

Christianity and the Disciplines: The Transformation of the University

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At university my options for studying Christianity were a couple of biblical studies electives attached to the classics department, or attending the Christian Union or parallel groups running alongside other clubs and societies. Theology as such was left to theological colleges, apparently so the university sector could avoid sectarianism. What I was really interested in, however, was not just studying straight theology but exploring the relevance of Christian faith for the topics we were unpacking in our history, sociology, economics and Asian Studies classes. This volume would have been helpful to disciple me in my approach to studying different disciplines and integrating studies with my Christian faith.

As a pastor and theological educator, I read *Christianity and the Disciplines* for ideas on how to help people in my church and classroom integrate their faith with their everyday world. As a pastor, a lot of my work focuses on matters of Bible and prayer, leadership and mission, pastoral care and church governance. But it is an important aspect of public theology to consider how thoughtful Christians might study and practice across the disciplines of different endeavours, rather than assuming Christianity only relates to the private/religious sphere. This is why the book is a useful reference for pastors, but will be of interest to Christian professionals and especially academics and teachers interested in the relevance of Christianity to their work.

The editors and writers are either academics in theology and religion, or Christian intellectuals spread across literature, history, psychology, philosophy, music, science, politics and law, all with an interest in their field's relationship to theology. They reflect on their practices and how their work would be shaped according to their Christian convictions? And how would their discipline ideally be taught in a Christian university context? The first volume of *The Religion and the University Series* focused on how theology and philosophy relate. This second volume grapples with how theology relates to other non-theological disciplines.

The seminal writing of John Henry Newman on the nature of the university, which Mervyn Davies discusses at the start of the volume, advocates for the interaction of Christianity and the disciplines. Newman argued that faith helps education and society to flourish. And he argued that education should not just be about consumerism and production, economic growth and nation building. For Newman, there is a place for character-forming education. And the university is a place for different disciplines to interact in "mutual education."

Christianity and the Disciplines takes Newman's challenge and, against the secularizing tendency, argues Christianity has an important contribution to make to scholarship and the public sphere that higher education serves.

Sixteen chapters, by seventeen writers, then discuss how different disciplines can engage with Christianity. Part 1 investigates five areas of the natural and life sciences: mathematics (and creation's beautiful rationality), physics (and the wonder of our world that is fine-tuned for carbon-based life), biology (and the challenges of evolutionary theory), environmental science (and the vocational invitation to help restore the world to balance) and medicine (and the vocation of restoring people to human flourishing, including people in developing world contexts).

Part 2 discusses six human and social sciences: psychology and psychotherapy (and how theology informs scholarly and therapeutic practice), how legal education, politics and economics can take theology seriously, and how sociology and theology relate. The chapter on sociology by James Sweeney was one of the most interesting. Sweeney advocates making the most of sociology to read the times, analyse experience and culture, understand spirituality and study churches qualitatively. But he also reminds us that if there is more than the eye can see, then there is more to the world than sociology can understand and we need theology too.

Part 3 finally offers chapters delving into theology and the humanities: literature (with examples of how theology can be used in literary criticism of Dante and Shakespeare), history (and the significance of a Christian lineal philosophy of history), classics (and its study of the ancient world that biblical studies also engages), and music (and the place of choral cathedrals in university life). The most helpful chapter is Lucy Beckett's study of English literature and her high view of good writing as a revealer of God's beauty, goodness and truth.

There is a range of views of how theology relates to the different disciplines, but the universal theme is that conversation with theology is beneficial. It is fascinating how disciplines across the university grapple with making sense of the world and how they deal with (or ignore) faith. Sometimes theology informs the content of what is taught, and sometimes it simply helps put other disciplines in context and add meaning and metaphysical depth. There is helpful discussion of teaching and education implications, especially the challenge to grapple with deeper matters, ethics and character formation as well as knowledge and skills. The best value of the book is the writers' contagious love of their subjects and how we can learn from the breadth and recent developments in different fields. The book finishes without a conclusion. But the eighteen chapters they have collected helpfully model diverse conversation between theology and other disciplines and invite ongoing dialogue.

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