

# The Oxford Times

## On the University and Religion

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### **How Oxford University of today relates to Christian theological tradition, by Werner G Jeanrond**

The crest of the University of Oxford includes the Latin inscription: *Dominus illuminatio mea* — God is my enlightenment. Is this motto a mere relic of the past or does it still hold any meaning today? How should the University of Oxford relate to the Christian theological tradition out of which it has emerged and developed since the Middle Ages?

Clearly, the existence, intellectual heritage and significance of this university witness to the strong commitment of Christian faith to reason, rational critique, and ongoing enlightenment.

Moreover, an enlightened theology has always known that God works through and with human beings because God loves her/his creation, and, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, wishes to establish friendship between all women, men and children in this universe. Thus, divine enlightenment ought not to be expected outside of God's creative and reconciling project but within it.

I wish to argue that theology is the intellectual conscience of the university. This is not to say that theology has all the questions and answers with regard to the mystery of God and the place of human beings in the universe. Rather I am saying that theology could help to make sure that all important aspects of human relationality are being considered.

We are relational beings: We live in relationship to other human beings, to the universe and all aspects of its nature, to God, and to our own emerging selves. All of these relationships are interdependent and constantly evolving.

Theology is the discipline that reflects on the entire network of all these dynamic relationships with the help of all adequate methodologies. Therefore, it is a central player in the orchestra of academic disciplines. However, its central position makes it also vulnerable.

Anybody familiar with the history of theology knows that at times theologians have been tempted to think of theology as rule of the university, as queen of the sciences, as the only 'real' science that could meaningfully explore the mystery of life in this universe.

Such theologians confused their vocation to work for human enlightenment with possessing enlightenment and administering it to everybody else in the portions which they deemed appropriate.

Such arrogance betrayed the aspiration expressed by the motto of the University of Oxford.

Theology, like any other discipline in the university, needs not only to be critical, but also self-critical. Only the mutually respectful cooperation between all disciplines in the university can achieve the level of critique and self-critique necessary for genuine enlightenment.

A great danger in today's approaches to understanding the mystery of life, of God, and of the plurality of religions is the attempt to analyse every aspect of life in ever greater dissociation of the whole.

Here, theology could live up to its vocation as the intellectual conscience of the university by inviting and gathering contributions on particular insights into the larger picture of the emerging whole. When teaching dental ethics to future dentists, I need to remind them that human beings are more than teeth.

When engaging in debates with evolutionary biologists, theologians could point out that no pattern of evolution contains its own teleology, ie a clear vision of its own possible meaning.

The reflection on meaning benefits from the multi-disciplinary work of scholars but cannot be reduced to academic labour alone.

We human beings are charged with developing our own frameworks for a meaningful life by considering all manifestations of truth. This charge cannot be merely handed over to members of the academy.

However, a responsible scholarship, firmly committed to its vocation, could support this global process of searching for meaning through research, analysis, critical thinking and a clear knowledge of its respective limitations.

When the University of Oxford came into being, its theology was Christian. Today, theologians know that God is not a Christian, but that there are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and other ways of relating to God's self-revelation in our universe.

Theology itself has become pluralistic. Pluralism, however, is not the same as relativism.

Rather a critical and self-critical theology explores ways of understanding God's radical otherness through exploring religious traditions and their truth claims as well as through studying nature, evolution, cosmology, and the universe(s) at large — always in a multidisciplinary spirit of genuine cooperation.

This spirit cannot accept claims to academic superiority. The university as a whole is committed to working towards ever more and deeper enlightenment. Thus, the motto of the University of Oxford is not a relic but a reminder of what is expected from the orchestra of its disciplines.

**Prof Werner G Jeanrond is Master of St Benet's Hall**



Professor Werner G Jeanrond at St. Benet's Hall

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