

Introduction

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It hardly needs saying that western European universities and Christianity have a common history. The great medieval universities were Christian universities which accepted the truth of Christianity, and saw their responsibility as one of perpetuating, explaining, and celebrating Christian teachings. While the earliest medieval universities were Catholic institutions, universities in time identified with various Protestant and other religious traditions. Slowly, universities, influenced by the Enlightenment, moved from religious to secular truth as religious teachings were replaced by a truth rooted in reason rather faith.

The growth of the so-called secular university did not mean, however, the end of universities with a distinctly Christian ethos, as the association of religious faith and universities migrated to North America, and many early Protestant institutions such as Harvard and Yale were created to provide ministerial training. The association of religion and the university has, in fact, flourished in the U.S. Today there are some 7,000 universities and colleges in the United States that identify with a particular religious belief.

To a greater or lesser degree, Canada has followed a similar pattern, and several now major Canadian universities had a religious association at some point in their history. At the same time, small faith-based institutions have flourished and have made contributions, not only to their faith community, but to the larger university landscape in Canada. This issue of *Religious Studies and Theology* comprises a series of papers contributed by individual representatives of these universities. It is intended that they speak with their own voice on how their institutions contribute to higher education in Canada and on the challenges and opportunities they confront.

Universities, have, of course, changed over time. Early on, the Catholic Church and the universities joined knowledge with divine truth. Over

time, universities became institutions which aimed to preserve established knowledge and create new knowledge intended to support and improve the world. In more recent times, however, universities have been increasingly concerned with social justice, and they have seen themselves as institutions that can have real and lasting impact on society.

Faith-based universities, supported as they are by an understanding that goes beyond rational discourse, are in a unique position to work for this public good. They offer a way of looking at the world that intentionally incorporates issues of faith and thereby provides an alternative for students wishing to use their faith in shaping their educational ambitions. They have merged faith and learning in ways that provide unique and powerful insights into the world as well as a way of living in that world.

The universities represented in this issue are all distinctive although they generally accept that education is about the complete person and espouse fundamental principles of academic integrity and academic freedom. Mark Husbands begins this issue with a history of Trinity Western University which he uses as context for a broad ranging and insightful discussion of where faith-based universities belong in the current world. Rejecting any sort of absolute distinction between the religious and the secular, he persuasively argues for the need “to build bridges and find common ground within and without the late modern university.” Drawing from Adventist teachings, Loren Agrey also makes this clear in his paper “Sowing the Seed: The Story of Burman University”: that its aim is “to help students think with discernment, believe with insight and commitment and act with confidence.” The seeds planted by the originators of Burman University, committed as they were to “the transformational power of whole-person education service has resulted in a harvest; multiple reapings of changed lives, both for the students of Burman as well as those they have impacted.” Rejecting how some see Christian universities as “divisive, intolerant, and a threat to the values of modern secular Canada,” Beth Green in her paper, “Why Go to University,” observes how Tyndale University has for over a century “been a place where students from all walks of life, traditions and backgrounds, engage the cultural questions and issues of the day with a holistic perspective, seeking the broader good and contributing to flourishing communities.”

It is not, though, that faith-based universities do not face challenges in remaining true to their religious roots even as they aspire to attract students in an increasingly secular world. Carl Still in his essay “St Thomas More College: A Basilian Heritage, a Renewed Identity” discusses how St. Thomas More College “carries the twin burden of showing the relevance

of its faith commitment at a time of declining participation, while also maintaining a core of Catholics that validates its claim to be faith based.” Recognizing this challenge, as well, David Zietsma and Nicole Benbow in “The Cross and the Calling: The History, Challenges and Opportunities of Redeemer University” argue how “the pervasiveness of post-Christian secularism has crystallized the differences in world view between secular institutions and traditional Christian universities,” and how in this context Redeemer University offers “a much-needed alternative” in bringing “the transforming power of Jesus Christ to all areas of life and learning.”

Three papers focus on the challenges of creating an inclusive and welcoming institution. Cheryl Pauls talks about Canadian Mennonite University as an “invitational community,” which in an environment of “university purity and practical agency” charts “a credible course of some new understanding of university.” Gordon Smith in “The Idea of a University: A Post-Bible College Perspective” talks about how an understanding of “the whole of the revelation of God—in Creation” draws on the disciplines of the liberal arts towards “building bridges, not walls,” the aim being to “sustain a broader vision of the character of the mission of God.” And Melanie Humphreys in “A journey towards LGBTQ+ inclusion at The King’s University” focuses on how a particular moment in its history allowed for “healing and reconciliation” that in turn allowed for a culture of inclusivity which is “one of faithfulness to . . . [its] mission as a Christian university.”

Certainly, there are things shared by the universities represented in this issue, not the least of which are an abiding commitment to liberal education and its transformative power, joined with the common goal of retaining their Christian distinctiveness even while being true to the broader aims of universities in the twenty-first century. In this, there is every reason to believe they will flourish in the future, and that when students are looking for purpose and meaning in their lives these Christian institutions, drawing on each of their unique histories and religious teachings, have a role to play in the higher education community in Canada. In this regard, it is fair to say that their influence is substantial especially when one considers that none of them aspires to become large comprehensive universities. This, one might argue, is a welcome addition to post-secondary education in Canada.

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