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THE UNIVERSITY AND INTERFAITH EDUCATION

Introduction

Some years ago there was an animated discussion in my department (located in a British university) concerning new proposals to initiate a postgraduate Masters programme in what was then being labelled “interfaith dialogue.” The arguments raised were balanced: both supportive and critical of the idea. Supporters would argue that a comparative and multi-faith approach to studies was a natural step forward for a mature department of theology that already included Islam, Christianity and Judaism and was rapidly expanding to include the religious traditions of South and East Asia. Some critics argued that an “interfaith” programme was a topic that was becoming anachronistic because its inner rationale assumed a liberal tradition of theological thinking and represented something that went against the more post-modern or postliberal trends that were becoming increasingly prominent in the theological academy. However, what both supporters and critics were agreed on was that the proposed title of the programme—interfaith dialogue—was potentially unsuitable in an academic environment which was probably more comfortable with promoting the *study of* religions in interaction as opposed to the programmatic elements suggested by the word “dialogue.” This might also raise a number of pedagogic questions: for example, would students of the programme be expected to engage in inter-faith dialogue themselves? If so, can we say that this is a genuinely *academic* expectation that can be subject to assessment? What would be measured—tolerance ... respect? And, would such expectations not only be at variance with strictly academic criteria but also tend to alienate more conservative students who are uneasy with the idea of dialogue and would be more comfortable with “comparative studies” or “studies in encounter” and so on? Nevertheless, the programme was accepted under the new title of “inter-religious relations” that was deemed to take account of the aspirations of the dialogical enthusiasts, reluctant participants and academics. Although “inter-religious” and “inter-faith” are often thought of as synonymous in meaning, it is sometimes felt that “religious” is better than “faith” because it appears more inclusive of non-theistic traditions. Moreover, whereas “inter-religious” might be used in a rather more descriptive sense—speaking of the mere fact of encounter between religions—“inter-faith” is commonly used in contexts where some form of programmatic

dialogue is taking place.¹ Moreover, where the hyphen is not used, “interfaith” can denote a particular stance tending towards pluralism. “Relations” is a rather neutral term that does not have the connotations of “dialogue,” and yet still conveys something of the focus of study as concerning the way in which religions meet and interact.²

My focus in this paper is largely pedagogical. I propose to reflect on the contribution that the university can play in inter-religious education. In examining the issues, I will firstly seek to sketch one particular characterisation of “interfaith” education. Here I am using the word “interfaith” deliberately without the hyphen because, as I have indicated, I will be implying a stance that reflects a more pluralistic philosophical/ theological standpoint. Moreover, throughout the paper I will be using the term “inter-religious studies” rather than “multi-religious studies” because I will mostly be speaking of an *interactive* notion of “studies of religions in encounter” rather than a merely descriptive “multi-religious studies” that denotes the “study of many religions.” Next, I will discuss the university environment and the impact that liberal secular assumptions have had on departments of religious studies and theology as well as briefly considering some of the current thinking that has engaged in critiquing not only the assumptions of secularity but the future shape of religious studies and theology. In this context I will give some consideration to the purpose of dialogue and issues concerning comparative studies. The purpose here is to gain a useful critical and contemporary insight into the place of “interfaith” in the university curriculum. This is followed by a look at some of the dilemmas that face the teaching of “inter-religious relations” in the university context: what “grounds” such studies, and what strategies might be employed for resolving ideological difficulties? Finally, there is a summative consideration of the features that might characterise inter-religious studies in the university.

Interfaith Education: One Possible Characterisation

Ostensibly, undertaking comparative religious studies in a secular university is relatively uncontroversial. This is not meant to imply that there are not those who would disagree (e.g. the more post-liberal or Radical Orthodoxy schools of thought) with the possibility of undertaking meaningful comparisons between different cultural traditions but that comparative study can be interpreted as a legitimate academic practice. That is, comparative studies can be carried out for their own sake without the presupposed agenda of finding fruitful avenues for

¹ See Weller’s (2001:79) brief discussion of this.

² Of course, the meanings of words are fluid. However, the brief discussion of terms here will hopefully clarify the way that such words are used in this paper.

interfaith dialogue.³ Of course, it would be misleading to maintain that there is a singular purpose to the interfaith movement or interfaith education or that people who are involved in such movements hold identical worldviews. However, I am going to describe one particular hypothetical stance that seems to resonate with many of the visions of interfaith movements. This stance assumes that inter-religious understanding and co-operation is a vital ingredient for the well-being of society and that underpinning such education there is, perhaps, an imperative to *apply* such learning towards seeking solutions to conflict and disagreement and pursue a common purpose of justice and peace. Moreover, there might be an additional assumption (though not always) that dialogue between two or more faith positions is an exchange that increases the sum total of truth; or else, the notion that different faith positions are *complementary* perspectives on some mystical ultimate referent rather than contradictory truth claims about the nature of reality. Thus, in this case, the task is to educate people towards a culture of dialogue and mutual exchange. Henceforth, for the sake of our discussion, we shall assume this hypothetical stance as the “interfaith/interfaith dialogue” position. However, to be clear, one is not necessarily seeking to be critical of this kind of stance *per se*, that is a separate issue; rather, we are concerned to reflect on the place of this kind of interfaith “curriculum” in a university setting.

The University Environment

What is the university environment? Or else, what is the *academic* context? In an influential lecture—which critiques the *secular* university—entitled “Reconceiving the University as an Institution and the Lecture as a Genre,” Alasdair MacIntyre suggests a “double-role” played by academics.⁴ On the one hand, each individual academic participates “in conflict as the protagonist of a particular world view...;” on the other, there is a duty “to uphold and to order the ongoing conflicts, to negotiate modes of encounter between opponents ...” (MacIntyre 1990: 231). Here MacIntyre is pointing out the need to recognise the epistemological and cultural “location” of scholars but also their responsibility to provide (negotiate) a “space” where dialogue and academic conflict takes place. This is in keeping with MacIntyre’s idea of the university as “a place of constrained disagreement, of imposed participation in conflict, in which a central responsibility of higher education would be to initiate students into conflict” (MacIntyre 1990: 231). Such an idea of the university might contrast with more liberal, modernistic notions of a neutral space which, for example, perceives religious or moral commitments as an *interference* in “objective” enquiries and seeks scholars who engage as detached observers rather than as “protagonists.”

³ There is a good discussion about this in Sharpe 1986, esp. ch. XI.

⁴ This lecture (part of the 1988 Gifford Lectures held at the University of Edinburgh) is the final chapter of MacIntyre 1990.

Nevertheless, I would suggest that both such ideas are valid within academic experience but at two different levels.⁵ Firstly, as already mentioned, there is the currently contested level (certainly within the humanities and the social sciences) which asks about the *epistemological* assumptions that surround the term “secular” itself: here the question is whether the “secular” really represents the neutral, non-confessional, stance that it has often been perceived as representing, or whether as an idea it is merely a leftover of the Enlightenment which actually privileges modern liberal western traditions. At this level, there is ongoing debate about the nature of the university itself as a *space* that aspires to bring together various “departments” and “fields”⁶ in organised and mutually supportive relations. Moreover, there is a question about the future direction of the “idea” of the university.⁷ Will the post-modern university become a multiple space which is no longer concerned to impose a secular agenda but is rather a sort of consortium of different methodologies and, even, confessions? This would have implications for the way that university departments view themselves and their relationships to one another. It might also challenge the basis on which departments of “religious studies”—that have traditionally engaged in phenomenological methodologies (e.g. *epoche*)—are justified or deemed necessary within a post-secular academy. We shall return to these issues momentarily.

Secondly, without necessarily contradicting the foregoing, there is a level that might be characterised as a *critical approach* when it comes to research expectations and pedagogic practice. That is, at this level we are less concerned with the epistemological starting points of our discourses and more with *academic practices* that include “free” critical enquiry for its own sake. It is on this second level that I would argue Philip Mitchell is speaking when he aptly encapsulates the aims of the university in the following: “The value of a university-level education, defined as the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, is that it provides the individual with an independence of mind essential to the objective analysis of problems” (Mitchell 1998: 231). In this regard, the passion

⁵ Here the terms of the discussion are perhaps more directly experienced within the context of Anglo-American universities than some European counterparts where the traditional departments of theology are divided along, say, Protestant and Catholic divisions or are departments which are oriented towards the training of clergy. However, the debate concerning the secular university and its relationship to departments of theology and religious studies is recognisable and relevant in these contexts also.

⁶ Of course, the nature of “departments” and “fields” might be characterised from postmodern perspectives as imposed categories that are the result of modernistic reifications.

⁷ For some recent reflections on this topic, see e.g. Barnett and Griffen 1997, Mitchell 1998 and Graham 2002.

for non-interference by the state or other interested parties is of crucial importance. The underlying anxiety is that although universities receive funding and support from outside agencies—including governments, industry, religious communities or private individuals etc.—they do not wish to be thrall to any accompanying agendas that might prejudice the open critical process. Furthermore, Bernard Williams, when defending the virtues of accuracy and sincerity in the universities, writes: “The authority of academics must be rooted in their truthfulness in both these respects: they take care, and they do not lie” (Williams 2002: 11). Here, Williams is speaking of academic *values* of careful research, critical analysis and the sincere and accurate representation of information as it emerges.

Thus, the picture is complex. The *secular* university might be an environment which, by promoting neutralist, objective (even “scientific”) notions of enquiry, finds little place for confessional or “fixed” stances. Nevertheless, with the critique of secular assumptions comes a greater recognition of “location” and the multifarious starting points of enquiry that characterise more post-modern academic communities. Yet, I would also suggest that, despite the emerging epistemological complexities, there is a common commitment to the “independence” of universities as places of free, critical enquiry.

Possible Coincidence?

Do these hypothetical sketches of interfaith education and the university context coincide? In one sense, a powerful liberal tradition—stemming from Kantian and Lockean influences—may well interpret the purpose of the universities in terms of the production of knowledge for the sake of societal well-being, tolerance and respect, and so, in this sense, the aims of the liberal university and the goals of interfaith education within departments of religious studies could coincide. Indeed, it would be unrealistic to imagine that university teaching and research are always activities that take place in a pristine environment where the pursuit of truth “for its own sake” is the only motivation. Moreover, universities and other higher education institutions are set in the context of, and are supported by, the society with which they are obliged to responsibly and constructively interact. Thus, *interfaith* education—a programme towards a culture of peace—may well be a properly responsible goal for universities, particularly those situated within societies characterised by inter-religious conflict and tension. Nevertheless, although universities cannot ignore their context, it must also be made clear that one of the major purposes of universities is that they be places which engage, as one commentator endearingly puts it, in “useless conversations” (O’Hear 1988: 15)! There is also, of course, the disquiet we have just mentioned about allowing outside agendas (however well intentioned) to prejudice the nature of free aca-

demic enquiry. So, even as an epiphenomenon of comparative studies,⁸ can we say that interfaith dialogue is something which should naturally occur as part of such studies within an *academic* context? Or, should interfaith dialogue be perceived as an activity that, like the various confessional religious groups that students attend, takes place in what might be called *extra-curricular* settings? Such questions have affinities with broader enquiries concerning the place of confessional theology departments in the academy. However, from an interfaith perspective, this is surely an awkward affinity? This is because one possible perception of *interfaith* is that it aspires to act like a *host* to the religious traditions in trying to broker meaningful encounter and exchange between them rather than being a sort of faith position in its own right. The idea of interfaith dialogue is not usually presented as being representative of a particular confession, rather it is popularly seen as a neutral activity. In which case it might look like it can stand *in-between*—an “open stance” similar to the kind of open critical enquiry that is meant to characterize the academic *space*. However, the question is whether such an interfaith “openness” and, what we might call, *critical* openness are the same things. This depends on what the intended goals are. The goal to create “cultures of peace”⁹ and inter-religious co-operation may constitute one possible purpose of openness (perhaps in conjunction with tolerance). However, “openness” in an academic context may merely be understood as a precondition for free, critical enquiry.

*Dialogical Methodology*¹⁰

When considering interfaith dialogue and its purpose there is a question about the meaning of the word “dialogue.” In an introductory work, Martin Forward briefly seeks to draw attention to the meaning of dialogue in terms of the underlying Greek words from which it is derived. Thus, seeing that the preposition *dia* means “through,” he evocatively suggests that *dia*-logue “signifies worldviews

⁸ Sharpe (1986) traces the historical threads between comparative religion, religious studies and interfaith dialogue.

⁹ For example, these are the goals expressed on the Temple of Understanding’s webpages. See <http://www.interfaithstudies.org/network/temple.html>. See also, World Conference of Religions for Peace on ‘peace education’: http://www.religionsforpeace.org/RforP/MISSION_MAIN.html, or the United Religions Initiative: http://www.uri.org.uk/about_uri/charter.htm. Of course, one is not necessarily being critical of the aims and objectives of such organisations, rather we are asking if the programmatic goals exemplified coincide with more “academic” aims.

¹⁰ Parts of this section have been taken (in reworked form) from the *Sardarni Kailash Kaur Memorial Lecture*, (Cheetham 2002) delivered by the author in Patiala in December 2001.

being argued *through* to significant and potentially transformative conclusions, for one or more participants. It involves a much more consequential encounter” (Forward 2001: 12). It is possible, as Forward recognises, that this is a rather loaded interpretation, for example the Greek word *dialegomai* means “discuss” or “debate” and, additionally, *dialogizomai* can mean “consider,” “reason” or “argue.” It is not possible to suggest—from just the Greek meanings alone—that there is a programme attached to such discussions or debates, particularly whether or not they are “transformative” or “consequential.” What Forward is really trying to get away from is the perception that “dialogue between faiths” is a saccharine activity. Nevertheless, it seems that this impression may be indicative of the kind of prejudicial perception of “interfaith” that has been in the forefront of critical minds who think of dialogue as a liberal activity. At the same time, whatever the actual semantics of the word itself, the spirit of dialogue is to be differentiated from a monologue where there is no real dialogue partner at all. We should also recognize that words are often transformed in the minds and lives of those who use them. “Dialogue,” in terms of its common usage, can therefore meaningfully denote a spirit of deliberately co-operative, rather than abrasive, discourse. But, sharpening our understanding of the meaning behind our dialogical activities can help clarify the intentions behind dialogue and challenge the perceptions of both those “for” dialogue and those who dismiss dialogue as merely a programmatic tendency to sell out one’s most cherished beliefs across a negotiating table for the *sake of dialogue*. It also might help us to consider the proper limits or boundaries of such activities in an academic context.

Speaking of Socratic dialogue, Richard Taylor writes “It [dialogue] takes us beyond where we feel we would have got as individuals thinking alone” (Taylor 1967: 55). Here, dialogue and exchange are being encouraged because they are necessary if the learning process is to be appropriately enlarged and enriched. That is, having two (or more) minds evaluating an issue is better than one in isolation and there is an important pedagogic value in the dialogical process itself. We should not operate as solitary individuals when it comes to learning; dialogue (certainly in the sense of “through-talking”) is crucial to a properly open and critical process of learning and engagement with alternative perspectives. Moreover, if we were to seek to develop only those areas that had been carefully fenced off from other systems, then our progress would only be within our own self-referential systems. Our understanding could only be self-authenticated and never properly cross-examined. Reflecting this sort of reasoning, J.P.F. Poole writes that “analysis within a single religious system—and thus within the semantic networks of the religion’s own terms, categories, and understandings—entangles the analysis with the very discourse it seeks to interpret and explain” (Poole 1986:413). Here the argument is that some kind of conversation with others is essential to prevent myopic perspectives or self-delusion. Similarly, Ninian Smart’s proposed methodology for “religious studies” (in contrast to “theology”) includes the claim that it should be “plural: both because there are

many religions, and because cross cultural work is often equivalent to experimentation in the sciences and for other reasons necessary in the field: she who knows but one religion knows none ..." (Smart 1999: 20).

Nevertheless, critics have questioned this dialogical comparative approach because its methodological stance may beg the question with regard to alleged underlying commonalities between traditions. With regard to the opinion of Poole expressed above, is it really possible to step outside of one's shoes and interrogate one's own tradition? This is the insider/outsider debate. Moreover, implicit in a "socratic" approach is to be found an assumption that all the participants in a dialogue are speaking about the same thing—in this case, it is about the same "genus" religion.¹¹ Dialogue becomes a matter of all participants contributing towards increased knowledge and understanding about this same genus. Thus, in the context of more pluralistic theories of religious diversity, *interfaith* dialogue is a path towards an increasing knowledge of truth about Reality. Or else, such dialogue is essential to the discovery of some kind of multi-aspectual or pluriform truth. In this sense, interfaith dialogue becomes a process whereby the outcome is already presupposed. Rather like the preparations of a teacher who has devised a pedagogic dialogue that will lead the pupil inexorably towards a preferred conclusion in the mind of the teacher, or will at least make the effort to keep the dialogical process "on track." Complaints (particularly in western circles) against this kind of procedure will call attention to its contrived artificiality, or its seeming obedience to a westernised Enlightenment mentality. Or else, it might be said to lack the spontaneity of genuine unscripted encounters that can result in all sorts of outcomes—constructive and/or critical.

Such complaints may well have weight, but perhaps they should be seen to have different degrees of significance depending on the level at which dialogue is undertaken. The kind of concerns just mentioned are more about ontological matters (what is "behind" Reality—is it the same thing in all religions? etc.). Nevertheless, certain other common assumptions seem less controversial: for example, from the perspective of sharing our humanity we might assume similar understandings, similar experiences and basic needs such as the common experience of suffering, injustice and the well-being of the environment. At this level of

¹¹ For example, Lesslie Newbigin (who is highly critical of the notion of *interfaith dialogue*) explains: "The concept of dialogue, as it functions in this discussion, is rooted in the classical, Greek elements of our culture. Here ultimate truth is sought in the realm of ideas, of eternal truths transcending the accidental happenings of history. Dialogue in this sense seeks an ultimate agreement about what must be true for all people through probing, testing, enlarging and correcting the insights of the participants in an exchange of wisdom" (Newbigin 1997: 6).

basic need, it seems nonsensical to over-emphasise difference and incommensurability. Hunger, pain and basic human necessities are *understood* across cultures, so embargos against any sort of common understanding seem blind to such experience, and they may also be unproductive.¹² However, one of the key debates which has been increasing in the past decade or more is whether or not interfaith dialogue is an issue which reflects the Enlightenment or *secular* modernism in the West and its concern for universalism, standardisation and liberal democracy (see, e.g. Milbank 1990a and D'Costa 2000.). Moreover, there is also the older suspicion, discerned from a critical reading of the writings of nineteenth-century colonialist missionaries, that dialogue is merely a project which has grown out of Christian attempts to engage in comparative studies in order to demonstrate a certain superiority over the host culture's religious traditions.¹³ This raises the question of prejudicial comparisons in religious studies. So, when categorising religious phenomena, which categories do we privilege over others? (E.g. typological categories like "God," "Scriptures," "Founding Figures," "The Human Condition" etc.) And whereas one religion might be able to satisfy some categories, other religions may not exhibit those same categories as strongly. For example, a naive comparison of Christianity with Buddhism with the category of "God" would reveal Buddhism to be "lacking" in this category. And this could this be strategically (mis)used to give the impression that Buddhism was therefore inferior. Thus, comparative studies should be undertaken self-critically and scholars should be aware of the power of categorization to conceal real differences and disadvantage certain groups which are being compared. In fact, it is in partial response to the awareness of the biased tendencies in colonial comparative studies that *post-colonial* scholarship has emerged which seeks to radically contest the "interpretations" that were given by those in power. For example, a leading post-colonial thinker, R.S. Sugirtharajah, describes post-colonial thinking as a "reactive resistance discourse of the colonized who critically interrogate dominant knowledge systems in order to recover the past from Western slander and misinformation of the colonial period" (Sugirtharajah 2002: 13).

¹² Keith Ward, a liberal thinker, says something similar when critiquing D'Costa's emphasis on "tradition-specific" criteria: 'In all human societies, however odd they may look, it is necessary to the pursuit of a social life that individuals agree on how to obtain basic perceptual information, on how to draw inductive conclusions from it and on how to use that information to obtain agreed ends (like obtaining food and warmth). Such simple forms of reasoning are necessary to form any intelligently ordered social life. They are not, and cannot be, culturally relative' (Ward 1994:319).

¹³ For example, there is an excellent discussion of Christian colonialist readings of Hinduism in India in Sugirtharajah 2003.

Similarly, but not speaking from the perspective of a “reactive resistance discourse,” Jonathan Z. Smith points out the weaknesses of comparative religion as a scholarly activity:

the enterprise of comparison...brings differences together solely within the space of the scholar's mind. It is the individual scholar, for his or her own good theoretical reasons, who imagines their cohabitation, without even requiring that they be consenting adults. (Smith 1990: 115)

This is a greater or lesser evil depending on the motivation of the comparison. For Sugirtharajah, it is a matter of imperialism. However, Smith's point might be employed merely to question the possibility of comparative religion being an objective or dispassionate scholarly activity. It is also an activity that, as we have said, is dismissed by more post-modern critics who are keen to emphasise the historical-cultural rootedness of ideas and belief systems and thus the impossibility of engaging in cross-cultural comparisons. For example, although not a post-modernist, the British theologian Gavin D'Costa is critical of attempts at formulating neutral theories of religious diversity. Influenced by Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of the Enlightenment as well as the important contemporary theological movement known as Radical Orthodoxy, he claims that all language is tradition-specific and therefore true pluralism is actually quite impossible.¹⁴ Thus, even religious pluralism, if properly understood, should be interpreted as a liberal modern tradition rather than an ahistorical perspective that somehow inhabits a neutral space. That is, it operates like an exclusive tradition in that religious perspectives or truth claims which do not coincide with the liberal spirit of pluralism are omitted or side-lined. Nevertheless, it would be hasty to assert that comparative studies should not be attempted at all, or that the criticisms of MacIntyre, D'Costa and others should be seen as totally triumphant. Rather, it is important that the scholar's “location” in such comparative work should be self-consciously acknowledged and become an integral part of the study.

Theology, Religious Studies and the University

Looking at the question of theology and religious studies in the universities, “religious studies” was created due to the perceived difficulty with a confessional theological enterprise within the secular academy. MacIntyre notes that “[a]cademic organisational forms can on occasion effectively exclude from academic debate and enquiry points of view insufficiently assimilable by the academic *status quo*” (MacIntyre 1990: 219). Theology is one such excluded “point of view,” as B.A. Gerrish writes: “whether theology has a legitimate place in the universities depends, in large part, on the scientific respectability of its method ...” (Gerrish 1992: 70). In response to the marginalisation of theology and to

¹⁴ For some key influential texts that exemplify this trend see e.g. MacIntyre 1988, 1985. Also Milbank 1999, 1990b.

meet the demands of scientific respectability, “religious studies” was therefore devised to present a multi-faith, comparative phenomenological approach committed to the “bracketing-out” (*epoche*) of presuppositions with its starting point in some kind of neutralism; that is, something that fitted into the secular university more readily. However, it is debatable whether the resultant “religious studies” discourse could be said to be fully representative of its subject matter. Again, MacIntyre argues that by seeking to conform with liberal secular ideals, “excluded doctrine” is only permissible “in reduced and distorted versions, so that it unavoidably becomes an ineffective contender for intellectual and moral allegiance” (MacIntyre 1990: 219). It may well be that, with the contemporary critique of notions of secularity, the perceived pressures to conform to standards of rationality or a secular “objectivity” can be relaxed, thus making “religious studies” (as a discourse fashioned out of the need for more “objective” scientific methodologies) less of a necessity. The interrogation of secularity and modernism means that the idea of “religious studies” is being re-conceived, and “theology” is becoming more bullish. In fact, in light of these shifts away from secular assumptions, Gavin D’Costa calls for a *theological* religious studies (as opposed to a neutral religious studies). A theological religious studies is one which resists the “requirement of secularity as its proper starting-point and one which engages in the study of other religions with properly theological questions guiding the enquiry” (D’Costa 1996: 347). The traditions of *epoche* associated with “religious studies” have had an undoubted effect on “theology” within the university too. That is, the language of faith and the believing community or tradition has been placed to one side—inadmissible in the secular academy—and therefore D’Costa maintains that: “We have the anomalous and anachronistic situation where theology is on offer in our universities to be taught by anyone, learnt by everyone, but apparently only practised in the churches”¹⁵ (D’Costa 1996: 341). D’Costa can be criticised by saying that for the purposes of his argument he presents a rather restricted view of theology as an ecclesially-centred activity. However, there are others, for example Paul Tillich, who would widen theology’s terms of reference to speak of the *depths* within society and culture and thus broaden theology’s relevance beyond its traditional remit and make it more *generally* applicable.¹⁶ However, D’Costa recommends that in order to take

¹⁵ MacIntyre comments on similar dilemmas when he writes: “For those who require sufficient resolution of fundamental disagreements in morals and theology in order that rational enquiry in those areas may proceed, the liberal university can provide no remedy. And by providing no remedy it has successfully excluded substantive moral and theological enquiry from its domain” (MacIntyre 1990: 226).

¹⁶ E.g. see Tillich 1959. There is a short and useful discussion of “theology of culture” and its influence on the place of theology and religious studies in America in Long 1992, esp. pp. 139-41.

account of the tradition-specific nature and starting point of theological discourse, one should discard the generalising of overarching “religious studies” departments and opt for more “sectarian” departments, maybe along denominational lines. Defending such a notion against possible charges of ghettoism, he argues that this would be a “good sectarianism,” a realistic acknowledgement of the inevitability of *context*, which would nevertheless welcome “opportunities for public debate and exchange” (D’Costa 1996: 348). Along similar lines to D’Costa, Gavin Hyman speaks also of the end of neutral religious studies departments and of the “return of Theology.” However, unlike D’Costa, Hyman does not recommend that (good) sectarian departments be established, but that a new *liminal* environment be conceived which retains the space of a religious studies department but holds within itself “confessional” elements represented by scholars of *particular* faiths who become a “community of contested discourses”¹⁷ rather than the old-style professional type of religionist “roaming around the world of faiths” (Hyman 2004: 216). This will produce, thinks Hyman, a more “genuine dialogue.”

So, the alleged demise of the universal (modernistic) metanarrative means that we can all now feel quite unabashed about starting from within our own tradition-specific localities. We cannot, as Stanley Samartha once pointed out, fly our theological helicopters above the action (Samartha 1981: 97). However, perhaps both D’Costa and Hyman have pressed their case a little too far. Much of their disquiet about the status of “religious studies” and “theology” are, of course, part of the ongoing discussion about the future of the *secular* as a notion that underpins the discourse within universities and about those religious studies departments which seem to have accepted (implicitly or otherwise) the secular perspective as normative. Whilst being important correctives to the secular-dominated methodologies of “religious studies,” these insights need not necessarily constitute the eschewing of pedagogic “neutrality.” Both D’Costa and Hyman are recommending portrayals of religious scholars as being those who *must* self-consciously declare their own assumptions and specific allegiances when engaged in any type of academic theological or religious activity; they are obliged to “defend their corner.” But this need not always be the case. As a university teacher, it seems perfectly feasible to me to disengage from my own particular opinions and adopt a neutral stance in the classroom or lecture theatre when presenting arguments and information. This does not mean that I am actually assuming or claiming an epistemologically neutral vantage point or a view from nowhere, rather it is a *pedagogic* technique.¹⁸ That is, by keeping my

¹⁷ This is phrase that Hyman borrows from Alasdair MacIntyre.

¹⁸ Some might argue that we can and should go beyond a mere *pedagogic* neutrality and speak of a *hermeneutical* principle: the importance of describing things accurately and endeavouring to represent facts in an unprejudiced way. E.g. Bernard Williams

opinions to myself, I am allowing students the freedom to explore their own viewpoints which otherwise—if I *advanced* my own position and vigorously defended my corner—might not be fully undertaken through fear of embarrassment or censure.¹⁹ Thus, it may be argued that, far from being epistemologically presumptuous, it is the professional duty of the university teacher to adopt a *pedagogic neutralism* by presenting various arguments and positions in their strongest form and allowing the students to explore them further for themselves.²⁰ This practice has little to do with preferring a neutral “religious studies” methodology over a tradition-specific “theology,” but is, I would argue, connected with the second level of the university environment that we referred to earlier—a commitment to open, critical enquiry in both teaching and research. (Even so, if *pedagogic neutralism* is to be valued then this might militate against the idea of departments that are largely concerned to be either tradition-specific centres—D’Costa—or be “communities of contested discourses” —MacIntyre, Hyman). Additionally, although it would be unwise to overplay this, it is possible to suggest that an academic environment occupies a *disinterested* space. By this we are alluding to the perception that arguments and dialogues that take place around the academic seminar table can sometimes possess a certain immunity. Hence the familiar riposte: “All this is *just* academic” In the context of the encounter between religions, such seminar table dialogues might be contrasted with the existential immediacy of those same dialogues and encounters taking place in the actual places of worship of religious communities.

This connects to the importance of location. The experience of setting up a Centre for the Study of Christianity and Asian Religions in what used to be the federation of Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham has shed some light on the

certainly argues the importance of this: See Williams 2002, esp. ch. 6. However, we need not go this far, I think. Given that others (post-modernists) would want to question the nature of “facts,” it is perhaps more sensible—in order to be more inclusive—to talk of *pedagogic* approaches rather than assert epistemological stances that may be contested.

¹⁹ We should remember that the politics of the lecture theatre mean that the university teacher occupies a position of “power” over the students (s/he is expected to assess and judge the students’ work and they are well aware of this!)

²⁰ For a good philosophical discussion of the issues, see chapter 7 of Basinger 2002. Basinger argues for a neutralist pedagogy in the university classroom, with which I agree with here. In fact, I would fully concur with his sense of satisfaction when he writes that “students who have taken my classes tell me ... that they could never tell which of the perspectives I shared was really mine!” (2002: 116).

importance of location and the “space” in which encounter takes place.²¹ Before the majority of the colleges merged with the University of Birmingham, the Selly Oak Colleges had strong associations with Christian mission. The original purpose for the Centre was that it facilitate the encounter between Christians and Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and Jains. It was conceived to be both an academic exercise and something involving the religious communities. On rare occasions, there was a certain amount of disquiet expressed about the agenda of this new Centre. Ostensibly, it was merely a comparative project that promoted inter-religious dialogue and exchange. However, being located within the Selly Oak context indicated a certain pedigree and latent (though always unobtrusive) Christian agenda. It was therefore interesting to discern that when the Centre became part of the Department of Theology and Religion in the University of Birmingham—it signalled in the minds of some observers in the religious communities that there had been a change of *location*: not just literally but also confessionally, pedagogically and, perhaps, epistemologically. That is, the new environment was welcomed because it seemed to indicate that the Centre had moved to a more neutral, academic territory. This perceived neutrality would be useful for providing a space for the students of a variety of faiths to meet and for creating a different (perhaps “disinterested”) atmosphere for exchange; however, the expense was that: removed from any overt confessional setting, or direct involvement of the religious communities, meant that the discourse was now supposed to be a “study of” That is, something that was to be subjected to critical academic study, purposes and expectations rather than religious or spiritual ones.

Inter-religious Studies and the University

Leading on from the preceding discussions, let us consider some of the questions that surround the teaching of inter-religious studies in the university. “Inter-religious Relations” as a self-contained academic programme presents certain conceptual and pedagogic problems. What should constitute the core elements of such a programme? This is not only a difficulty in constructing such a programme in a purely academic context, but it also raises an important paradox for would-be *interfaith* educators: What is the “canon” of literature that belongs to “inter-religious relations” where the aim is not to privilege one religious discourse over another?²² Here “canon” could of course be expanded beyond a pure consideration of literature to be a question of sources. The sources of Christian theology might necessarily include a study of scriptural texts, the writings of the early

²¹ This Centre for the Study of Christianity and Asian Religions was founded in 1999.

²² This was a critical question that was asked by the first external examiner to the “Inter-religious Relations” programme.

church, a consideration of historical and cultural debates and the development of Christian doctrine, Christology and so on. Likewise, with Islamic Studies the sources might be Qur'anic Arabic, Hadith Studies, Shariah Law and so on. But what are the *sources* for inter-religious studies? What are the *authorities* in this discussion and why are they the authorities? In response, one option might be to recognise this difficulty and connect the programme to acknowledged theological or other starting points. That is, returning to the points raised by D'Costa and Hyman, one might construct programmes within more tradition-specific identities and abandon the notion of "inter-religious relations" (as an all-encompassing ideal) in favour of "Christian Theology and Other Religions," or "Islamic Studies and Inter-religious Dialogue," to give two examples. Alternatively, if one preferred to broaden the scope beyond such tradition-specific starting points, one might discard ideas of having any core to the programme and instead have a number of separate individual courses (e.g. "Buddhist perspectives," "Jewish perspectives," "Muslim perspectives," etc.) each with their own methodological starting points. Or further, one might place the *student* at the centre of the programme, perhaps through the use of individual "core placements" which allow the student to engage with the subject matter from within their own self-directed studies and reflections. However, with these latter options, the pedagogic difficulty is that there is less conceptual or structural coherency to the programme and thus it becomes difficult to assess what the underlying *outcomes* are that tie the programme together. Even so, this can be defended if we acknowledge that a programme that studies inter-religious relations is bound to have a variety of possible outcomes which reflect students' different approaches and standpoints. Moreover, perhaps such ambiguities constitute the *proper* expectations for an inter-religious relations programme that does not seek to impose a core agenda or direct the critical process in a particular direction? Thus, the programme's title—"inter-religious relations"—should be understood as merely a designatory term that identifies a field or what Hyman calls a "placeholder" which is "ideologically and methodologically 'empty'". (Hyman 2004: 216)

However, without a specific core interfaith element, it is difficult to see how the study of inter-religious relations could be *prescribed* in such a way that the typical outcomes are "respect," "tolerance" or a "culture of peace and dialogue." This last issue also isolates the difficulty for *interfaith* educators. That is, rather than being located "in-between" it is important to acknowledge specific interfaith agendas and interpretations in the discussion. That is, alongside other particular confessions of individual scholars and students, they must see their perspectives as being one of purposeful *advocacy* (rather than neutrality): to bring about peace and understanding through inter-religious dialogue. Of course, this does not mean that interfaith educators—like any other scholars—cannot themselves adopt a pedagogic neutrality, but that pedagogic neutrality and "directed" interfaith education are not the same things. Perhaps (if we entertain D'Costa's idea of good

sectarianism) the overall goals of interfaith are better served in confessional-style departments of “interfaith studies” with their own agreed canons and authorities?

Conclusion

There are limitations regarding the role that the university can play in interfaith education. Much depends on the intended outcomes. I have suggested that *interfaith* education, according to the hypothetical characterisation at the beginning, is concerned with certain prescribed goals that may sit uneasily in a university context. (This is somewhat paradoxical, I have suggested, given the oft-perceived neutral and “open” status afforded to interfaith perspectives.) Alternatively, the university environment could be understood as one component of such interfaith aims in the context of a “consortium” between universities and interfaith colleges. Nevertheless, the precise nature of the relationship between the “secular” academy and confessional contexts is evolving and so the future of religious studies, theology and inter-religious studies (and, even, the “secular”) in the university has not yet settled into a clear framework. However, in drawing this together, I shall suggest that there are three aspects of the university environment that characterise the contribution that the university can make: the idea of an “academic space,” the pursuit of truth “for-its-own-sake” and the importance of “critical open-ness.”

An “Academic” Space.

There is still considerable debate to be had about what constitutes an academic space. As we have said, at one level there is the question of epistemological location in post-modern critiques of the secular university that would make it difficult to characterise the “academic” with any real agreement. Indeed, in the context of departments of theology and religious studies, we have seen that writers like D’Costa and Hyman have proposed “good sectarian” departments or “communities of contested discourses” respectively. Nevertheless, despite ongoing debate, there is a recognisable commitment within universities to open, critical processes. Thus, certainly in the popular imagination, universities provide a unique environment of perceived disinterest: an academic *space* where critical open enquiry is practised and expected. I would suggest that this facilitates an atmosphere for the kind of critical dialogue that might be more difficult, and perhaps misunderstood, in non-academic settings. That is, if the popular perceptions are that universities provide an academic “neutral” environment, then, far from being a drawback, this provides a hugely advantageous location for inter-religious studies. That is, the un-programmatic tone makes inter-religious exchange refreshing and releases those with non-interfaith aspirations into fuller participation in the exchange and debate. Paradoxically, knowing that “it’s just academic ...” can be a liberative, rather than limiting, notion. Nevertheless, there is the important caveat that, removed from its immediate confessional settings, inter-religious exchange within an academic context may have a disconnected

quality that lacks the more existential and transformative nature of inter-religious encounters outside of academia.

The Pursuit of Truth “for-its-own-Sake”

Earlier, we hinted at the “pursuit of truth” as an important goal of university research and teaching. It is paradoxical that the thinker that is most associated with the denial of “truth” as a meaningful notion turns out (in later life) to be one of its staunch defenders.²³ Thus, Nietzsche, in a striking passage, writes: “We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we are able to live But that does not prove them. Life is not an argument; the conditions of life might include error” (Nietzsche 2001: 121). Moreover, “*Fundamental Insight*: There is no pre-established harmony between the furthering of truth and the well-being of humanity” (Nietzsche 1995: 517). This captures something of the academic’s dilemma. The attempt to simultaneously pursue truth “for its own sake” and maintain a proper sense of responsible societal participation. Nevertheless, the starkness of Nietzsche’s account of truth in these quotes may actually resonate very much with the subject matter of our focus: religion. Any thoroughgoing (and interesting) classroom discussion about religion cannot responsibly avoid the issue of truth; this is an issue that should be faced honestly and its full force appreciated and included. In an excellent recent monograph, the educationalist Andrew Wright comments that honesty and the inclusion of questions of “truth” are an aid towards “cultivating ... freedom for proper relationship with the *order-of-things*” (Wright 2004: 223). We might suggest that rather than resolving “clashes of truth” with more liberal frameworks, one should be aiming towards strategies that foster a mature ‘literacy of difference.’ This would involve the capacity to handle ambiguity and to *live with* contradiction and incompatibilities. In this sense, the ideals of the “pursuit of truth” set within an academic space may actually turn out to be a useful environment for the cultivation of a “literacy of difference.”

A “Critical” Open-ness

Again, commitment to an academic critical openness means that dialogue and exchanges are undertaken more in the context of a pursuit of truth for-its-own-sake than for the sake of “well-being.” This may provide the kind of space that is more accommodating of all viewpoints rather than those that explicitly aid a more pluralistic vision or a “culture of peace.” By this, we are not implying a deliberate recalcitrance towards such pluralistic or altruistic aims, but that the critical pro-

²³ See Williams 2002:12-19 for a discussion of this. Alternatively, an example of Nietzsche’s more well-known antagonism towards truth: “Truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins” (from an early essay by Nietzsche (*On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense*) cited in Williams 2002: 17).

cess—if it is a truly open activity—should be allowed to proceed where it will. This is the kind of *pedagogic neutralism* that we referred to earlier. To be clear, it is not a neutralism that is maintained in an ontological or epistemological sense, but a practical neutralism that does not prejudice the conclusions of students one way or another and allows class discussions and dialogues to take their own un-directed course. Furthermore, it is possible that such an open, critical approach amounts to a more rigorous way towards achieving real inter-religious “literacy.” What are the best ways to make students properly *literate* with regard to the concerns of different religions, the problem of conflicting truth-claims, historical factors and issues concerning the future of inter-religious encounter? It must include the process of becoming aware of the significance of religious choices and the consequences of decisions. In this sense, if the hard edges of conflicts between religions, both religious and political, are avoided in favour of the exploration of commonalities, then there may in fact be no real literacy that is achieved. Here we do not mean just a narrow definition of literacy but one that denotes moral, spiritual, intellectual and religious literacy or integrity. Again, Wright argues strongly that “by dissolving difference into sameness they [liberal pluralists] attempt to disguise the reality of religious ambiguity and as a result end up abdicating their pedagogical responsibilities” (Wright 2004: 223). Similarly, if “grating” differences are eschewed in favour of those aspects of inter-religious comparative studies that serve the “culture of peace,” then in what way have we actually nurtured wisdom in encounters with “the Other?” Part of any robust inter-religious studies includes facing up to the *unpalatable*. A properly critical inter-religious education involves including the complexity, difficulty and perhaps incommensurability of the multi-religious landscape. This means that critical inter-religious studies should enable students “to feel the full impact of alternative world-views.” Moreover, such approaches possess, according to Wright, a “deep pedagogical value” (Wright 2004: 224).

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