Faith, Diversity and Higher Education

Towards the Faith Based University

By

Martin D. Stringer

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Dedication

To all my friends, colleagues and students at the University of Brimingham and at Swansea University with thanks for all that they have taught me over many years.

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This is perhaps an unusual book within the literature on Higher Education. It weaves together several different threads. Each thread will undoubtedly appeal to a different reader. I might, therefore, encourage you to dip and in and out of those Sections/Chapters that speak to your own need. I do hope, however, that you, as reader, might also agree, should you read the whole text, that the various threads do work together and produce more than any one might if allowed to stand on its own.

The first thread is relatively straight forward. The various chapters that make up this book are based on a series of talks I gave, in very different contexts, during the seven and a half years that I was Pro-Vice-Chancellor (PVC) for Learning and Teaching at Swansea University with responsibility for all the learning and teaching across the University. The themes of learning and teaching and student experience, and the centrality of the student, are, therefore, an inevitable part of the series of papers. I was interviewed and appointed as a PVC at Swansea University with a specific brief to oversee the College of Arts and Humanities and the College of Law. A week or so before I arrived the previous PVC for Learning and Teaching moved on to a role in another university and I was called into the Vice Chancellor's office to be asked whether, as I obviously had some interest in learning and teaching, I would take on the role. I was very happy to do so.

Swansea University had an excellent reputation for student satisfaction, and a growing reputation for employability. There is no question that the academic staff always went well beyond what was expected of them in terms of their commitment to their students and the time they would spend supporting the students. This brought about various tensions over the years, as might be expected, but it did mean that despite the opening of a new campus and a significant expansion in student

numbers, Swansea University maintained its position as among the top ten or twenty universities in the UK for both National Student Survey satisfaction scores and graduate employment. This was an achievement of which the University was justly proud, and I did what I could, in my role as leader and facilitator across the institution, to keep us in that position.

It was not only the academic staff, however, who put students first. We, as a senior leadership team, were also committed to working with and alongside the student body. One of the first acts that occurred when I went to Swansea was a conference co-hosted by myself another colleague on the senior team, which initiated what we called the STEP4Excellence Programme. This brought together academics, students and professional service staff to reflect on what could be done to transform the experience of our student body. The initial conference led to four separate strands and each strand was subsequently co-led by a student leader and a member of academic or professional services staff. This collaborative approach was sustained, and developed, throughout my time at Swansea and was shown to be essential as we moved into COVID and lockdown from March 2020 onwards. The ability to work alongside the student leaders and to work together, always putting the student first, meant that the experience of lockdown was far less fraught than it might otherwise have been.

Many of the talks that I gave over the years, therefore, focused on learning and teaching. A number of those that follow were first delivered as part of the annual Swansea Academy of Learning and Teaching (SALT) conference which drew together over two hundred academics at the end of July each year. Others were presented at other points in the year, or as particular issues arose that I felt it was important to explore with colleagues. Others, again, were given as introductions to, or as keynote papers within, conferences held at Swansea University.

This, however, is only one of the threads that comes together to inform the papers that make up this book. The second thread looks back,

beyond Swansea, to my time at the University of Birmingham. I was at Birmingham for twenty-three years and ended up in the role of Deputy-PVC with responsibility for staffing and planning. What this meant in practice was that I acted as a voice of the academy (my fellow academics) in decisions made by Human Resources, Finance, Planning and other central professional service functions. What it also meant was that I had much more choice over the areas of the university that I was able to focus on than I might have done in any other role.

As part of this role, I led a project to reimagine the employability strategy of the university and to establish an internal employment agency enabling students to take on many part-time, and fixed term roles across the university. I also revised the annual professional development review process for academics and revised the annual staff survey, in both cases aiming to increase the voice of academics across the institution. I undertook a project on valuing teaching (still relatively underrepresented within a heavily research focused institution) and established a teaching academy for staff. I also established and led the university's first equality and diversity strategy, bringing together colleagues from a range of protected characteristics and establishing a year of focus on questions of equality, culminating in a festival of equality and inclusion that drew colleagues from across the institution into a conference addressed by the Vice Chancellor and leading voices in equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) from across the sector. Many of these are elements that contemporary universities take for granted, but they were still very new, and pioneering, even ten or twelve years ago.

I am gay. I am dyslexic. Both these 'protected characteristics' are essential parts of my identity, but I felt that I had, to some extent, to suppress them in the first part of my academic career. They were seen to be barriers to progress, rather than elements of myself that I needed to celebrate. I was increasingly involved in LGBTQ activities, most specifically in a very successful student mentoring programme, but it was only by working to establish an equalities' structure and strategy

for the University, emphasising equality across all the characteristics of the 2010 Equalities Act, and deliberately including all staff and students from across the University, that I was able to see these features of myself as strengths, as something to celebrate and as something that could inform my approach to higher education as a whole.

I moved to Swansea University determined not to suppress this aspect of myself and to engage with colleagues, students, and others on a more human and holistic level. I always accepted the opportunity, therefore, to talk at events focused on EDI, both within the university and beyond, and elements of this debate inevitably filtered into my presentations on learning and teaching. The first conference that I attended, just before starting at Swansea, was organised by a group of researchers looking into student sex work. One of the first internal study days that I addressed was on queer studies, and I used that to introduce the idea of the 'queer curriculum' (Chapter Eight below). One of the most important projects that I have been involved in, both in Birmingham and Swansea, was the development of an inclusive curriculum, whether that be LGBTQ inclusive, decolonisation, or a curriculum that is accessible to students living with disabilities or neurodiversity.

The second thread across these papers, therefore, is EDI, albeit through a very personal filter. I have made the deliberate choice to put myself front and centre of all these talks, and to draw on my own personal history and experience in presenting the issues involved. This is important as these talks come from a very specific experience and I discovered, as I worked with colleagues and students across universities, just how important it was to be open, and vulnerable, to share my experience with colleagues and to draw on that experience in developing agendas, strategies, and visions for the future.

The final thread, therefore, is religion, or as I have chosen to phrase it, 'faith'. Belief is one of the protected characteristics within the 2010 Equalities Act, but it is, in my experience, one that is more often ignored, rather than celebrated in our highly secularised society. As well as being gay and dyslexic, I am also a Catholic. While being gay or

dyslexic is not a choice (although how I act or engage with either is clearly a choice), I have chosen to be a Catholic (although I would argue that my sense of the abiding presence of God in my life is no more of a choice than being gay or dyslexic). I was bought up in an Anglican household, and the church has always played a significant role in my life. From an early age I engaged with bishops and other senior figures in the church, and I was, for a time, employed by the Anglican Church undertaking church-based community work in East Manchester. I have also gone on to study religion, primarily through a sociological/ anthropological lens, but also theologically/philosophically, and my primary academic task is to write a series of books, based on ethnographic research among the people of the UK, that aim, ultimately, to develop a 'general theory of religion' (Stringer 1999, 2008, 2013).

As I took up my engagement with equality, diversity, and inclusion at the University of Birmingham I came to it as a member of the Department of Theology and Religion, as somebody who had previously had to fight for theology and religion to be studied within a self-consciously 'secular' university. As one of my first tasks, therefore, I chose to present a paper on the place of faith in a secular university (Chapter Three below). One of the moves I made in that paper was to challenge the meaning of 'the secular' by focusing on how the founders of the institution would have understood it. The founders came from among the non-conformist Christians, Congregationalists, Unitarians, and Quakers, who also dominated the city's politics at the time. The University was established, in part, as a challenge to the hegemony of Anglican dominance in institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge. 'Secular', in this context, was far from being a denial of religion, but rather a celebration of the fact that the specific religious affiliation of academics or students was irrelevant.

John Henry Newman, also a Catholic convert, was working in Birmingham at very much the same time that the first conversations about a university in Birmingham were taking place among the political

and industrial leaders of the city. When he was asked to establish, and act as the first principle (Vice Chancellor) of a new Catholic University in Dublin, he faced many of the same challenges from the Anglican hegemony of British higher education. His *Idea of the University*, a series of lectures given to the whole academic community (staff and students) of his new institution, has since become a classic (Newman 1996). However, it is Newman's vision of a 'liberal arts' university, rather than the specifically Catholic elements of his text, that has gained most interest and influence over the years. The book, and Newman's ideas, have also been more influential the United States than in the UK, and certainly had very little impact on the University of Birmingham.

There are several universities within the UK that look back to their foundation as teacher training colleges, or other institutions, by one or other of the churches. Birmingham Newman University is one of these and I am very honoured to have had the opportunity to join and subsequently chair the Council of this University. Many of these universities still celebrate their religious heritage as underpinning their current values, highlighting the positives in their historical legacy. In an increasingly multi-faith context, however, where the appeal of a faith-based institution is perhaps of more concern to those in non-Christian religious communities, the Christian origin is often underplayed and re-defined in terms of a wider 'values' framework. However, even in these institutions, the underlying structures of higher education in the UK, and the need to do well in league tables and activities such as the Research Evaluation Framework (REF) etc. has meant that the distinctively 'faith' basis of such institutions is seldom seen as a primary driver for its activities, even if it still plays a major part in marketing campaigns or mission statements.

I am strongly of the belief that there is a space for a very self-consciously 'faith-based' higher education institution in the UK today. The argument towards such a position will therefore form the third thread within these papers. I have worked across religions, with strong and positive links to the Muslim and Sikh communities in Birmingham, and

with students from many different faiths. I am not, therefore, advocating a 'Christian' university, certainly not in the model of many such institutions elsewhere in the world, and still less a 'Catholic' university, although Newman will be a regular dialogue partner behind many of the papers that follow, and I will come back to engage with his ideas more explicitly in the Epilogue. I do, however, believe there is something distinctive about a 'faith-based' approach, and that is something that I do want to explore in the papers that make up this book.

Before I begin, therefore, it is probably worth spending a short amount of time outlining what faith means to me, especially in this context. This is not a work of theology, or of spirituality, and so this is not the place to explore all the details and implications of my faith position. However, unless I state, upfront and as clearly as I can, where I am coming from, then much of what follows, and some of the conclusions I draw, will not be grasped or appreciated.

The first presentation that I gave at Swansea University was to the SALT conference in the July of my first year at the University (see Chapter Eleven below). I chose as my subject 'The Swansea Graduate' and I opened the paper by showing images of Karl Marx and Margaret Thatcher. I noted that I had grown up in South Yorkshire in the years leading up to the election of the Thatcher Government in 1979 and the subsequent miner's strike of the early 1980s. This had formed much of my own thinking, both politically and religiously. I then used that context to talk about the position of the individual and society/community, which is core to my own theology, and much of the thinking that underpins this book.

In 1988 Thatcher gave a speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in which she famously repeated her view that there was no such thing as society, only families and individuals. Such a position was generally dismissed by many at the time, and since, as fatuous and nonsensical. I, however, asked my audience to reflect on it further. I did not have a good experience of the socialist alternative through my own

experiences at school (where out head teacher was a self-confessed communist). I lived in a part of the world where socialism, as reflected in both the political leadership of South Yorkshire, and by the leaders of the National Union of Mineworkers, was seen primarily in terms of the submission of the individual to the wider needs of the collective, a series of needs that were assumed to be shared by all members of the community. Anybody who stepped out of line, or who challenged the leadership, were seen to be traitors to the cause and were (sometimes quite violently) pushed out of the community, branded as scabs, and ostracised. This is, perhaps, as much of a caricature as Thatcher's statement about individuals and society. This was, however, how things looked to a teenage mind that was more than used to being excluded (by both pupils and staff), because of a series of perceived differences, from the wider community of the local comprehensive.

I always remember what my mother told me about my grandfather, a priest in the Anglican church who worked in London during the Second World War and who, like his own father before him, had built churches in the poorer neighbourhoods of Clacton and Leigh on Sea in Essex. My grandfather apparently said that if, in the whole of his ministry, he had brought one person to Christ, then his life would have been worthwhile. It is that emphasis on the single person, the unique individual, that has always stuck with me. In all my dealings with others, therefore, I have tried to approach each and every person that I have engaged with as a unique individual, with particular gifts and something distinctive to teach me. I don't think I have ever been taught to do this, but it has been with me from my school days and remains the guiding principle of my interaction with others.

Going back to Thatcher's address to the Church of Scotland, therefore, the 'individual' that mattered for Thatcher was always the self. Thatcher celebrated the individual self, encouraged the enterprise and entrepreneurship of individuals, emphasised the individual's own ability to get on and make something of themselves. This was a radical meritocracy. The individual self had absolute autonomy, progressed

through their own merits, and succeeded primarily because of their own innate abilities. If they failed, however, or found themselves on the wrong side of the law, of economic progress, or whatever other forces were against them, then that was also their fault and a demonstration of their lack of ability. Poverty and unemployment were blamed on the individual, as was crime and anti-social behaviour. That is what Thatcher meant by the 'individual', the focused self, isolated from society. Like Thatcher, I am also keen to focus on the 'individual', but I am less interested in the 'self' and more focused on the 'other'. The unique, special, and distinctive individual human being that mattered to me was never the self. It was always, and has always been, the other.

This takes me back to theology and why I see this position as essentially a faith position, rather than a political one (although in practical terms it is probably both). The position, as I have presented it above, is founded in three distinct elements of the Christian faith. The first is based on creation and the statement that we, that is all human persons, are made in the image of God. The second picks up the incarnation, the fact that God chose to become human in a very specific time and place in history in the person of Jesus. The third develops from the words and actions of Jesus as presented in the Gospels.

The focus on the individual, therefore, and more specifically on the uniqueness and specialness of each and every human person, is founded for me in the idea that we are all created by God and made in the image of God. The creation story is one that can be taken too literally and, as such, causes complications and conflict with science. However, the message that God, that which we define as perfect in all things, made the world, saw that the world was 'good', and endorsed it as such, and that God also made human beings and chose specifically to endow humans with something that reflected God's own person, is an element of the Christian (and other faith's) message that I find inspirational. Of course, the designation of the whole of creation as 'good' is also central to an environmental message and a basis for any person of faith as supporting all actions towards the maintenance of the earth in all its

beauty and diversity. However, I want to emphasise the special place of the human within this world. That might be controversial to some, given that it is human beings who have, undoubtedly, caused so much damage to the world. Others would challenge any kind of qualitative difference or distinction between humans and other beings. Personally, however, I would always want to put a particular value on humanity. It is that 'image of God' that sets us apart. Finally, therefore, one consequence of placing the focus on the human and creation in God's image, is the importance of creativity in what it is to be human. That is something that is central to my own view of learning and teaching. This is a point that will be developed in several of the Chapters that follow.

The idea of 'incarnation', God becoming human, is what I bring to these papers from my own Christian tradition. This is the doctrine that is core to my own faith and devotion, as I will outline further in Chapter One. I would also state that this is probably one of the most revolutionary doctrines across the religions, and one that has most ramifications for how we, as humans, behave and respond, both to each other and to God. I will, at some point in my retirement, write a text specifically on the incarnation. For now, what is important is the added emphasis that God taking on human form gives to the point that I made around the idea of creation above. It is God's choice, and God's endorsement of the human that is important here. The specific form of human, the gender, the sexuality, the race, the time, and the place, is for me irrelevant, except as far as it was specific. God did not become human in some abstract or typical form. God became a particular human at a specific time and place. There is far more to be said here in terms of what it means for God to become human, and the relationship to pain and suffering, and ultimately the cross and resurrection, but that will be picked up in Chapter One.

Having become human, however, what that human person says and does takes on a particular importance. What the Church also chooses to retain and authorise out of those words and deeds is also significant from my own personal perspective. The Gospels, therefore, act, for me,

as a definitive and authoritative text. Here we see Jesus engaging with many different people, from different parts of society and in different circumstances. In each case, however, what we see is Jesus engaging with the whole person, recognising and identifying each person as an individual and responding with care and compassion to their most pressing needs. This is as true of Pontius Pilate, at his trial, as it is of the woman caught in adultery, or the lepers that came for healing, or the various individual disciples. I would also argue that many of the teachings, and particularly the parables, develop this approach and endorse it as a sign of the kingdom, a sign for each of us to follow. Here we see very clear what it is that I mean by saying that we must treat each other human as a distinct and special individual, and that the individuals that matters are seldom the self, and always the other.

This very simple, and, I would argue, profound position has an obvious and immediate impact in each of the threads, or themes, that form the basis for this book. My position is, as I have shown, rooted in faith, but it does have some distinct and often unusual implications when applied in practice. The most obvious comes when we approach some aspects of theology that tend to be assumed by both Christians and those who claim to have no specific faith. My position, for example, would challenge a principle, that finds its origin in liberation theology, which suggests that God has a preferential option for the poor. This is based on biblical allusions and has been used, very effectively, to challenge some fundamental, and unhelpful, perspectives in classical theology. However, if every individual is unique and to be cherished for themselves then there is no preferential option for any one category or group of persons, whether poor or rich. Jesus reached out to many who were rich and powerful in different ways, as well as to those on the margins of society. If each person matters, then their economic position becomes part of who they are, but not a feature that identifies them as worth engaging with or not.

In fact, my position challenges all ideas of classification and categorisation, something that is so pervasive, not only in theology, but

in much contemporary social thinking. I will explore this position in more detail in Chapter Four, where I will look at what my own alternative to the preferential option for the poor might be. For now, I just want to suggest that we often focus on the ones who are disadvantaged by the system, whatever that system is, without giving equal weight and consideration to those who because of their position can, usually, change that system. The rich and the powerful, the leaders in our universities (often referred to as 'them', or simply 'the university') are individuals too. It is often difficult to see such people, or to reach out to them, at that individual level without, perhaps, compromising some of our other principles. This is, however, what I have always aimed to do, from standing up to bullies at school, to working with university, industry, and civic leaders as part of my various roles within higher education.

In the area of EDI my principles come to the fore in conversations around intersectionality. I do see the value of working with classifications at a crude level, especially when some social group is ignored and perhaps not even seen, let alone respected. However, we are never the product of just one category. People are much more complex than that. Much of the difficulty in EDI work comes when either we, or others, insist on fixing clear and definitive boundaries to whatever social categories we may choose to use, whether positive or negative. This is what I describe in Chapter Seven as 'difference' as opposed to 'diversity'. Each one of us is complex and brings with us a particular and unique history where different identities have interacted and challenged each other at different points in our life. It is sometimes said that a focus on intersectionality fails to take full account of the suffering, pain, or oppression, of those from any one characteristic. It waters down the anger or the outrage. It paralyses the will to act, or the range of radical actions that may be considered possible. I don't believe that this is the case at all, as I will aim to demonstrate in many of the papers that make up this book. I do believe, however, that identity politics, with all that comes with it, is potentially among the most

damaging social trends in society today, and so within the university. It is something that we really do have to move beyond.

Finally, therefore, turning back to the university, it should be obvious that I am a fervent supporter of individualised learning and treating each student (and each member of academic and professional services staff) as a unique individual. That, however, is an almost impossible challenge in this time of mass higher education. My time at Swansea University was a time of significant student growth, with the opening of a new campus and an increase of student numbers from 14,000 to over 20,000 in less than five years. Many of the challenges faced by academics in their teaching, by professional services in their support for students, and by my colleagues and myself in terms of leadership, derived ultimately from this rapidly growing number of students and our increasing inability to engage on a personal and human level with each student, or even, given the pressures of time and workload, with each member of staff. That has driven much of the thinking that underpins the papers in this book, and, while I can see that creative use of the digital and of artificial intelligence can potentially help us in this task, that brings so many other issues, many of which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Fourteen. Personally, I do think that clear strategic thinking, and an approach that views the institution as a single whole, with common values and personalised approaches, is the way forward, but this is not easy. We all need to think much more critically than we have so far if we wish to tackle this effectively.

So, this is my starting point. In the Epilogue I will return to the question of the faith-based university and ask, more specifically, what that might look like. For now, however, I will put that question aside and in the chapters that follow I will address a range of different issues that grow out of what I have tried to present in this Prologue. I have divided the book into three parts, Faith, Diversity, and Higher Education. This is somewhat arbitrary, but the papers in each section do try to focus on the issues at hand through the lens of the section in which they are placed. I have tried to rework the various papers in a way that reduces

repetition and that develops a continuous narrative (if not a coherent argument), but there will inevitably be points at which I head down rabbit holes, or set off at tangents, that reflect the original context for the papers rather than the wider argument of the book, and I beg your indulgence as a reader for this tendency and hope it will not disturb your reading too much.

Finally, therefore, I must thank all those that made this book possible, primarily the staff and students at Swansea University, and at the University of Birmingham before that. I do not want to highlight specific individuals at this stage, despite my stated principles, as I could never provide a comprehensive list of all those who have influenced me, and I would inevitably miss out somebody very important. This is one point where the individuals must be subsumed into the collective. However, without the support and encouragement of all my colleagues my thinking around these issues would never have got off the ground. So 'Thank You All!'

Part One: Faith

Chapter One
Why I Became a Catholic

It was in 1993, as I moved jobs, and moved cities from Manchester to Birmingham, that I also chose to move churches, from Anglican to Catholic. There were, of course, many reasons for this and the date itself was mere convenience. I had been employed by the Anglican Church for the previous five years doing community work with thirteen Anglican parishes on the east side of Manchester. I knew nobody in Birmingham. It was something of a clean break. I knew I could simply approach the local Catholic church and go through the process that was necessary to be received. It was not as I changed jobs and moved cities, however, that I made the decision to change churches.

It is probably impossible now to articulate all the reasons why the move was so obvious at the time. I was bought up within an Anglican family. My father had been a missionary in Tanzania, running a teacher training college at the time my sister and I were born. My mother always ran the local church, committing her life to the people of the parish and making a very significant contribution to the community, especially the unemployed and the disadvantaged. My sister, eighteen months older than me, joined a Pentecostal church when she was in the sixth form, and I always enjoyed accompanying her to the evening services at her church. My grandfather, on my mother's side, and my great grandfather, were both Anglican priests, each building a church and a new parish in the poorer neighbourhoods of Clacton and Leigh on Sea in Essex. They were firmly of the Catholic tradition within the Anglican church, as was my father's family. Worship in the church I was bought up in was 'high Anglican', ritual, with vestments and servers etc., but never fully Anglo-Catholic. It was always assumed, from the age of seven, through to my late teens, that I would follow the family trade and would, eventually, become a priest. I knew from the age of fourteen or fifteen that that was never going to be the case.

I had a strong Christian background, therefore, in a Catholic orientated tradition, and, in moving to Manchester for university, I was naturally drawn towards the more overtly Anglo-Catholic churches, to those that worshiped using the Catholic Mass with all the ceremonial and tradition that was part of that strand of Anglicanism. Bring part of that tradition, however, always felt odd. Their ecclesiology, their understanding of what the church should be, never really matched their worshipping tradition, or their wider theological position. They were often at logger heads with their bishop, and the wider authorities of the Anglican church, condemning it loudly for not being Catholic enough, and yet they were so convinced of the Catholic nature of the Anglican Church that they would not move across to the Roman Catholic Church. In practice they were congregational, recognising no real authority, whether Anglican or, ironically, Catholic. I enjoyed the culture, and particularly the worship, but felt somewhat uncomfortable in my own position within it. Much of that tradition was ultimately destroyed by the decision of the Anglican Church to ordain women in the early 1990s and the Anglican Church is a very different place today.

I have always found myself responding to ritual, to colour, to action and to symbol. I am dyslexic, and I have had to discover words only through hard work and careful practice. I do not want to be part of a religious tradition that is rooted in words. I am very happy being embraced by the ritual and the colour, by the sound and the smells, the sensual world of the liturgy. I now enjoy the full ritual and Latin of the 'extraordinary rite' at the Oratory church in Birmingham. This is not for everyone, and unlike many in that church I would recoil in horror at imposing it on anybody else, but it is what suits me.

I also have a relationship with God that is 'external'. I remember one of my Quaker PhD students saying in a seminar that 'of course' we all experience the presence of God within us, and I stopped her on the spot. She could not make that assumption. I have never felt the presence of God within me, and I would be horrified by the very idea. For me God is external, enfolding me, holding me, whatever metaphor you wish to

choose, but not within me. I have no difficulties, therefore, with the doctrine of the real presence, and I find the idea of God made manifest within the host of the eucharist, present in the tabernacle, worshiped in Benediction, and the devotion of Corpus Christi, absolutely compelling.

I visited Rome several times as a student and was always struck by the depth of history that is present within that city. One year we were given a tour of the catacombs beneath St Peter's, visiting the tomb of St Peter himself, as well as the streets of the dead within which the earliest Christian communities met to worship. That history, the continuity, but also the diversity, has always been one strand of my own research into Christian worship. I have great affection for, and feel very comfortable in, Armenia and Georgia, other spaces with a remarkable and rich Christian history. Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was overwhelming in its size, its beauty, and its many textured history. I was blown away by a visit to the historic churches of Ethiopia and the liturgy that was performed within them. The depth of history, the power of tradition, but also the recognition in each of the major historic churches, of the sheer diversity of ways in which individuals and communities have chosen to worship God (there is, in fact, far less continuity than we might sometimes imagine) has a powerful hold for me, and to be part of that tradition, in the West, I need to be a Catholic.

There are, therefore, many reasons why I chose to be a Catholic, some more obvious than others. There are also many reasons why I should, perhaps, not be a Catholic. I am gay. I live with my partner, and I have never had any difficulties reconciling my faith and my sexuality, or 'lifestyle', although I recognise that the Church still finds that very difficult. Socially and politically, I am probably somewhat to the left of many in the Catholic Church, way to the left of those in the congregation of the church where I worship. I am committed to the equality of women, to interfaith dialogue and respect for those of other faiths, to active political engagement on behalf of the excluded and the oppressed, positions that are not noted as being mainstream within the Catholic tradition. I am also very anti authority, or perhaps that should

be anti-authoritarian. I believe that respect, and therefore authority, is something that is earned and not given, nor inherent in an office. I was bought up among bishops and other church leaders. They have always had to earn my respect. I do not give it easily. The same could be said of Vice-Chancellors. In fact, many people often ask me, almost in disbelief, why I am a Catholic given so many good, and obvious reasons why I should not be.

The answer to this can never be simply that I love the ritual, or I have a romantic attachment to history and the diversity of tradition. That doesn't sound strong enough, either for others, or for myself, as a reason for my powerful assertion that, yes, I am a Catholic, I want to be a Catholic. The answer, I believe, must be theological, far more fundamental than the trappings of ritual and history. I am not, however, a theologian. As one-time Head of a Department of Theology and Religion, I must make that absolutely clear. I cannot claim to have read enough, or thought enough, to be recognised by anybody who has an ounce of theological education, as a theologian. I would certainly not be recognised by the Church as a theologian, and there are no doubt important elements of my own position that would be considered theologically suspect by the relevant authorities within the Congregation of the Faith. It is not that kind of academic, systematic, theology that I am looking to when I say that the answer must be theological.

I am Christian, whether Catholic or not, primarily because I believe absolutely in the incarnation. That fact – God become human – is fundamental, unique to Christianity among the religions, and mind blowing in its consequences. My devotion to the real presence of the Eucharist is rooted in my understanding of the incarnation. The way in which I engage with, and relate to, other people throughout my life is rooted in my understanding of the incarnation. It is through the incarnation that I live my life, and, as I noted in the Prologue, I have promised myself that in my retirement I will write a three volume, truly theological, work on the incarnation, on humanity, on politics, on

power and on love. It is the incarnation that, for me, defines both who God is, and what humanity could become. I am a Catholic, however, because, taking that one step further, I also believe, absolutely, in original sin.

Evil, for me, is essentially a human trait. Inherent in any understanding of evil must be the idea of purposive action: it must be intended. There must, therefore, be a mind behind it. The 'problem of evil' in theology often asks how we can reconcile an omnipotent and essentially good God with the presence of evil in the world. Many of the examples chosen to explore this involve natural disaster, or illness. In my understanding there is nothing 'evil' about an earthquake or a tsunami. There is nothing 'evil' about cancer or any other illness. There is nothing 'evil', in my view, about genuine accidents. This does not mean that there is not a philosophical or theological question that asks why an essentially good God should allow such natural disasters, illness, or tragic accidents. For me, however, that is a discussion of the 'problem of suffering', and not the 'problem of evil'.

Original sin, for me, stripping out all of the mythical narrative elements from the garden or Eden story, and perhaps much of what Augustine added in his classic account, can be boiled down to the view that all human beings have the potential for evil, intentional acts of cruelty against other human beings, and many, if not most, act on this at some point in their lives. They sin. Casual, and intentional, acts of cruelty are common and, if we are honest, are something that all of us have engaged in at some point in our lives, probably on a very small scale, often with very limited consequences. Let me offer a couple of random examples. A friend who was going through a messy divorce returned to the family house to find that her husband had sold her beloved horses. Another friend had to fight an unfounded case of research misconduct because of the jealousy of a colleague. There is cruelty here, against the horses perhaps, but the evil, in my view, is the intentional cruelty towards the wife or the academic, the perpetration of an act that

the individual knows is going to cause suffering to another human person.

The question, of course, if we are going to talk about 'original' sin, is whether this tendency, or propensity, is there from birth, or whether it is something that is learnt, or, in some psychological theories, a reaction to evil acts that are perpetrated on us throughout our lives, a reaction to the evil of others. I am no psychologist, and I do not really want to get into the debate of absolute origins. Very early childhood is a complex area, and there are others far more qualified than me to talk on this. What I do know is that even very young children are capable of remarkable acts of cruelty, on other children, and on the adults who care for them, perhaps not always aware of the full consequences of their actions, but very often, with the explicit intention of hurting another person. Any of us who have been the victims of bullying as children, as well perhaps, those who were bullies, are only far too aware of the deliberate cruelty of children.

But why does this matter? What difference does it make whether we accept this kind of original sin, or whatever the alternative might be, perhaps 'original innocence'. I would suggest that we do, in fact, live at a cultural moment when 'original innocence' is the accepted norm, and that this has various very practical consequences that are damaging to our society and to certain people within it.

To take just one example. We hear a great deal in the media today about the sexualisation of children. The language that surrounds this is, naturally, one of horror and condemnation, but it also has about it the sense of moral outrage, perhaps even of overreaction, an utter condemnation of those involved as the personification of evil. The language used is inherently that inherited from an earlier age, a language of the 'corruption of innocence', setting children apart as in some sense 'innocent' or 'pure', an innocence or purity that is all too fragile and doomed to be broken at some point. The language is also one that talks about the denial of, or the removal of, 'childhood', such that childhood itself is seen to be something ideal, beautiful, and

precious. I am not, of course, going to condone the sexual exploitation of children, although I would want to base my condemnation of questions of power, and the abuse of power, the inability of children to understand or fully comply with questions of consent, rather than the 'corruption of innocence'.

What the language of the 'corruption of innocence' has led to, I would suggest, is the fact that we, as a society, have such difficulties in dealing with children's own emerging sexuality and their need to explore that sexuality as individuals, and sometimes with others of their own age. In over half the cases of sexual abuse against children the perpetrator is another child. The language of purity and corruption, I would suggest, has opened children to a different kind of vulnerability at the hands of other children, or even adults, primarily through the medium of social media. Technology has transformed the lives of children more, perhaps, than any other group within our society, and the access to sexually explicit imagery, and the sharing of sexually explicit content among children, has come as a shock to many in our society, simply because they have a culturally constructed image of the 'innocence' of children.

To change tack slightly, I have a great deal of sympathy with the social critique of the Marxist tradition, especially in its mid-twentieth century post-structuralist and post-colonial forms. The work of Michel Foucault, for example, while not always historically accurate, provides an incisive critique of the way power works in society, within organisations, and between individuals. The difficulty I have with much Marxist thought, and with many less hard-edged socialist approaches that derive from it, is not the underlying critique of society, but rather the solutions that are offered.

At a human level, the communist utopia, and many socialist agendas, contain two fallacies. The first is that they assume that all human beings will, in the right circumstances, always want to be nice to each other. The second is that they tend to subsume the individual to the collective. In practice, of course, no communist and very few socialist societies ever work. The 'being nice to each other' needs to be enforced through

draconian methods, and the needs of the collective often sit at odds with the needs of marginal and non-conformist individuals within the society. Perhaps such a perspective is too simplistic, and I should point to the social democratic systems of Scandinavia as examples of a variety of socialism that works in practice. Perhaps, but these are also very 'conservative' societies in other ways and things are not always perfect, especially for the outsider, even in these societies.

John Milbank, an advocate of what he describes as 'radical orthodoxy', suggests a direct line of intellectual decent from the humanist thinkers, and protestant reformers in the sixteenth century, through various forms of enlightenment radicalism, with its rejection of original sin and a different view of humanity, to Marx, and the socialist political project, through to contemporary sociology and much of the social thinking in our universities today (Milbank 1990). He even goes as far as to describe sociology as an 'atheist protestant heresy'. I have a lot of sympathy with Milbank's analysis and can see some elements of truth in what is, essentially, a rhetorical position, although, as with the Marxists, I would reject completely his, and his followers, political and social solutions, along with the wider radical orthodox project.

The right-wing approach to political philosophy, therefore, is of no more interest to me than the socialists. Conservative thinkers do often recognise, albeit implicitly, what I am calling 'original sin' but suggest that the only solution is one of draconian law and oppression, something they are usually far more explicit about than the socialists. The conservatives tend to argue that because human beings are inherently evil, or wish to do harm to each other, they must be restrained or deterred by law. Unfortunately, many thinkers in this tradition, and certainly many who attempt to implement these policies in practice, work on the assumption that is other people who have a natural propensity to evil, especially (in different circumstances and under different regimes) the poor, women, blacks, immigrants or Jews, while totally denying their own propensity to evil while deluding themselves about their own 'obvious innocence'. Once again, what we

are talking about here is essentially a question of power, and the relations of power within society.

However, there is one further element of ultra-right-wing approaches that must also be acknowledged and reckoned with as part of this wider discussion. I say that many right-wing thinkers tend to recognise original sin in others, and that is true, but in doing this some also make a second and then a third move that is even more dangerous and underpins much of the oppression and horror of the twentieth (and perhaps earlier) century. In denying their own propensity to evil, their second move, they are, in effect, espousing a position of 'original innocence', contradicting their first move of recognising the propensity to evil. In this second move the right-wing thinkers are implicated in the humanist trajectory just as much as the Marxists or the socialists. In doing this, however, they need to make their third move, one of denying the humanity of the other (whether outsiders, black or Jews, or insiders, the poor or women), as any person who they define as evil cannot in their view be 'human'. It is this denial of humanity, seeing original sin as an indicator of inhumanity, that leads to the kind of horror seen in the slave trade, the Holocaust, or more recently in the ethnic cleansing of Yugoslavia or Rwanda and other similar atrocities, as well was the ongoing, and equally insidious oppression of women, homosexuals, and immigrants within our own society.

One last point on this wider political or social agenda, therefore, before I move back towards the more individual consequences of my position. Humanism, and the development of modernism that followed from it, gave to much of our thinking an understanding of progress, the idea that we are moving, either gradually, or through revolutionary leaps, towards an ideal, utopian, position where human suffering will have been eliminated. Whether that is seen in political or scientific terms this is the current orthodoxy. It is an orthodoxy, I would suggest, that is underpinned by notions of original innocence. It is also a fallacy. I was fascinated by the post-modern moment in the 1980s and 90s. That existed at a point when the idea of unlimited progress was beginning to

be questioned, and social thinkers could see no other viable alternative. Much post-modern thinking is essentially nihilistic. In denying the modernist grand narrative of progress, it sees no possible future and reduces all social thinking to nothing more than playing in the ruins of the past (Lyotard 1984).

What I believe that much recent experience has taught us, however, is not that grand narratives of progress are necessarily wrong, or that the alternative is to deny any hope for the future, but rather that each generation must make its own mistakes and must consequently find its own solutions. There is clearly progress, in terms of medicine, science more generally, and perhaps even socially. However, each time we believe that we have organised society, or technology, in a way that manages our own inherited experiences of human evil, the next generation will find new ways to corrupt and misuse our achievements. They will make their own mistakes, and the next generation will need to learn once again how to handle the difficulties humanity always generates for itself, how to handle original evil. There is no way, in my view, that we can, however much we try, protect the next generation from its own cruelty or suffering and the product of our own stupidity, primarily because we cannot predict where that cruelty or suffering will come from. It will be there even if we sort out all our own issues of cruelty and suffering in our own generation (which is highly unlikely). Facing and challenging the evils of our own generation is part of what it means to grow as human persons, and that will be true of every generation until the end of time.

For me, therefore, the Catholic tradition, or to be more precise, the Gospel, provides not only an analysis of the 'problem', if that is what we want to call it, but also some kind of solution. As part of my PhD, I spent six months with four different churches, asking what their worship meant to them (Stringer 1999). The members of the Independent Christian Fellowship were an interesting group for many reasons, but they were firmly of the belief that Christianity was solely about letting Jesus into your heart and coming to the foot of the cross.

Nothing further was needed. The whole of their worship was about coming back to the foot of the cross, back to the moment of their conversion. There was great joy within the community, but it was also a group that was cut off from the world, a theology that set them apart, and an approach that deliberately led them to isolate themselves in that moment of conversion. I found that very difficult.

There is nothing, for me, in the Gospels, that encourages us to cut ourselves off from the world. Many Christian traditions have withdrawn from the world over the centuries, but only to confront it more fully in a spiritual manner. There is also nothing that suggests that conversion is a once for all event, that giving our lives to God means that everything will be well. Christianity, our relationship with Jesus, is something that needs working on. Sin is not just original, it is recurring, and we need to acknowledge our constant temptation to fall short. Once again, Catholicism, for me, allows us to appreciate this, not with confession as a get out of jail free card as many seem to believe, but in its attitude to life as a struggle for perfection and an emphasis on action, and on works, as well as on faith.

I mentioned earlier that socialism has two major failings, an assumption of original innocence, and a prioritising of the collective over the individual. Right-wing thinkers tend to the same two fallacies, although neither is fully recognised in most of their thinking. I referred in the Prologue to Margaret Thatcher's rhetorical comment when, in addressing the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, she said that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and families. I am certainly not going to support such a perspective, but as I noted in the Prologue, we often fail to acknowledge the value and importance of the individual in so much of our political and social thinking. I do, like Thatcher, want to put the individual centre stage. Where I differ from her, however, as I also said in the Prologue, is that the individual I want to put centre stage in my social and political thinking, as well as in my everyday action, is always the other, the oppressed, the ignored, the