary exploration happens, and where there would be knowledge transfer into the churches and other civic groups. This is what research assessment in the UK like to call “public impact”.

Academic staff would all be involved in this project, but not necessarily as a matter of personal faith. An interest in this interdisciplinary work with theology *would* be required of candidates in an employment procedure, but as a purely *academic* requirement and not as part of a faith-test. Now, my own college is not a Christian *university* like this: it is an ecumenical Christian college within a much larger public university, but there may be clue to employment practice in its statutes, which have the following clause:

All persons to be appointed to Tutorial Fellowships or Research Fellowships shall demonstrate an interest in exploring the Christian tradition in a manner appropriate to their discipline, and a willingness to work together on interdisciplinary projects.

These patterns of academic work shall characterise the life of the college.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Baptist Idea of a Secular University**

As I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture, some might ask why Baptists *should* have any idea about the nature of a secular, public-owned university. But, of course, many Baptist academics work in this context, and might be expected to have a vision for the development of their institution. “Secular” from a Christian theological viewpoint, does not mean God-

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<sup>30</sup> The Statutes of Regent’s Park College, Oxford, 2016, para. 5.5.

less, or opposed to the sacred. It simply means, in its medieval sense, the part of the world outside the boundaries of the church, and since God's mission extends throughout the world we can say that there is a secular kind of sacredness, just as there is a church sacredness. As I have already mentioned, Baptists in the UK, invested time, effort and financial benefaction in the nineteenth century in helping to found civic universities as non-confessional, non-sectarian places of higher education. London University was the first such to be created in 1825 by a consortium of nonconformists, including Baptists, Jews and free-thinkers, all excluded from the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The organizing secretary of this project was Francis Cox, the Mathematics Tutor of the Stepney Baptist Academy.<sup>31</sup>

This pattern of affiliation is still present today, in the relation of all Baptist *theological* colleges in the UK to public universities. Elsewhere in the world there are also some *multi-faculty* Baptist institutions accredited by state universities, such as the Ghana Baptist University College, affiliated to the University of Cape Coast. Further still, a couple of Baptist university-level institutions are actually *part* of the internal structure of a larger, public university. I mention here Regent's Park College, the continuation of Stepney Academy, which is part of Oxford University. There is also a Baptist Faculty in the University of Bucharest.

In general, the threefold Baptist idea of a university is readily transferable to the public space of a state university: that is, giving priority to the formation of the person, and taking an interdisciplinary approach to education in which Christian theology should play a part. Of course, the voice of Christian theology should only expect to be one religious voice in a plural environment of many voices and many convictions, alongside those of other religions. But this is exactly the kind of tension and negotiation which is encouraged by the idea of covenantal relations, and by a thorough respect for freedom of belief.

A secular university should expect to benefit from including theology in its syllabus. On the one hand, the presence of theology should provoke a university into examining its picture of intellectual enquiry. Theology is an awkward member of the academic senate: unlike religious studies which examine faiths as phenomena, theology presumes that there has been some kind of self-unveiling or self-opening of God which has shaped the life of a human community. But this awkwardness should push the university into asking whether it

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<sup>31</sup> See John H.Y. Briggs, " 'Active, Busy, Zealous': The Reverend Dr Cox of Hackney", in *Pilgrim Pathways. Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B.R. White*, ed. William H. Brackney, Paul S. Fiddes & John H.Y. Briggs (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999), pp. 223-41;

has been working with too universalized an idea of a scientific discipline, and whether it has been reducing the options for intellectual life. Learning, after all, is a social practice, and as such its methods and standards of excellence have changed over time and are often deeply contested.<sup>32</sup> Without theology, a university tends to stress the mastery over the world of the enquiring mind, with nature and other persons regarded as mere objects of the investigating subject.<sup>33</sup> This “domination” model has been rejected by secular philosophies of late-modernism,<sup>34</sup> but theology can add its own kind of critique, based on the initiative taken in the process of knowing by the ultimate Other, God.

In case it be thought that such a function of theology in a secular university is mere wishful thinking by Christians, we should consider the case of the atheist philosopher Iris Murdoch, reflecting on how philosophy should be done in a university. All her professional life she was troubled by the way that modern philosophy was separating what could be established as *fact*, and the *values* in life that were being considered as mere opinion and emotion. Her solution was what she called “theology”. For her, as an atheist, this was attention to what is unconditional; for her, this was not God but *the Good*, and love. These were objective realities. But she saw attention to these values as a kind of theology, and even quotes a theologian and a Psalm to illustrate this:

We need a theology which can continue without God. Why not [just] call such a reflection a form of moral philosophy? All right, so long as it treats of those matters of “ultimate concern”, our experience of the unconditioned and our continued sense of what is holy. Tillich refers us to Psalm 139: “Whither shall I go from thy spirit, whither shall I flee from thy presence?”<sup>35</sup>

There is surely no reason then why Christian theologians should not find a place for *Christian* theology to bring what is “unconditioned” and “holy” to the attention of a University.

On the other hand, the presence of theology should help to bring to light the hidden convictions and assumptions about the nature of the world that lie behind the approach of all scholars to their subject. Although an interest-free approach to intellectual enquiry may still in some quarters be held up as an ideal, there is a widespread acknowledgement today that

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<sup>32</sup> See Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Travail of Theology in the Modern Academy”, in *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honour of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Miroslav Volf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 37–8.

<sup>33</sup> For this analysis, see John Webster, *Theological Theology. An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 27 October 1997* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 3–8.

<sup>34</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp. 35–40; Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 82–7, 146–8.

<sup>35</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 511–12. See Paul S. Fiddes, *Iris Murdoch and the Others. A Writer in Dialogue with Theology* (2021), 76–9.

scholars come to their subject from a particular perspective and with prior convictions, often shaped by the communities of which they are a part – whether social, ethnic or academic.<sup>36</sup> Theology as a rigorous study of convictions can help to bring prior commitments to light, and this is more likely to happen when theology is brought into inter-disciplinary relation with other subjects. It is misleading for scholars to hide the convictional backgrounds that have shaped their opinions; if teachers are willing to reveal the major sources of their own perspectives, then students are in a better position to weigh them and evaluate them critically.<sup>37</sup> Projects that combine (for example) theology and history, or theology and social biology, will give the opportunity for such explorations to be made.

Finally, it should be admitted that the ideas of the formation of the person, the inclusion of theology and an interdisciplinary approach are all present in Newman's idea of a Catholic university. But they take on a distinct colouring when passed through the refracting lens of the Baptist confession, with its idea of covenant, its commitment to ministerial formation, its insistence on freedom of belief and its experience of vulnerability. These ideas enable us to see how a basic idea of a university can be expressed in the different spaces of an avowedly Christian university and a secular university. Though it is an ambitious assertion, I suggest that there is such a thing as the Baptist idea of a university, any university.

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<sup>36</sup> George Marsden, "Theology and the University: Newman's Idea and Current Realities" in Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. Frank M. Turner, 308–10.

<sup>37</sup> So Marsden, "Theology and the University", 315.