Personal Reflections on the Role of the Secular Academy in Inter-Faith Dialogue

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Has the secular academy a role to play in inter-faith dialogue? For me this is a very personal question. A few years ago I retired as a professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Manchester. It was the end of an academic career spanning thirty-eight years in two major British universities (Oxford was the other one) – a career dedicated to teaching, research, and publication in the field of religion.

For all that time, and even earlier, back to my student days, I had a strong interest in inter-faith dialogue. From student days I've been a member of CCJ, and over the years have addressed countless synagogue and church groups on various aspects of Jewish-Christian relations – in addition to all the papers I was giving to academic seminars, workshops, and conferences as part of my professional life. My academic research and writing continues, and has grown apace since I retired, and I remain passionately interested in inter-faith dialogue, which I see as one of the great issues of our times. But what role can I play as an academic in this great work? [1]

For me the answer is not straightforward. I see two problems.

(1) Inter-faith dialogue is surely just that: a dialogue between believers, between those who are committed to a faith position, and active in a religious tradition. My scholarship lies primarily in Judaism, which I have studied in its classical sources since my teens, but I am not Jewish, and though my *knowledge* is in some ways great, I cannot speak plausibly for the Jewish side in Jewish-Christian or Jewish-Muslim dialogue. My worldview may have been shaped, and, indeed, my religious life nourished more than I realise, by my encounter with the great texts of Judaism, but I am not committed to them, nor do I consciously try to follow them. I do not live the life of a Jew, so how can I speak for Judaism in the public arena? My upbringing was Christian, and over the years I have also studied many of the great Christian thinkers, and learned much about the history of the Church, especially in its relations with the Jewish people, but my scholarship does not lie in Christianity, nor, though I am formally a member of the Church of England, do I feel able to speak with conviction and authority for the Christian side in dialogue. So where do I stand in the inter-faith forum? Which side do I speak for?

(2) My uncertainty as to which side I can speak for is compounded by the fact that any authority I may have to speak on religious matters arises in virtue of my position as a member of an institution, which, for want of a better word, I will call the secular academy, which stands *outside* the faith communities, and in some respects *in opposition* to them. I formally entered this academy when I matriculated at Oxford in 1965, and after graduation and postgraduate study I became one of its professional teachers – in the field of religion. I fully embrace the methods and subscribe to the values of that academy, which can be institutionally defined, in a rough and ready fashion, by the leading universities in the UK, or more globally by the institutions listed in the well known league-tables of world universities.[2] As a glance at these lists will show, the secular academy is huge, and represents a substantial slice of the world's knowledge-economy – and it is growing. What role can I as a Christian professor of Jewish studies in such a forum play in inter-faith dialogue? This is the problem which I would like to explore in this brief essay.

II

The secular academy as a locus for the study and teaching of religion stands over against two other settings in which the same activities take place:

(a) the confessional academy; and

(b) the faith communities.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and other religions as well, seek to pass on their worldviews and traditions to their adherents, and have well-established ways of doing so, e.g. through catechesis and sermon, delivered by recognized, accredited religious teachers (Rabbis, Imams, Priests, and the like). This instruction tends to happen within the main religious institution of the community (the synagogue, the church, the mosque). But many faith communities also sponsor institutions (Yeshivahs, Madrasas, Bible Colleges) in which their religious traditions are studied and taught more formally and intensively, and in which their religious experts and teachers are trained. Some of these institutions bear the name of university, and confer academic degrees (bachelors, masters and doctorates). They form what I will call the confessional academy.

The confessional academy can look very like the secular academy in how its teaching is organized and how it approaches the study of religion. It can interact strongly with the secular academy, its staff attending the latter's conferences, and publishing books and articles through secular publishers and journals. But, I would argue, there are fundamental differences between the two academies. The faith communities exercise control over the academic institutions which they sponsor and fund in ways that would be unacceptable to the secular academy. I make no value judgement here: I simply state the facts. The importance of this distinction for present purposes is this: had I been a professor of religion in one of these *confessional* academic institutions, rather than in the secular academy, my role in inter-faith dialogue would be much clearer. Indeed, as far as I can see, the problems which I identified above would more or less disappear.

III

The secular academy, as I envisage it, emerged quite recently in history, and it emerged *out of* the confessional academy. This is neither the time nor the place to attempt a history of the modern university,[3] but a few remarks may be in order to clarify the argument here – remarks largely from the standpoint of Europe and more specifically the UK. How far my observations would apply to the situation in other parts of the world is open to discussion. If there is one thing I have learned from "knocking around" the university system world-wide for over forty years, it is that, although I find I share core academic values with colleagues in other countries, their institutional experiences and the development of their higher education systems may be very different from what I know from the UK.

The modern university has a long pedigree, traceable back at least to the great schools of the middle ages, and possibly even to the academies of ancient Greece. In the Latin West Theology was central to the curriculum of the medieval schools, and, indeed, ruled as *regina scientiarum*. All teaching of religion was confessional: the Church claimed to have authority over what the schoolmen taught, and, anyway, they would have regarded themselves, by and large, as loyal

Christians who were bound to uphold the teachings the Christian faith, at least as they understood them, though some did get themselves into hot water with the Church authorities, and occasionally ended up branded as heretics and removed from their posts (teachings of the *Doctor Angelicus* himself were, at one point, condemned).

Ecclesiastical control of the curriculum within the universities steadily declined in the early modern period, but in the case of England it continued, formally down at least to the nineteenth century. Till then students and staff at Oxford and Cambridge had to subscribe to the *Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England,* and it was only after this test was abolished that non-conformist Christians or Jews or members of other faiths could, in good conscience, submit themselves to an Oxbridge education. Isaac Newton's successor in the Lucasian Chair of Mathematics at Cambridge, William Whiston (now famous as the translator of the works of Josephus), was deprived of his university position in 1710, because he professed unorthodox views of the Trinity. And it was as late as 1882 before the first Jew was elected to a college fellowship at either Oxford or Cambridge (it was at Lincoln Oxford). He was Samuel Alexander, later to become a distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Manchester (1893-1924), and author of that masterpiece of metaphysics, *Space, Time and Deity.*

From the late nineteenth century onwards we begin to see an independent, secular, academic domain of religious studies emerging in England from the confessionally dominated study of religion. The process is complex. Elements of the story include the establishment of new higher education institutions such as University College London, Owens College Manchester, and Queen's College Belfast. These evolved into major universities which challenged the monopoly of Oxbridge, and which, crucially, imposed no religious test for membership. Many of the new institutions, to begin with, deliberately excluded the study of religion from their curricula. However, as the prestige of the university system increased, pressure from the Churches began to grow to have the study of religion admitted to the new universities – to validate religion's intellectual respectability, and to affirm its continuing relevance in the modern world. What the Churches failed fully to foresee was that once admitted into the new academy, the study of religion would inevitably have to be governed by the new academy's rules and values. Important in setting these were disciplines other than theology – history, oriental studies, philosophy, sociology and anthropology – which had strong interests in religion. The last two were particularly significant: they had their own battles to gain academic recognition, but once in they adopted deeply secular approaches to the study of religion, which challenged traditional academics to think outside the traditional theological box.

As the study of religion within the academy secularized, the Churches came to rely less and less on the universities to train their ministers and clergy. Colleges like Westcott House in Cambridge illustrate this development from the standpoint of the Church of England. This and similar institutions arose from a growing sense among the Church hierarchy that doing a degree in theology at Oxbridge was on its own no longer adequate for the *spiritual* formation of potential Anglican priests. They needed something more. To begin with the teaching duties performed by Westcott House and the other church colleges were minimal: they were effectively halls of residence where the ordinands could live together in a Christian ethos, while attending the university, but gradually they took on more and more teaching duties, until, finally, a parallel system of degree-level religious education emerged. The non-conformists had got there some time before. Because they had been excluded from Oxbridge they had had to make their own arrangements. This led to the establishment of institutions like Manchester College in Manchester in 1786, and Spring Hill College in Birmingham in 1838. Both these colleges migrated in due course to Oxford, where they are now constituent colleges of the University – the former as Harris Manchester College, the latter as Mansfield College.

In England the separation of the secular and religious domains reached some kind of finality only after World War II, but remnants of the overlap survived into my lifetime. When I first joined the

staff at Manchester in the early 1970s there were still BD students, i.e., ordinands, doing a Manchester University taught and examined degree as part of their ministerial training. My younger colleagues today would, I think, find it hard to imagine how confessional some of the teaching in the university could still be even then. Though I never witnessed it myself, several staff were reported to begin their classes with an act of public prayer – something which would now be totally unacceptable in a British university. (I would be among the first to object!)

My recollection is that the secular and religious domains of the study of religion pulled apart very strongly in the seventies, eighties, and nineties of the last century. This period coincided with the high-tide of "ivory-towerism" in British universities, driven by the concept of "pure-research" – the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, at the tax-payers expense, of course, without any interference from outside agencies. The academy would decide what was to be researched and how: it would take dictation from no-one. This attitude was institutionalized by the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) which has now morphed into the REF (Research Excellence Framework), a nation-wide review mechanism, dominated by a process of self-assessment known as peer-review, aimed at identifying the very best university research, as the basis for future funding. The RAE became obsessed with academic excellence in research, to the extent that popular writing of any kind, even of student textbooks, was deemed for a university teacher academic death. The RAE's motto could have been the toast, popular, it is said, at Trinity Cambridge when Russell and Whitehead were around: "Here's to pure mathematics – and may it never be of use to anyone!" In this atmosphere an aggressive, secular, humanistic approach to the study of religion emerged in some parts of the academy. Often this involved not only asserting the academy's independence of the religious communities which it studied, but actually dismissing their ways of studying their own traditions as primitive, invalid, and unscientific. There are signs that the high tide of ivory-towerism is receding, and the relevance of the academy's research to the society that funds it is being increasingly stressed, even by "pure-research" funders such the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The concept of "impact" has been introduced as a new criterion for measuring research-quality into the Research Excellence Framework. This new outward-looking perspective in UK university research may result in a new rapprochement between the secular academy and the faith communities. There are signs that this is happening. I will come back to this in a moment, but suffice to say here that where we are now, at this point in time, at least in the UK, is that we have two distinct and autonomous domains within which the study of religion takes place: the secular university and the faith communities. How we got to this position, as my brief history shows, means that these domains are *mutually opposed*: the secular has emerged out of the confessional, and achieved its independence only recently. To many within the secular domain, that independence was hard won, and only grudgingly granted, and they are sensitive and quick to object to any attempt by the faith communities to interfere with what and how they teach.

IV

What axioms, principles and values control the study of religion in this secular academy, and how far do these differ from those which operate within the faith communities? I begin with the secular academy.

The academic study of religion (and here I focus once again on the UK) takes place within the framework of the university charters and the laws of the land. These set down two very important parameters.

(1) The first is the intellectual independence of the universities from outside interference. Universities are established by royal charter. They are not funded directly by the government but through Funding Councils (such as HEFCE, the Higher Education Funding Council for England), which shield them, to some degree, from direct state interference. The Funding Councils devolve, largely by formula, the money they receive from the state to the individual universities in the form of

a block-grant, which the universities then disburse largely at their own discretion. University teachers in the UK are not state employees, as in some countries, but are employed by their universities.

Governments, of course, being governments, do try to interfere in various ways, to try and align universities with national economic and social goals. For example, quite recently the UK government decided to fund directly only the teaching of STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine), because these are deemed important for the UK economy. But this "interference" is at a very global level, and no UK government in my experience has seriously attempted to interfere directly with any university's *academic* autonomy. Universities are free to teach non-STEM subjects, including Religious Studies, provided they can recruit enough fee-paying students to support the programmes.

There *are* threats to academic freedom which have resulted indirectly from government policies. For example, the government has, as a matter of policy, created a market in higher education, and, as a result, universities have turned increasingly to outside funders (wealthy philanthopists, charitable foundations and the like) to supplement their state-income. Sometimes these external donors try to exercise undue influence on how the subjects they fund are researched and taught within the university, and even who is appointed to the posts they support. On several occasions during my career I have been involved in delicate negotiations with potential donors who were in danger of overstepping the mark. But generally speaking the mark is not overstepped. Academic independence is a well entrenched and deeply cherished value in the secular academy, which remains absolutely central to its identity. In the study of religion this means that no university can or indeed should be dictated to in any way by the faith communities. No religious community has any legal or indeed moral right to say what should or should not be taught about its religious beliefs and practices within the university.

(2) There is a second important principle which is laid down by the legal framework within which UK universities operate: neither staff nor students should be discriminated against on grounds of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. This has some interesting implications. It means that universities can and do appoint to teach and research specific religions staff who do not subscribe in any shape or form to that religion, or who may even be atheists or strongly agnostic. Only the academic's proven competence to do the job is relevant, not his or her beliefs. I am a professor of Jewish Studies, but I'm not Jewish. I know Jewish academics who teach Christianity. That is all totally acceptable within the secular academy.

Once we pass beyond this broad framework of charter and state law, however, the values of the secular academy become a little bit harder to define. Where do we find them written down? I know of no list posted on any university website in the UK to which I can turn. But these values most assuredly do exist, and are, in my experience, well-recognized within the system. Were we find them most clearly articulated is in the academic assessment process. By this I mean the standards which I and my colleagues apply in judging academic merit. I am thinking not just about assessment criteria for undergraduate essays, but the criteria we use if we do doctoral examinations, or decide who is appointed to a university post, or who gets a grant, or a research fellowship, or if we write a book review. Carrying out such assessment is the bread and butter of a university teacher.

What I find intriguing is how universal the criteria are, how broad the consensus. It applies not only to the UK, but, in my experience, across the world. I regularly act as assessor for grant applications and senior posts abroad, and I find the criteria I am expected to apply in the case of North America, or Europe, or Israel, or Australia are fundamentally the same as those in the UK. This can be proved by comparing the written guidance I am given on how to carry out these assessments, but what is even more revealing is that I have no difficulty in *interpreting* this guidance, which is usually quite brief. What this points to is the highly significant fact that I have been enculturated

into an intellectual tradition in which a set of values has been passed on which I share with my fellow academics. We may, and do, differ in our *judgement* as to how well the criteria have been met in any given case, but there is impressive agreement on the cardinal principles themselves.

There are, I would suggest, four interlocking principles – competence, openness, argument, independence. Let me try and unpack these very quickly.

(1) By competence I mean mastery of all the relevant skills, knowledge and evidence. Primary sources have to be investigated first-hand, ideally in their original languages. Secondary literature has to be carefully read and evaluated. Anything I say has to be based on thorough research, taking all the evidence into account. Competence also includes the ability to state and analyse a problem, to present an argument, and communicate results in precise language, in a clear and orderly way that contributes to the ongoing academic debate.

(2) By openness I mean a willingness to follow the evidence and the argument wherever they may lead, not prejudging conclusions, not ruling anything out or in before examining the facts. No question can ever be finally settled. All results are provisional. Knowledge is cumulative: there is a strong sense of progress, a movement towards the truth, but we can never say that we have finally arrived. A premium is placed on originality: it is pointless to repeat endlessly the same facts and ideas. One is obliged to make a contribution to knowledge, by bringing new evidence to bear on the problem, or by rethinking it in new ways. There should be a constant, radical and rigorous critique of existing orthodoxies, methodologies and assumptions to test their validity. No point of view, however, authoritative, can be exempt from challenge.

(3) By argument I mean that a coherent, soundly-articulated case must be made in which the conclusions are justified in terms of the available evidence. Rhetoric is viewed with suspicion, particularly if it is used to mask weakness in evidence or argument. Emotion and raw conviction are irrelevant. Reasons have to be given: unsupported opinion has no validity. All judgements must be evidence-based.

(4) Independence at a personal level means that I have a duty to make up my own mind as to what is the case. I should not expound ideas simply because they are fashionable, or because they are authoritative, or because they are what I have been taught, but because I am convinced they are right and accord with the available data and evidence. And if my research leads me to challenge the consensus then I must do so. At the institutional level this principle imposes on the university authorities a duty to create a framework within which I can express my views without fear or favour. They must protect me from internal or external pressure that would try to manipulate or constrain what I say.

We could spend a long time unpacking these values. They raise huge philosophical issues, and are sometimes, alas, observed more in the breach than in the performance. They are under constant pressure from within and without the academy – from internal ideologies and external politics. But it seems clear to me that the ideals I have outlined would be recognized as core-values throughout the major universities of the world, and are certainly reflected in the assessment criteria which university teachers in the UK (which is where I stand) are still expected to apply day in, day out at all levels of their academic activity.

V

It is harder to generalize about the values that undergird the study of religion within the faith communities. Some will come closer to secular academic values than others, but I would hazard the guess that there are few, if any, faith communities that would implement the *whole* secular academic package. It could cause widespread problems on the personnel front. It would surely be

only in the most exceptional circumstances that a faith community would employ a non-believer to teach its faith? Some would discriminate against women or even gays as teachers. Few if any could match the degree of openness that the secular academy demands, but would constrain what could be assumed or what conclusions could be reached by various *regulae fidei.*

It is in the confessional *academy* that we find the closest parallels to the methods and values of the secular academy. This is hardly surprising. As I have already mentioned, parts of the confessional academy carry the title "university", and interact on a regular basis with the secular academy. But even here I would argue that there are, on close inspection, profound differences – differences so fundamental that I can only conclude that each sector is actually working to a different hermeneutical code. The confessional academy does not have the autonomy that the secular academy demands: it is the servant of the faith community, and is required to reflect its views.

This point can be illustrated by the Catholic Church which has a large and distinguished higher education sector, comprising Catholic and Pontifical Universities, Catholic Faculties within secular universities, and colleges of various kinds. These function under Canons 807-821 of the *1983 Codex Iuris Canonici*. The canons assert the right of the Catholic Church "to establish and to govern universities, which serve to promote the deeper culture and fuller development of the human person, and to complement the Church's own teaching office" (Canon 807). It is acknowledged that each of the disciplines taught in these universities has its own "scientific autonomy" (Canon 809). The management of these institutions is instructed "to ensure that between their own university or faculty and other universities and faculties, even non-ecclesiastical ones, there be a mutual cooperation in which, through conferences, coordinated scientific research and other means, they work together for the greater increase of scientific knowledge" (Canon 820). So far so good. But on the other side all teaching and research has to be done "in the light of Christian doctrine" (Canon 809); "the principles of catholic doctrine" are to be "faithfully observed" (Canon 810). The competent statutory authorities have a duty "to ensure that there be appointed teachers who are not only qualified in scientific and pedagogical expertise, but are also outstanding in their integrity of doctrine and uprightness of life. If these requirements are found to be lacking, it is also that authority's duty to see to it that these teachers are removed from office, in accordance with the procedure determined in the statutes" (Canon 810).

In other words teaching and research in the Catholic Universities has to be in accordance with the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, and only those who submit to that Magisterium can be teachers or researchers in Catholic institutes of higher learning. Such constraints are not acceptable in the secular academy. In terms of the four cardinal hermeneutical principles of the secular academy which I enunciated above, while staff in Catholic universities can, and very often do, demonstrate "competence" and "argument", there are question marks over their "independence", and, potentially, over their "openness". The case of Hans Küng is instructive. He was dismissed on doctrinal grounds from his position as a teacher in the Catholic Church, but his standing in the wider academy remained unimpaired. He moved out of the Catholic Faculty at Tübingen to a general university chair. In other words the grounds on which he was deemed unfit to serve as a *Catholic* professor were not considered valid to deny him a distinguished position in the secular academy.

VI

I have, perhaps, rather laboured this point, but for me it is vital if we are to attain any clarity on the role of the *secular* academy in inter-faith dialogue. Some who read this may be surprised that I draw such a sharp distinction between the secular and the confessional academy. The Catholic higher education sector has made considerable efforts to integrate itself into the broader university sector, at least in Europe. It is an enthusiastic participant in the Bologna Process, which aims to standardize university degrees across Europe.[4] But the Bologna Process is fundamentally

concerned with the *delivery* of degree programmes, with what is known in the jargon as Quality Assurance, rather than with defining the *principles* on which university teaching and research should be based. Some quality assurance mechanisms may presuppose some of the principles I enunciated above, but only very weakly, and it is perfectly possible in practice to skirt round the principles of "independence" and "openness" and still sign up to Bologna.

The Bologna Process is a political initiative from within the EU, and it reminds us of an important point to which I alluded earlier, namely that universities are evolving institutions, and are, in fact, at the moment undergoing rapid change – at least in the UK, and, I suspect, also elsewhere. The Bologna Process is indicative of a new technocratic approach to higher education, which stresses overwhelmingly *delivery* – ways and means. Few politicians and professional educators now show interest in the *idea* of a university, in the *philosophy* of higher education.[5] One can trace this declining interest by looking at the three major reports which have shaped higher education in the UK since World War II – the Robbins Report (1967), the Dearing Report (1997), and the Browne Review (2010).[6] Robbins paid considerable attention to the question of the philosophical principles that should undergird higher education (see his meaty section on "Academic Freedom and its Scope", pp. 228-237, as well as the discussion of "The Aims of Higher Education", pp. 6-7). Dearing also offered some discussion of fundamental principles (mainly in Chapter 5, "Aims and Purposes"), though the analysis is less clear and less incisive than Robbins. Browne has effectively nothing on the subject. It is only a partial defence of Browne to say that his remit was limited strictly to the question of the *funding* of higher education, because it can be argued that funding should be considered in the light of general principles, and that the weakness of some of Browne's recommendations goes back to the fact that he did not argue his case from a clearly articulated *philosophy* of higher education.

VII

One effect of this new pragmatism has been, at least in the UK, that the sharp distinction between the secular academy and the faith communities, which was drawn with increasing emphasis over the past thirty years, has now begun to blur again. There are several factors at work here, two of which I have already mentioned in passing.

(a) The first, noted earlier, is the new outward-looking emphasis in university research: what beneficial impact does it have on wider society and the wider world that justifies its funding; how does it serve the national interest and the economy. The natural constituency in the wider world for religious studies is the faith communities. Suddenly academics who play a role in churches or mosques or synagogues find that this is now viewed *positively* in the academic context, whereas before it would have been seen as irrelevant, or even something to be kept dark, because in some way it tainted the academic's independence and integrity.

(b) The second factor, again alluded to earlier, is the new funding mechanisms for higher education, which emphasize market-forces and encourage entrepreneurialism among academics. In religious studies this basically means seeking external donors to support teaching and research, and, given the subject, these donors are most likely to be found in the faith communities. This opens the door at least to collaboration with the faith communities, and in some cases allows them to exercise direct influence.

(c) The third factor I have not yet touched upon. It relates to profound changes over the past few decades in the intellectual life of the academy associated with the rise of what is loosely called Postmodernism. The strict separation of the secular academy from the religious communities was the outworking of ideas rooted in the European Enlightenment. It was an aspect of the modernist project, which is based ultimately on a positivist concept of truth. But this concept has come under ferocious attack *from within* the secular academy. The idea of objective truth, and even of fact, has

been relentlessly critiqued. All truth, it has been argued, is relative. What we are left with are competing wordviews, competing narratives put out by interest groups bidding for power. In this context the assertion of religious belief, as one of those worldviews, even within the secular academy itself, now seems more acceptable.

(d) The fourth factor, the one bringing about the profoundest changes at the boundary between religious studies in the secular university and religious studies in the faith communities, is the policy of successive governments to expand the higher education sector in the UK. In pursuit of this objective governments have been prepared to recognize a plurality of degree-providers – over and above the conventional universities. Some confessional colleges have been elevated to the status of full universities. In some cases (e.g. Liverpool Hope, Chester, Christ Church Canterbury) these have become fully integrated and successful members of the university system – though a few still claim to retain "a Christian ethos". In other cases, however, confessional colleges, dedicated exclusively to teaching religious traditions within the framework of their own confessions, have been able to gain university degrees for their students. This is done through a process of validation by an established university. In theory this mechanism is meant to ensure that these colleges conform to the basic principles of the university sector, but in my experience (inevitably anecdotal, but very extensive) monitoring by the validating institutions tends to be weak, and to confine itself to compliance, sometimes in a rather minimal way, with basic Quality Assurance requirements. There is no real consideration of the *philosophy* of these confessional institutions, nor how that impacts on study and research within them. And it remains self-evident to me that a student studying religion in a large, secular university will inevitably have a very different educational experience from one studying it in a small, confessional college, where he or she will be associating only with students interested in the same subjects, and, broadly speaking, of a similar mind and worldview.

The boundary, then, between the study of religion in the secular academy and the study of religion in the faith communities is fluid and changing, and, in the UK at least, we seem to be entering a phase when it is starting to be blurred. I regret this blurring: it does no favours to either side. It is only if each side retains its distinctiveness and integrity that it can challenge the other, and a fruitful dialectic of understanding ensue.

VIII

Having thus, I hope, clarified the standpoint from which I approach inter-faith dialogue, I return, finally, to my opening question. As a member of the secular academy, who holds the principles and values sketched above, what role can I play in inter-faith dialogue? A few thoughts and I am done.

(1) First, if my analysis is sound, then it confirms my initial perception, set out at the start of this essay, that I, as a secular academic, cannot speak for either party in the dialogue, because as a secular academic I cannot take *a priori* any particular religious stance. For me to speak in my secular capacity for a religion would involve a confusion of roles, and might, with justification, be resented by the faith communities as a grab for power by the secular academy, as an act of cultural imperialism. Now, of course, I may, as a professor in the secular academy also be a member of a faith community, and indeed exercise some authority there. That is not uncommon. In the latter capacity I may certainly speak for my religion, but as soon as I do so I need "to change hats", and make it clear I'm changing hats. This may seem schizophrenic, but a fundamental principle is at stake: the secular academic cannot *qua* secular academic, speak *for* any religion. He or she can speak *about* religion, but they cannot speak *for* it. If I happen to embody within myself a dual role, then in the public arena I need to negotiate carefully the two sides of my persona.

(2) Second the role of the secular academy in inter-faith dialogue is an aspect of the broader problem of the relationship between the study of religion in the secular academy and its study in

the faith-communities. Unless this is successfully negotiated, and a *modus vivendi* worked out in which each side recognizes the integrity of the other, and respects its independence, the role of the secular academy in inter-faith dialogue will remain limited – if it is allowed any role at all, because its right to be at the table may be denied by the main parties.

There are problems and prejudices to be overcome on both sides. On the side of the faith communities, some have still a long way to go to recognize the existence, let alone the integrity of the secular academic study of religion. One tends to assume that in the UK at least the mainline churches have a mature understanding of academia, given that the majority of their leadership is university-educated, but then pronouncements from the churches rock one back on one's heels. I cite two cases from the last ten years to make this point.

(a) In 2004 the Anglican Communion published the *Windsor Report,* embodying the recommendations of a committee chaired by Robin Eames, then Archbishop of Armagh. This prestigious document sought to identify the common ground on which the Anglican Communion could unite and heal its currents rifts. In section 60 on pp. 41-42 it states:

"Biblical scholarship needs simultaneously to be free to explore different meanings and to be constrained by loyalty to the community of the Church across time and space. It cannot pretend to a detached 'neutrality'. Such pretence (as in phrases like 'the objective results of scholarship') is often, and rightly, seen as either a grab for power or a mere protest against alternative interpretations. Where a fresh wave of scholarship generates ideas which are perceived as a threat to something the Church has always held dear, it is up to the scholars concerned, on the one hand, to explain how what is now proposed not only accords with but actually enhances the central core of the Church's faith. And it is up to the Church, on the other hand, not to reject new proposals out of hand, but to listen carefully, to test everything, and to be prepared to change its mind if and when a convincing case is made".

I find this truly astonishing. It presupposes the Church still totally *owns* the Bible, and so has the final say over how it gets interpreted – a claim which ignores the fact that another faith community (the Jews) also lays claim to half that Bible, *and* that the Bible, as a major cultural artefact, now belongs to humanity, and is studied and interpreted *outside* the Church. Here is a breathtaking "grab for power" and "a mere protest against alternative interpretations" of Scripture which resonates ironically with laying the same charge at scholarship's door. The tone is unfortunate. Note how tetchily and tendentiously the charge is put: shouldn't the phrase be "the *assured* results of scholarship" not "the *objective* results of scholarship"? There is a difference! It is a well-known ploy of religious apologists to argue that scholarship too has its presuppositions: "We may have our presuppositions, but you too have yours. So we're equal." But this masks important differences. No scholarship can be without presuppositions, and I doubt if any sensible scholar ever claimed that sort of objectivity. The difference is one of degree. Scholarship within the secular academy, as I have already argued, is marked by a degree of openness, including the constant questioning of its own presuppositions, that few, if any, in faith communities can match. Commitment to a religious creed by definition starts with an act of faith which *at a stroke* forecloses possibilities which the secular academy might want to leave open and freely explore.

Even if we take "biblical scholarship" here as shorthand for "*Christian* biblical scholarship", surely even *Christian* Bible scholars, if they function within the universities, are not obliged to prove that their findings do not conflict with the cherished teachings of the Church (whatever these may be, and by whomsoever defined). If they were to feel so obliged, they would be seen within the secular academy, where many of them earn their living, as violating its hermeneutical code. There is here a casual erasure of the large, autonomous world of secular academic biblical scholarship, which marches to its own drum and is not obliged in any way to the Church, a failure to recognize its existence, let alone consider the validity of its truth-claims.

(b) The second example concerns an interview given in 2008 by the then Catholic Bishop of Lancaster, Patrick O'Donoghue, in the Catholic on-line journal *Zenit* (29/10/2008). The bishop stated:

"The Second Vatican Council tends to be misrepresented most by Catholics who have had a university education – that is, by those most exposed to the intellectual and moral spirit of the age. These well-educated Catholics have gone on to occupy influential positions in education, the media, politics, and even the Church, where they have been able to spread their so-called loyal dissent, causing confusion and discord in the whole church."

The Bishop's views aroused sharp controversy, and he was criticised by leading Catholic intellectuals, such as Nicholas Lash. He felt he had to defend himself against the charge of being anti-university, and to do so he pointed out that "over the past couple of years I have built up collaborative links between the Diocese of Lancaster and the higher education college Maryvale Institute, Birmingham" (*The Tablet*, 22/10/2008, p.12). Now the Maryvale Institute is a *Catholic* college, which at the time the Bishop was writing posted on its website its profession of faith, which included adherence "with religious submission of will and intellect to the teachings which either the Roman Pontiff or the College of Bishops enunciate when they exercise their authentic Magisterium, even if they do not intend to proclaim these teachings by a definitive act."[7] The Bishop's relationship with such an institution was beside the point. It would have been extraordinary had he not had cordial relations with Maryvale, given its loyal Catholic stance. But that did not to refute the accusation. No UK university could put such a declaration on its website: there would be instant uproar if it did, because it would been seen immediately as violating one of the cardinal principles of higher education in this country – academic freedom. The Bishop failed to address the charge that he was uncomfortable with such freedom, and fearful for Catholics exposed to it.

On the side of the secular academy there is also much pondering to be done. There is no room for arrogance, for aggressive and "cocky" secularism, for dismissing "theology" out of hand. The academy has its own intellectual frailties: it is prone to jargon and over-refinement; it succumbs too easily to intellectual fads and ideologies; it is all too supine in the face of political pressure or intellectual bullying; it often lacks maturity of judgement and true seriousness of purpose, and falls short of its own high ideals.

 An anecdote may help to illustrate this point. In my own Department at Manchester, a few years before I retired, we put together a Source Book for our first-year undergraduate module, "Introduction to the Study of Religion", which all our students were obliged to take, containing readings from key secondary literature. The first three readings were from Marx (the famous passage on religion as the opium of the people from his *Introduction to the Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*), from Freud (a passage on religion as a delusion from his *Future of an Illusion*), and from Durkheim (the precise piece now escapes me). There was some surprise among my colleagues when, at a departmental meeting, I said I had problems with this. While I had not the least objection in principle to exposing our students to Marx, Freud and Durkheim, I did have a problem with them *starting* their study of religion with three thinkers who were profoundly ignorant of religion. The correct academic approach surely should be to start with a religion's own self-understanding, with some of its own leading thinkers, and then, when these had been properly understood, to go on to critique them from whatever angle seemed appropriate – historical, sociological, anthropological, psychological, philosophical. That I had put my finger on a real problem was confirmed to me later by a conversation I had with one of the students in my first-year "Introduction" group. She expressed delight that Freud was on the syllabus, because she had "already done him at A-level". It emerged that she had spent a substantial part of her A-level Religious Studies course studying Freud! The student had no religious background herself, and I feared what genuine understanding she would ever attain of religion.

The modern university is not an "ivory tower". When the secular academy studies religions, it should do so with respect. Moritz Steinschneider is reported to have remarked that the task of the Science of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) was "to give Judaism a decent burial". That attitude should have no place in the academy. Academics need to acknowledge that they may have a significant impact on the faith communities they study, not only because they have members of those communities in their classes (the border between the secular and religious domains runs through their lecture rooms), but also because the sheer weight of academic publication on some religions (notably Christianity, but also, to a lesser degree, Judaism) inevitably impinges on those religions themselves – a point to which I shall return. No academic student of religion should be indifferent to the future of the religious tradition he or she studies. This means that they need to work out an ethically responsible attitude towards them, in the same way as anthropologists should work out an ethically responsible attitude towards communities they study.

One of the most significant developments within the academy in recent years (a sign that it is coming out of its recent isolationism) has been the growth of the concept of *ethically responsible* research. This most obviously applies in the sciences (notably the bio-sciences), but that it has relevance also to the humanities and the arts is increasingly accepted. Gone are the days when academics could "pursue the truth wherever it might lead" without any thought for its potential consequences for their students, or the subjects of their research, or society at large. I have known colleagues who set out quite deliberately to "destroy" the "fundamentalist" faith of their students, with total disregard for the psychological impact their actions might have. Today that would be rightly seen as unprofessional. And, although the Bible is no longer exclusively "owned" by the Church or the Synagogue, academics need to acknowledge the enormous expertise that the Church and the Synagogue possess in interpreting this text, and listen carefully to what they say. There is much pondering and negotiating to be done on both sides.

(3) Finally, while the secular academy cannot be a *direct* party to inter-faith dialogue – that, as I have argued, has to remain primarily between the faith communities and their representatives – it can offer a number of *services* which can help dialogue on its way. The secular academy is inevitably involved in the dialogue whether the main parties like it or not, whether secular academics like it or not. The dialogue is present, implicitly or explicitly, in the university classroom – in the topics studied, in the minds of students and staff. The point is to recognize this fact and to find ways of building on it. I close with three ways in which this might be done:

(a) Secular academics can act as referees in inter-faith dialogue. By challenging the truth claims and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments on *both* sides, they can inject a neutral, critical perspective into the discussion which can help to keep it grounded and honest. For a number of years before I retired I taught an undergraduate course, with my colleague, Dr Renate Smithuis, on "The Jewish-Christian-Muslim Controversy from the Earliest Times to the End of the Middle Ages". It involved reading and analysing with a class of students from Christian, Jewish and Muslim backgrounds, some of the classic apologetic and polemic texts from all three faiths. In a final session we set the students the task of grading the primary sources we had studied on the basis of the criteria which we used to assess their essays. It was an interesting exercise. They generally concluded that even the best of the apologists would scarcely merit more than a 2.2! This is the kind of critical role which secular academia might play on the wider stage.

But refereeing goes beyond assessing the strength of arguments. It can involve challenging truth-claims. We should never loose sight of the unity of truth. It is not defensible simply to say, "You have your truth, and we have ours". I am thinking here in simple, concrete, historical terms. Many of the faith communities make truth-claims that can be tested at the bar of history. This is particularly true of the so-called Abrahamic faiths, which validate their faith by constantly asserting that certain things happened in history, or certain people said certain things. Two examples will illustrate the point.

(i) The Catholic Church, at least since the eleventh century, based its claim to primacy within the universal Church in part on the document known as the Donation of Constantine. The force of that claim was seen to be strengthened by the existence of this document, but it all depended on whether or not the document was genuine. In the fifteenth century, using philological and historical arguments, Nicholas of Cusa, Reginald Pecock and Lorenzo Valla, proved beyond any reasonable doubt that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery, probably done in the eighth century, and this fact is now accepted even by the Catholic Church, which has to find other evidence on which to base its claim to primacy – evidence which will equally be open to challenge.

(ii) A classic argument used by Catholic apologists against the truth of Protestantism has been the alleged absence of Protestant church order or theology prior to the Reformation. Were Protestants seriously going to claim that such important truths were only discovered in the sixteenth century? Surely the doctrine of divine providence would suggest this was unlikely. Surely one of the notes of the true church is that it should be *visible*. Some Protestants replied by trying to demonstrate that Reformation principles and ecclesiology *could* be traced back in an unbroken chain to the primitive church, whose purity they claimed to restore, and a lot of historical research went into proving this to be the case. There is a succinct account of this argument, which seems to have peaked in the eighteenth century, in the *Historical Theology* of the eminent nineteenth century Scottish Presbyterian divine, William Cunningham.[8] The argument had a curious afterlife in a work by a Plymouth Brother, E.H. Broadbent, called *The Pilgrim Church*.[9] Drawing strength from a strong tradition of remnant theology, and an ingrained "little flock" mentality, Broadbent traced a continuous line of true believers – an *Ecclesiola in Ecclesia* – all the way from the first to the nineteenth century, culminating in the Plymouth Brethren. The theology is totally based on history: it stands or falls on the validity of the historical argument. What would strike any academic historian at once in Broadbent's case is that his genealogy of the Pilgrim Church goes through some very odd groups. Are the Albigensians or the Bogomils really forerunners of the Plymouth Brethren? The groups on the family tree do share a family likeness in having all been persecuted by the big battalions, but they are theologically hugely diverse. The radical dualism of the Albigensians and Bogomils is miles away from the generally Trinitarian orthodoxy of Brethrenism. The argument is historical, but as history it does not stand up.

Now I doubt if anyone who reads this will have any personal investment in either of these cases, and that is precisely why I chose them. We can be relaxed about them, sit back, and maybe smile a little. But let us now suppose that it is the historicity of the *Gospels*, or of the *Torah of Moses*, or of the *Qur'an* that is in question. Then things might get a bit more tense. But the principle is exactly the same. No historical claim by any religion can be immune from historical investigation, and it is important that inter-faith dialogue takes this on board. It grieves me how many well-intentioned inter-faith declarations are based on poor historical research. Asserting what is questionable as incontrovertible gets us nowhere.

(b) The secular academic study of a religion can uncover and bring to the fore thinkers or aspects of a religious tradition which the religious community itself has long forgotten. And it can offer new insights, new ways of understanding the classic authoritative texts. It can, consequently, increase the theological resources at the disposal of religious communities to develop dialogue. This is an aspect of the inevitable symbiosis between the secular academy and the faith communities. The secular academic study of religion has reached such a critical mass that it *must* have an impact on all but the most isolated religious traditions. Books and articles pour from the pens of secular academics: in some cases the quantities may be greater than those produced within the faith communities themselves. Some of this academic publishing crosses the divide, facilitated by the fact that certain key publishers maintain both academic and confessional lists. This academic publication is less constrained by tradition, and so can offer the faith community new resources or fresh insights on which to draw in developing its worldview. Thoughtful scholars have always realized this. Ephraim Urbach, the great academic Talmudist, in a speech at the founding of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1928, looked forward to the new university playing a significant

role in the transmission and indeed revival of *Judaism*. And I can think of examples where his hopes have been realised. Few would doubt that the current interest in Hasidism and Qabbalah within the wider Jewish community was strongly influenced by the highly academic researches of Gershom Scholem.

(c) Finally, the secular academy can also offer neutral ground on which religions can meet. I mean this in a territorial sense – rooms and accommodation where encounters can take place, which do not belong in any sense to either side, but which lie within an institution dedicated to the pursuit of truth. And I think we underestimate the extent to which inter-faith dialogue actually goes on *already* in departments of religion within the secular academy. As I noted earlier many members of faith communities function, as staff and students, within the secular academy, and rub shoulders and discuss religious questions with people of other faiths. This is most likely to happen within *secular* universities, precisely because it is there that the staff and student body is likely to be most culturally and religiously diverse. This is a subtle but powerful process, which works because it is governed by the rules of civil discourse entrenched within the secular academy. It is an unintended but beneficial and heartening by-product of the main business of academic exchange. I would suggest it offers an important model for fruitful religious dialogue in the wider world.

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[1] This is the reworking of a paper I gave at the ICCJ meeting in Manchester in summer 2012. I also gave a version of it at the Departmental Seminar in the department of Religions and Theology at Manchester in the previous year. I am grateful for the comments I received on these occasions. I would be interested in further comment. I can be contacted by email at philip.alexander@manchester.ac.uk.

[2] E.g. the *THE World University Rankings*, the *QS World University Rankings*, or the "Shanghai Index" (the *Academic Ranking of World Universities*). All are available online.

[3] See Hilde de Ridder-Symoens and Walter Rüegg (eds), *A History of the University in Europe* (4 vols; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1992-2011).

[4] See the official website of the Bologna Process, which gives the history and the official documents.

[5] One of the seminal works on this subject is, of course, John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University*, first published in 1852 and 1858. There have been many reprints, e.g., J.H. Newman, The Idea of a University defined and illustrated, ed. with preface by Teresa Iglesias (Ashfield Press: Dublin, 2009). Other studies of the subject include: Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of a University: A Reexamination* (Yale University Press: New Haven, Conn., 1994); David Smith and Anne Langslow (eds), *The Idea of a University* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London, 1999); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy needs the Humanities* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2010); Stefan Collini, *What are Universities For?* (Penguin: New York, 2012). It is worth noting that the question of whether there is a place for the study of religion in the modern university is quite different from the one I am exploring here. I am interested in the place of the university study of religion in the faith communities.

[6] All are available online.

[7] The Maryvale Institute's website has since been revamped, and this declaration of faith seems to have been taken down. Its degree programmes seem to be validated by Liverpool Hope University.

[8] William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (T & T Clark: Edinburgh, 1863): see vol. 1, pp. 16ff.

[9] E.H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church* (Pickering & Inglis: Basingstoke, 1931).

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