

# The University: Theology, Legend and History<sup>(1)</sup>

by P. Ellingworth

In September 1966, a somewhat more than pan-African consultation was held at Accra, under the combined auspices of the WSCF (World Student Christian Federation) and the AACC (All Africa Conference of Churches) to discuss the subject of **Christian presence in the academic world**. I propose to look at this same subject, first from a theological and secondly from a historical point of view.

\*  
\* \*

Let us begin with what may seem the drier and less attractive aspect of the question: the **theological**. Without imitating those less gifted students who go back to the flood before answering any question they are asked, I should like to make two remarks which have, I admit, only an indirect connection with the university situation. The first concerns the expression "Christian presence", and the second, the meaning of this presence in the academic world.

For the Christian, as for the Jew and Muslim, if not for members of other religious traditions, theology is a paradoxical undertaking. It is man talking about God. But what does man know about Him? Man is not God, and never will be. If God were not beyond him, He would not be God. If it is hard for us to speak

---

(1) A lecture given at the French Cultural Centre, Yaounde, on 18th November 1966.

objectively of our human parents, of their qualities and defects; if it is harder for us to dissociate ourselves from them so completely that we do not mind others criticizing them, it is still more difficult for us to dissociate ourselves from God, who is not the contingent but the absolute source of our being; to see him as an object, or as a person other than ourselves. Some find the word "revelation" too abstract and intellectual. However this may be, most Christians agree that our speaking about God is possible because of a word spoken by God to man; that our theology is therefore a dependent, derived science, whose subject matter is given in advance, however different may be the ways in which we interpret it. In the same way, Christian action is only possible because of a prior activity of God, and Christian presence only has meaning in the light of God's presence in the world and among men. Christians in the university are not simply Christians who by coincidence happen to be in a university: they are present in the university in the name of Christ, or, as St Paul puts it, as members or organs of His body. Christian presence in the academic world is not simply the fact that there are Christians in the university: it is Christ at work in His Church within the academic community. We are not Christians **and** members of a university: we take the university seriously because of Christ.

But what is the meaning of this presence in the academic world? This is our second question. We have deliberately chosen to speak of the academic **world**, rather than the academic sphere or field, since for the Christian, the academic world, like the rural world or the industrial world, is a particular aspect of "the world", a subject to which theologians have recently been giving close attention. Christians have often rightly emphasized the fact that the world is fallen and corrupt. They have cited New Testament texts which speak, for example, of the world as lying under the power of the evil one. The exaggeration of this element of Christian teaching led many people to think that if they were to be truly Christian, they must cut themselves off as completely as possible from the world, by following the example of St Antony or St Benedict, or at least by becoming ordained as a pastor or a secular priest. This is of course a complete misunderstanding of Christian vocation, but it is one which still leaves its mark on us.

Nevertheless, we are beginning to restore the balance by recalling other passages of the Bible which speak of a God who created the world, who is present in the world to sustain it, who willed to become incarnate in the world and continues to love it.

To speak of Christian presence, and therefore of God's presence, in the academic world is not to idealise either the university or the world; it is not to delude oneself that the university is Christian; it is to carry to its logical conclusion the Christian conviction that God's word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The holy God is present in an imperfect world. It follows that His presence (and therefore Christian presence) will be the source of a continual dynamism, a continual revolution. God may Himself be changeless (though the Bible prefers to speak of a living and faithful God); yet He is the source and the end of all true movement. Today, we can understand better than the last generation the two sides of this paradox. In the past, people often spoke as if God intervened in the world from outside. This is the aspect of the truth which was most emphasized at the time when in Africa, people spoke more about the mission than about the Church. The motive and foundation of this mission were seen as the sending of Jesus into the world by His Father: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." But the Church's mission was thought of too exclusively in geographical terms, as the sending of missionaries from an already well established Christendom into other countries known as "mission fields." Today, when African churches have become independent of the West, and the traditional African heritage is being rediscovered, we are able once more to see things in better perspective. We are emphasizing the complementary truth that God has always been present in the world He made; that in the **beginning** was the Word, so that the knowledge of Himself which God makes possible for men is even more "original" than sin. We need to think of a presence of Christ, and therefore of a Christian presence in the academic world, and in the world as a whole, which will have nothing static about it, but will rather be a movement flowing continually from God, renewing itself continually in Him, and finding in Him its fulfilment.

\*  
\* \*

After the theology, a little **history**. The history of the European universities of the Middle Ages is like the story of King Arthur, in that a huge collection of legends has gathered round a tiny nucleus of historical fact. It is not much easier in the case of the universities than in the case of King Arthur to distinguish the his-

tory from the legend. We must however make the attempt, at least in general terms, because at each point, the discovery, even in part, of what really happened gives us a new insight into Christian presence in the university to-day.

The **legend** says (and in the legend, there is just enough history to make us swallow the mixture) that the **universities were founded by the Church**; that they were all steeped in a profoundly Christian spirituality. The Sorbonne is named after the confessor of St. Louis; Oxford University grew up around a sanctuary of St. Frideswide; the University of Toulouse was founded by Pope Gregory IX, and that of Rome by Innocent IV; almost all of them based their claim to the title of university on an authorisation by the Holy See. Unfortunately (the legend continues) things went wrong; these children of the Church became disobedient and ungrateful **enfants terribles**. They became declericalised. This is the first reason why to-day, there are no more universities in the true sense of the word.

The **reality** is rather different. The universities were seldom church foundations, even though Christians and even ecclesiastics may have personally helped to found them. Not to speak of the ancient Muslim universities, Oxford was apparently a non-ecclesiastical foundation. If Toulouse and Rome were founded by popes, Naples and Prague were founded by emperors. Even the Sorbonne was not always an entirely submissive daughter of the Church. In general, it was only after the oldest universities had come into being that it became the custom to acquire from the Holy See the "privilege" of using the title of university.

To-day, in a secular university, we can grasp more easily the implications of these facts. In some countries, universities are in danger of becoming the tools of a political ideology, a capitalist foundation, or even (still) of a religious denomination. I think we should agree that this is a deformation of the idea of a university. The Christian cannot help seeing an analogy between the freedom which a university should enjoy within society, and what St. Paul calls the "glorious liberty of the children of God." (Both forms of liberty can of course be abused, but **abusus non tollit usum**.) One of the university's functions is the critical examination of current platitudes. This rôle is not limited to the correcting of students' examination papers, but extends to the whole of society. It should of course be constructive, loyal and responsible criticism, but it must always be completely free.

Something like this seems to be also one of the functions of the whole Christian community, considered as a human, imperfect but responsible expression of the creative judgement of God. I myself would go a little further, though I do not know if even all my colleagues would follow me here. I believe that the Christian community in the university has a similar critical function in relation both to the structures of the university in which it lives, and also to the ecclesiastical structures (such as parishes) of which it is itself a particular example. The university Christian community is responsible to God in the university, just as the university itself has immense responsibilities in the nation; the university Christian community has the right to call on the resources of the Church of which it forms a part, just as the university calls on the resources of the nation of which it forms a part; but there are forms of intervention (not to say interference) from outside which are harmful both to the life of the university, and to Christian presence in its midst.

\*  
\* \*

Let us return to history, or rather to our legend. The legend says, in the second place, that the university was originally, as its name implies, a place of universal learning, an **universitas facultatorum**, a whole in which everything which had any claim to scholarship was studied and taught. The fifteenth and sixteenth century renaissance had the ideal of the **uomo universale**, the universal man, acquainted with every branch of learning, the man of general culture of whom Leonardo da Vinci is the classic example. The equally important renaissance of the twelfth century had the vision of a universal community. Unfortunately (the legend continues), not only are there no more universal men: the universities themselves are no longer universal. Specialisation means that scholars no longer understand or speak to one another; the physicist busies himself with a tiny corner of his science; he does his own job, instead of becoming involved in profound reflexions on Science with a capital S. In some countries, it is even proposed to give the name of university to what are now called "institutes of advanced technology", in which the arts and the humanities have no place. The university, it is said, is disintegrating. This is the second reason why there are no more universities in the true sense of the word.

The historical facts, once again, are rather different. The word "university" referred primarily, not to the range of subjects taught, but to the members of which the university was made up. It was a community, a collectivity, a corporation of students or teachers, universal in the sense that its students could be of any nationality, and its professors possessed the **jus ubique docendi**, the right to teach anywhere. Even the most famous universities did not always have a complete range of faculties. Far from being a unity which later disintegrated, the university often began as a collection of independent schools which later united. The integration of the Oxford and Cambridge colleges is still far from complete, and would certainly meet with determined opposition.

The Christian in the university has, it seems, to recognize on the one hand that specialisation does not necessarily exclude coordination, but rather presupposes it. Woe to the lecturer in Church history who shuts his eyes to history in general! There is at least one university in which theological students are obliged to take courses in philosophy and sociology given by non-Christian lecturers. The most interesting theses are often those on subjects which lie between two or several branches of study. On the other hand, however, specialisation in itself is far more than a necessary evil. Diversity, in scholarship as in the university community, is just as important as cohesion. If, in the past, in the university as elsewhere, the Churches have sometimes been a divisive factor, it has been when they have tried to be totalitarian, to impose an artificial (and, theologically speaking, essentially idolatrous) uniformity. This appears to be less and less the case to-day. Christianity claims to preach a message of reconciliation between different groups (Jews, Greeks, men, women, slaves, free men etc.) which, even though they form one body, maintain the diversity by which they enrich one another. In the same way, the university Christian community will respect denominational diversity while being itself radically ecumenical; it will respect ethnic differences, since they exist among its own members, while being itself entirely open; it will respect differences of religion and try to understand them, while being itself fully Christian. It will never make itself a spokesman for a pressure group: still less will it allow itself to become one.

\*

\* \*

The third and last part of our legend is a corollary of the two others. Since the first universities, it is said, were Church foundations, **theology was the queen of the sciences**. It was theology which gave cohesion to the whole of scholarship, defined the function of other disciplines, fixed their respective frontiers, and gave to each subject an eternal value and meaning which it could never have found for itself. The university was a pyramid of which theology was the apex, an arch of which theology was the keystone. Unfortunately (the legend continues) values have been turned upside down. Sometimes, theology is completely banished from the university. Sometimes, as is the case in Yaoundé, the Faculty of Theology is an officially recognized but private body existing side by side with the University, in close, fraternal but unofficial relationship to it. Sometimes, although the Faculty of Theology is an integral part of the university, as is the case for example at Strasbourg and (under the name of Department of Religious Studies) at Ibadan, its students are usually few in number in comparison with those of other faculties, and the sciences, for example, are far from feeling themselves the subjects of a queen called theology. The university, it is said, is becoming secularised. This is the third reason why there are no more universities in the true sense of the word.

Once more, history has to be twisted to justify this conclusion. At Paris, it is true, theology had a predominant place. This was also the case, for example, at Oxford and Cambridge, where certain official ceremonies still look more like a religious procession than a secular march-past, because they are led by Doctors of Divinity. Originally, however, the different faculties were more often equal in principle, and in practice, for example at Bologna, law might be much more important than theology. Theology has only from time to time been thought of as queen of the sciences: there is nothing unusual in its not holding this place to-day.

In any case, theology (though an academic discipline whose **raison d'être** it is not my present purpose to defend) is not the whole of Christianity, nor is it the exclusive preserve of the clergy. In the same way, the clergy is not the whole of the Church, and Christian presence in the academic world is not limited to the existence of a faculty of theology in or beside the university. On the contrary, theology finds its true place as the servant, not the queen of the sciences; the clergyman finds his true place as minister or servant of God's people; the Church finds its true place as

servant of the world; the Christian community in the university finds its true place as servant of the university as a whole; and this, not in order to adapt itself to abnormal, difficult and (it is hoped) temporary circumstances, but in the name of Him who, though indeed the King of heaven and earth, became in Christ the servant of us all.

### SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- G. H. Williams: *The Theological Idea of the University*. Commission on Higher Education, National Council of Churches, 1958.
- G. H. Williams: article s. v. "Universität", *Weltkirchenlexicon*, Stuttgart, Kreuz-Verlag, 1960.
- Harvey Cox: *The Secular City*, London, SCM Press, 1965, p. 217-237.
- J. A. T. Robinson: *Honest to God*, London, SCM Press, 1963. Traduction française *Dieu sans Dieu*, Paris, Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1964.
- M. Conway: *The Undivided Vision*. London, SCM Press, 1966.
- Jean Jousselin: "A New University for a New World", in *Student World*, vol. LIX, no. 1, p. 3-85.
- Student World*, vol. LVIII, no. 2: "Christians in the University" (Joint WSCF—Pax Romana number).
- Student World*, vol. LIX, no. 2: "Christian Presence". "The Christian Community in the Academic World", Genève, WSCF, 1964.
- "The Christian Community in the Universities of Africa". Unpublished report of the AACC—WSCF consultation, September 1-7 1966, University of Ghana.
- Unpublished Minutes of the Consultation of Teachers of Theology and Religious Studies in African Universities held at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, March 5th—9th 1966. Traduction française inédite : Procès-verbal de la Consultation des professeurs de théologie et des études religieuses dans les universités africaines, tenue à l'Université du Nigéria, Nsukka, du 5 au 9 mars 1966.

**This article is Copyright and Distributed under the following license**



**Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike  
CC BY-NC-SA**

This license lets others remix, tweak, and build upon your work non-commercially, as long as they credit you and license their new creations under the identical terms.

[View License Deed](#) | [View Legal Code](#)

**Cet article est protégé par le droit d'auteur et distribué sous la licence suivante**



**Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation  
Commerciale - Partage dans les Mêmes  
Conditions CC BY-NC-SA**

Cette licence permet aux autres de remixier, arranger, et adapter votre œuvre à des fins non commerciales tant qu'on vous crédite en citant votre nom et que les nouvelles œuvres sont diffusées selon les mêmes conditions.

[Voir le Résumé Explicatif](#) | [Voir le Code Juridique](#)

### **Copyright and Take Down notice**

The digitized version of Abbia seeks to honour the original intentions of the paper publication. We continue to publish under the patronage of the Ministry of Arts and Culture: permission for this was given by the minister of Arts and Culture on 9 August 2019 Ref 1752/L/MINAC/SG/DLL/.. It has not proved possible to track down the surviving authors so we are making the material available under a more restrictive noncommercial CC license. We have setup a takedown policy to accommodate this. More details are available from [here](#).

La version numérisée d'Abbia vise à honorer les intentions originales de la publication sur papier. Nous continuons à publier sous le patronage du Ministère des Arts et de la Culture: permission a été donné par le ministre le 9 August 2019 Ref 1752/L/MINAC/SG/DLL/. Il n'a pas été possible de retrouver les auteurs survivants, c'est pourquoi nous rendons le matériel disponible sous une licence CC non commerciale plus restrictive. Nous avons mis en place une politique de démantèlement pour y faire face. Plus de détails sont disponibles [ici](#).