

Towards a Free Church vision for the place of religion in universities

Preamble

Universities shape the lives of millions of people in the UK. Nearly half of all our young people attend universities, and their impact reaches into the wider community.

Religion is also a life-changing force in today's world. More than 80% of the world's population identify with one religion or another.¹ Understanding how universities and religion relate is therefore vitally important.

This is why in 2014 the Free Churches Group (FCG) set up a working group to consider the best way of resourcing Free Church people to engage with Higher Education.

This group submitted a report to the FCG Directors in May 2015. It can be read at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58359f279de4bbe7aba10e31/t/5925533e6b8f5b5c145645cb/1495618402404/Hope+in+Higher+Education+Report.pdf>

The Report made four recommendations, the second of which was 'that the FCG engages with questions about the place of religion in universities in a way informed by FC principles and contemporary realities.'²

This paper is a response to that recommendation. It is a sister paper to that expressing a positive vision for HE; the latter can be read at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58359f279de4bbe7aba10e31/t/5a9e5bb3c83025ca5dcb1f45/1520327605304/Towards+a+Free+Church+Vision+for+Higher+Education+.pdf>

Like the positive vision for higher education paper, this one is intended initially to be an 'internal' document. It is primarily for the FCG and its member bodies, with the aim of encouraging them to think through some fundamental issues relating to the place and role of religion on campus and guiding them in determining approaches and priorities. It could be adapted for wider use.

Two sections of the May 2014 report are particularly relevant as background to this document and have been borne in mind in preparing it: section Four 'Free Church Principles' and section Six 'The Religious Context'.

To help in creating this statement, a questionnaire was sent to all FCG members. Follow up interviews and interviews with 'expert witnesses' took place. Literature was reviewed and preliminary drafts critiqued by individuals and groups.

¹ www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/

² For the other recommendations see page 2 of the report.

A search also took place to determine whether the FCG has produced any similar statements in other areas of its work, or any generic statements about the place of religion in the public realm. None were found, but there are relevant 'pointers' to positions the FCG might take. For example, the FCG website says the FCG is an 'ecumenical association' and the 'History' section of the site says: 'The Free Churches have a history of advocating freedom of belief and conscience, seeing personal faith as integral to the Christian Gospel. They continue to do this whilst seeking to create a safe, caring and equal society where intellectual, spiritual and socio-economic freedoms allow people to exercise choice in a way that enables everyone to flourish. It (the FCG) facilitates the corporate expression and promotion of these values, speaking into issues of public concern and serving society.'³

The prioritising of freedom, along with the desire to see the flourishing of all and the societal vision enshrined in this quotation, proved a major influence on the statement. They inspire us to challenge universities to give due recognition to our experience and insights and develop a framework for debate in which both religious and non-religious views are taken seriously.

Towards a vision.....

Background

1. The survey of FCG members suggests there may not be a lot of knowledge amongst most of the FCG member organisations about how religion is treated on campus. The comments we did receive indicate satisfaction with arrangements where universities validate denominational courses and fears that universities impact negatively on personal faith. In follow up interviews, some more intimately involved with universities suggested that university-wide policies treat religion in a positive way, but at other levels in the university that may not always be the case. Much can depend on the attitude of individual staff. Religion can also be treated as a 'problem', an equality issue to be 'solved', or something to be 'managed' in cases where it is perceived, correctly or otherwise, to be a source of actual or potential terrorist threats.

2. We recognise the existence of various pieces of legislation governing the place of religion on campus. Churches engaging with universities will be expected to work within those legal frameworks. In law, religion is treated as an equality issue, a 'protected characteristic' within the Equality Act 2010, meaning individuals cannot be discriminated against on the basis of their religion or belief. The Act also means that, when exercising their functions, universities must have 'due regard' to the need to advance equality of opportunity between people who have a particular religion or belief, and those who do not. We also note that the Human Rights Act enshrines the right: to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (article 9); to freedom of expression, including the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas which may shock, offend or disturb others (article 10); to freedom of assembly and association (article 11); and to non-discrimination in the enjoyment of rights (article 14).

A further relevant piece of legislation is the [Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015](#), which seeks to deal with the possible 'radicalisation' of people who might go on to become 'extremists' or 'violent extremists', including with religious, or possible religiously-related motivations. Under this Act universities now have a statutory duty to engage with the government's Prevent agenda.

³ www.freechurches.org.uk/history/

3. Individual universities also produce their own policy statements in relevant areas, for example freedom of speech. They can be read on university websites and are useful for any group wishing to raise religious issues with a university. All universities are also subject to other specific legislative provisions, such as those enshrined in Section 202 of the 1988 Education Reform Act defining and safeguarding academic freedom.

4. Some within the FCG membership who responded to our questionnaire welcomed religion being treated as an equality issue. No-one criticised this approach.

A Free Church view...

5. Whilst such frameworks for dealing with religion are part of contemporary reality, FCG members will have other ways of understanding the place of religion in universities, arising from Christian and, in particular, Free Church experience, tradition and insights.

6. In doing that, FCG members will recognise, and encourage others to recognise, religion as a source of wisdom, meaning and truth. Within the world's religions there are deep theological, spiritual and other traditions, which can offer insights into life's meaning and purpose. Religious traditions also speak into contemporary issues, offering challenge and resource for reflection. They provide a perspective from which society can reflect on itself, examining its assumptions, priorities and orthodoxies. They speak into public as well as private life.

7. Mindful of such points, FCG members may wish to consider how the university makes use of religion within its educational and decision making processes. Is religion treated as a source of wisdom and insight? Is there room for 'religious ways of knowing' in the curriculum? Is the contribution that religion makes to our understanding of the world recognised, honoured and taught?

8. A university prepared to take religion seriously will need particular resources. These might include a vibrant and theologically-able chaplaincy and the provision for the academic study of theology and/or religious studies. It was the view of one questionnaire respondent that there is a 'steady erosion of religion and theology departments in Universities'. Some such departments certainly are closing. That seems inevitable in a policy context where recruitment determines viability, since enrolments on theology and religious studies courses are in decline.⁴

⁴ See paragraph 37 of our initial report.

9. This is of particular significance at a time when it is recognised there is a deficit in religious literacy, including in universities. Three recent studies which have noted this are 'Faiths in Higher Education Chaplaincy',⁵ the ensuing 'Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education Project'⁶ and 'Living with Difference', the report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life published in 2015.⁷ Universities have the opportunity to address that, to be places where students can learn about religious traditions and perspectives and be equipped to live in today's complex world where religion is again a major force. The Free Churches, with their own significant theological resources, may be able to support universities in that and in other ways.

10. As indicated in the preamble, for the FCG, freedom of belief and conscience are of great importance. That freedom is set by the FCG within the vision of a certain sort of society: 'a safe, caring and equal society where intellectual, spiritual and socio-economic freedoms allow people to exercise choice in a way that enables everyone to flourish.' It is freedom within an understanding of the common good in a world of diverse views.

11. It is also important to make clear that it is *freedom* which is being advocated here. Freedom is more than toleration. It is about having the opportunity, and the right, within the university, to explore religious ways of seeking fullness of life.

12. A FC vision suggests universities should both model and embody such an understanding, being places of freedom of religion and places dedicated to the flourishing of individuals and societies. FCG members will wish to think carefully, not only about whether universities treat religion in accord with such a vision, but how they as Free Churches might behave on campus in such a way as to honour both individual freedom and individual and collective flourishing.

13. That involves affirming universities as places which welcome a variety of religious and, indeed, non-religious views and practices. As indicated in paragraph 102 of our original report, Free Church people have long argued for such 'faith-rich' spaces. This includes freedom for individual students and staff to practise and witness to their religion, and an ordering of the university, including in its educational work, in which religious and non-religious insights are honoured. In their involvement on campus Free Churches will wish to honour and work with such an understanding.

14. It follows also that universities should be places of freedom of debate, in which individuals are free to seek to persuade others of the value of their views, be they religious or not. Free Church people, silenced in the past, are unlikely to favour policies which deny minorities, or unpopular or unconventional views a voice. However, in this and other matters, Free Church people will wish to be mindful that neighbours will sometimes hold different views and may find some Christian, and other, views offensive.

⁵ Jeremy Clines, Faiths in Higher Education Chaplaincy (London, Church of England Board of Education, 2008).

⁶ https://research.gold.ac.uk/3916/1/RLLP_Analysis_AW_email.pdf

⁷ www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/research/publications/reports/report-of-the-commission-on-religion-and-belief-in-british-public-life

15. Like other Christians, Free Church people will want to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, including on university campuses. As gospel people committed to love and compassion, they will want to do so in a responsible way, being open to dialogue and discussion and commending Jesus Christ without disrespecting others. The centrality of valuing and respecting others, made in the image of God, was noted in 'Towards a Free Church Vision for Higher Education'.

16. If a university is to be a place where people are free to follow religious traditions in the way set out here, there are implications for catering, timetabling, the providing of spaces for prayer, chaplaincy and for Students Unions, in particular in their rules for student societies. Free Church people will be keen to see universities making what provision they can to enable members of all faiths and none to live according to the dictates of their conscience, recognising that we live in a diverse society where differences need negotiating towards the good of all. Free Church people will seek to foster good relations between people of different faiths and world-views.

17. Running through much of the above is the call both for freedom and for living in a peaceful and respectful way with others; for individual freedom and overall flourishing. Such a vision has long been part of Free Church thinking, as the extract from the FCG website above suggests.⁸ There may at times be tensions between individual freedom and overall flourishing: exercising freedom to express a view critical of something dear to another, part of their identity even, can cause deep anguish to the other. Such tensions are currently present in universities. One response is to refuse some speakers a platform. The argument in this statement is not supportive of such actions; discussion and debate are to be favoured wherever possible. However, we do recognise there are tensions in a diverse and free society and that those tensions are sources of pain and, even, violence.

18. Christians will wish to approach such tensions, and the individual situations in which they arise, with love, prayer and wisdom. In so doing they will bring the learning which comes from centuries of living with diversity (both successfully and not so successfully). At their best, they will bring a sense of humility arising from living by faith and the awareness of past mistakes, as well as confidence in a God who redeems. Free Church Christians, with their experience of being a minority, at times marginalised and oppressed, and a theology shaped by that experience, will – or should - have a natural sympathy with those whose views are marginalised today. We call for universities to give due recognition to our experience and insights and develop a framework for robust debate in which both religious and non-religious views are taken seriously.

19. The churches themselves also have responsibilities. There is a need for our churches to equip their members for dealing with such tensions and debates. Young church members in particular need a secure grounding in faith, including a theological grounding, which equips them for university, and life more generally.

⁸ See also the work of the early Baptist, Thomas Helwys (1575–1616), quoted in para 16 of our original report.