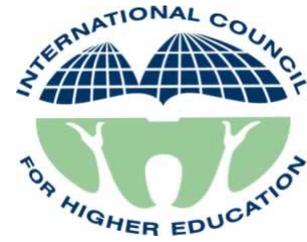


## **OXFORD THINK PIECE**

renewing the global “conspiracy” for  
Christ-centered higher education  
*(circulated among attendees prior to meeting)*



### **The Commission on International Higher Education Oxford Consultation, Oxford, U.K. 8-10 June 2007**

Together, we have become bold enough to believe that our Creator is bringing about a global emergence of international education that declares Jesus Christ as Lord of all things (Colossians 1:15-20). This “conspiracy” of Christ-centered higher education, in God’s timing is simultaneous to the dramatic expansion of the Church in the Global South and the need for intellectual and spiritual renewal in the North.

As we gather in Oxford we seek, then, a conspiracy among a variety of educator friends who recognize our origin in Jesus. This variety reflects in part the range of denominations involved in higher education and affirming historic Christian truths, including the Anglican, Baptist, Non-denominational Evangelical, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Reformed, Roman Catholic and Wesleyan/Holiness traditions. Within these traditions one also finds a range of approaches. And of course we find this variety arising from the diversity of cultures served by God’s people throughout the world.

During this consultation we seek to talk through four central questions related to Christian higher education (CHE).

- What is International CHE and what do we see God doing among us?
- What is the purpose of International CHE and what can we learn from each other?
- How does our history, culture and theological context affect our individual missions?
- How can we strategically partner together most effectively?

Thus, our vision as those committed to higher education is to seek to better understand what it means to profess to the entire world that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior.

#### **I. What is International CHE and what do we see God doing among us?**

We begin by looking at four developments in the history of Christ-centered higher education. First, whereas higher education in the West began within the arms of the Church, today individuals, groups and governments have taken primary responsibility for higher education. Second, whereas nearly all of the world’s great universities were established as an integral part of the Christian mission, today few of these institutions remain committed to an historic, Biblical Christian perspective. Many others stand at a perceived crossroads of academic success and faithfulness to the Christian faith. Thirdly, with the rejection of the most general common goal of truth, many universities have become “multiversities,” paralyzed by warring factions advancing incommensurate and incoherent agendas. Finally, and most importantly,

we now see the development of substantial institutions of higher education that affirm Jesus Christ as Lord around the globe and on almost every continent.

The first development entails the differentiation of ecclesial, political and educational institutions. Citing academic freedom, many in higher education rejected the authority of the Church and of the state to direct and shape intellectual life. Meanwhile, in *ex corde ecclesia*, the Roman Catholic Church insists on adherence to Catholic teachings within the theological faculty of institutions claiming the Church's support. Protestant institutions continue to struggle over the relationship between denominational authority and educational authority. The argument here arises over the efficacy of educational authorities to stem the tide of secularism. Hence the question, can international CHE resist the pull of secularism without a clear relationship to religious authorities?

The second development, the rise of secularism, makes this argument more pointed. It is true that nearly all of the West's great institutions of higher education have left the arms of the church—from Bologna, Paris and Oxford to Harvard, Princeton and Yale. To cite one example, Harvard University has reduced its founding motto from "Veritas, Christo et Ecclesiae" to "Veritas." However, the post-modern hermeneutic of suspicion undermines even this minimal unifying goal. Although some argue that secularization results from the separation of educational from ecclesial authority, others contend that ecclesiastical agents are neither qualified nor capable of moderating intellectual discourse. Who is qualified to direct intellectual inquiry in Christian colleges and universities? On what basis do we understand Christian higher education to be Christian?

Such questions lead in part to a third development, namely the deconstruction of truth. More than 140 years ago Calvinists and more liberal Christians both rallied under such slogans as "All things are Christ's."<sup>1</sup> For Christians in higher education such nostrums often proved themselves ineffective in resisting the erosion of Christian belief in higher education. Nonetheless, two developments have dramatically improved our situation over the intervening period. First, the arrogant assertion that traditional religious beliefs which result in adverse conditions for humanity must be replaced by modern secular reason (with only positive results) has been undermined by the last century's history. Second, important advances in Christian scholarship have called into question the divide between religious and non-religious scholarship. More than two generations of Christian scholars from around the globe have traced the arguments of supposedly "secular" arguments back to religious starting points. The conclusion then is that (1) "religion" cannot in fact be excluded from the academy and (2) greater care must be taken in tracing one's arguments back to their starting points.

The encouraging and exciting news is that Christ-centered institutions of learning are springing up around the globe. These institutions not only offer Biblical and theological education but also education in the arts, sciences, humanities and professional studies. The vast majority of these institutions have emerged in the recent lifetime of those participating in the Oxford International Consultation.

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<sup>1</sup> In Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light*, p. 825.

From our current vantage point, we might ask then:

- While we emphasize various standards for quality higher education, have we been faithful to the distinctives that unite us in all of our varied missions and contexts?
- How must the biblical worldview shape the character of Christian colleges and universities?
- How does this worldview play out across the disciplines?
- What steps should we take together to advance this international education movement?

## **II. What is the Purpose of International Christian higher education and what can we learn from each other?**

Institutions of higher education serve a variety of purposes: preparation for citizenship within a particular country or leadership in a specific clan or tribe, job training, general education, and church leadership. Educators, who share one common biblical, theistic worldview, need to continue thinking through the ways in which our Biblical worldview prepares young servants of God to serve within the world. As *service* was central to the ministry of our Lord Jesus, Christian higher education must prepare students for Christ-like service. This seems to require several emphases.

First, International CHE needs to understand the specific needs of its supporting community. Early missionaries went all over the world and served people with education for total development. They believed that Jesus Christ sent them to serve as their Master served. Institutions must similarly encourage service-learning within the extended community that supports each institution. This service need not be restricted to the institutional church, but should extend to all spheres of activity.

Second, International Christian higher education needs to pay attention to the ways in which bad thinking misdirects practical service in the world. This is the call to proclaim and demonstrate the power of the Gospel amid the rampant evil that pervades the world. However, such attention must be given in close dialogue with sisters and brothers at work in such areas. Too often academic criticism of Christians struggling to bring shalom into the world comes without any understanding of the practical constraints that limit choices our choices to a “good” that falls short of the “perfect.”

Third, Christian scholarship reminds us of the insights gleaned through diligent and sustained reflection. Books, libraries and increasingly information technology must continue to play a major role in Christian colleges. Through research and publication Christian scholars remember our community with saints at rest and care for those saints to come who will continue to struggle with the call to follow God into all the world.

Fourth, Christian higher education needs to prepare students to lament the enduring brokenness that will remain even after their best efforts. This means in part that students must be encouraged in spiritual discipline and to work in community.

We need to ask questions such as the following:

- What role does international Christian higher education play in God's mission for the world today?
- How do we take advantage of the resources and history of Western Christian higher education while avoiding any form of dominance?
- How can international Christians higher Education train and equip students of all disciplines of study to serve God as witnesses in our local community and throughout the world?
- How can we integrate student life and academic life?

### **III. How does our history, culture and theological contexts affect our individual missions?**

The sheer variety of geographical contexts in which Christians serve in higher education raises important strategic questions. One way of surveying the variety of contexts is by considering regional characteristics.

Taking Paul's speech on Mars Hill for their model, many Asian scholars have utilized the religious symbols and texts prevalent in non-Christian contexts. Along with their Asian brothers and sisters, African scholars have worked hard to sift through not only the points of agreement and disagreement but also ways in which to express and discuss such agreements and disagreements within an explicitly religious context. Global Christian higher education is characterized by diversity although we still claim unity through Christ. Globalization has brought us closer together and this consultation must prepare us to jointly face some of the positive challenges and opportunities.

Our educational models need to be developed more appropriately to each context rather than depending heavily on models successful elsewhere. There are also efforts by Western institutions to export their programs to various parts of the world. Although some are successful in adapting to local needs, others are not shaping their models with a concern for local realities. Our models should be truly integrated where faculty teaches and students learn with sensitivity to their contexts.

Another way of addressing some of these differences is by comparing Western and non-Western contexts. Undoubtedly the Church is growing faster in the non-Western world than in the West. Consequently, there is an unprecedented growth of Christian institutions in these countries. Often this growth occurs in places with limited understanding of quality or standards and continues despite limited resources. The same could easily have been said of Western Church-related institutions in their beginnings. However, many of these institutions proceed without the distortions and tensions that have attended much of the development in the

West, such as fact-value distinctions and the privatization of faith that is nearly second-nature in the developed world.

Secularism in the West appears to be at a point of exhaustion. After the decline of the influence of religion on education, today some influential academics see religion as a central category for thinking through ethical and political questions. Niall Ferguson, a historian with joint appointments at Oxford and Harvard, argues that the moral vacuum left by “de-Christianization” can only be filled by the Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> African and Asian followers of Jesus Christ can vouch for this as they have witnessed the powerful influence of Christian institutions in shaping culture, life and values in their countries.

We need to ask questions such as the following:

- How do institutions serving Christians in a secularized West differ from those serving Christians in other contexts?
- Is it possible to uniformly structure education in terms of quality and standards in these varying contexts? Is it possible to reduce differences across socio-economic and cultural boundaries?
- To what extent does globalization reduce differences between us?
- Are our programs integrated well enough to our contexts in order to make us more effective trainers for mission within our contexts?

#### **IV. How can we strategically partner together most effectively?**

There is an urgent need for cooperation and strategic partnerships that will maximize our resources. While we note the phenomenal growth of institutions outside the West, Western institutions still retain a wealth of resources – scholarship, libraries, finances, etc. While these institutions currently stimulate significant Christian scholarly discussions there is little inclusion of effective insights taking place in ministries in other parts of the world. How can we cooperate?

We need to ask questions such as the following:

- Are there resources that can assist with the creation of internationally recognized standards for degree recognition?
- Can CCCU, IAPCHE, and ICHE build strategic partnerships without losing their own individual distinctives?
- Are there new services that any of these three associations should consider adding to their portfolio? Likewise, are there services that should be

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<sup>2</sup> Niall Ferguson, “Heaven knows how we’ll rekindle our religion, but I believe we must” in *The Telegraph* July 31, 2005. This perspective remains controversial, as the title of a recent article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* demonstrates: “Reason, Unfettered by Faith.”

recommended to respective boards for removal? We need to be open to change!

- In what ways will this become more concrete and thereby help draw together member institutions and individuals for more significant service through higher education?
- Where do we go from here?

It is our hope that we can further discuss some these issues in the time ahead of us. We do so recognizing that God's spirit must animate our "conspiracy" for the coming months and years. The three of us have enjoyed submitting to one another out of Christ's love and we look forward to the Oxford Consultation participants joining us in collaboration. We want to move with the Holy Spirit and not dictate to the Holy Spirit what must be done!