

## EDUCATION

The struggle to be a Christian university might have to be repeated by the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, writes **Prof Bennie van der Walt**. In this article he spells out what a Christian university really is .... and what it does not want to be.

# *A Christian university*

*What it really is ... and what it does not want to be*

**T**o date we have had, in South Africa, something like a Medieval *corpus Christianum* society. The point of departure was that we were a Christian country with a Christian religion. The state could thus be expected not only to protect but also to promote the Christian religion.

Because we did not distinguish clearly between the task of the church and the state, we tended, like Charlemagne who wanted to extend the kingdom of God with the sword, to justify the wars we fought because they were perceived as "necessary for the preservation of Christian civilization".

In this way we nearly followed in the tracks of Calvin (cf. also Article 36 of the Belgic Confession of Faith) who allowed Servetus to die at the stake because of unbiblical ideas. An instance of this is the fact that the government officially promoted Christian (national) education.

Church and state, however, each has a *specific* and *limited* task. The task of the state is not to *promote* a *specific* religion but to *guarantee* the freedom of *all* religions.

Does this mean that a neutral dispensation of state government is being advocated? By no means. The God-given task of the state is to ensure that unbiased public (general) justice is maintained. The state cannot be neutral towards this: it either has to obey or disobey the God-given norm.

The task of the state, however, does not involve interfering in the cultic-religious field. Christians, after all, will not approve of a government deciding to promote Islam or Satanism!

We therefore reject ecclesiastical imperialism as used by the state to promote Christianity. Scripture is very clear on the point that the kingdom of God shall not be promoted by violence or the power of the sword.

The new danger perhaps facing us in future is another kind of state absolutism. In this case the state might try to enforce a total division between faith and public life, and remove all religious activity from the public sphere. Religion would then only have a place in personal (private) life. In such a case, for example, the state could well prescribe that a university may not be Christian, but has to be absolutely "neutral" towards religion.

You will therefore understand, then, if I say that the Christian character of the Potchefstroom University might in future not be automatically guaranteed. It is therefore crucial to understand exactly what is meant when one speaks of a Christian university so that, if it should become necessary, we can defend its unique identity.

### **The Earlier struggle to achieve freedom and independence**

The struggle to be a Christian institution which the Potchefstroom University had to wage in the early years might have to be repeated. (It is an entirely different question as to whether it will succeed again.) At the time of the struggle the reigning viewpoint was:

- **That the state could prescribe to the university**, probably because it finances the university. Our South African universities were then and are still today not truly free and autonomous institutions.
- **That scholarship has nothing to do with religion** (the misconception of a "neutral" scholarship) ➤

the principle of confessional pluralism.

The reason why the state advocated "neutral" education was probably because it was afraid of narrow, bigoted, dogmatic and uncritical education, which could even be used simply to promote a particular religion. Should this have been the case, then the motives of the state should be applauded.

From what follows here, however, it emerges that this is not what is meant by Christian scholarly activity and practice of science. A Christian institution for higher education is actually able to be strongly critically positioned towards current trends in science and in society!

After a long struggle - of half a century - the Potchefstroom University finally (in 1952) succeeded in being released from the so-called conscience clause applying to South African universities. This clause determines that a university cannot refuse to appoint a lecturer on the basis of his/her religious convictions.

If we should want, however, to defend the Christian character of the University, it goes without saying that we should know *exactly* what is meant by it. From experience I know that many students - and even lecturers - are unable to articulate this. Many of them even have erroneous ideas as to what a Christian university is.

I would first like to mention the incorrect assumptions, and then state in positive terms what it means to be a Christian higher educational institution.

### SIX ERRONEOUS CONCEPTIONS AS TO WHAT A CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY IS

- It is not a neutral institution

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The neutrality concept is unacceptable for the following four reasons:

- \* In the first place this a negative concept. The word *neutral* is derived from the Latin *neuter* which can be translated as "neither one nor the other". Somebody is neutral if he does not belong to either of two parties. It therefore indicates what somebody is *not*.

It is thus not a positive concept which clearly states what somebody *is* (e.g. Christian). Christians should be positive people, who live *for* Christ, and would therefore not like to regard their institution as neutral!

- \* In the second place it is an *illusory* concept, because neutralism is also a belief. The neutralist viewpoint is itself a viewpoint, it is not impartial. Even "lack of principle is a principle!"

*Neutralism is therefore nothing other than a hidden betrayal of our King, Jesus Christ. This is also true in the field of scholarship.*

- \* In the third place the concept of neutrality is *unclear*, because it determines its position with regard to the two poles between which it finds itself. And once the poles shift, the viewpoint of the neutralist also has to change. It can therefore happen that the neutralist assumes exactly the viewpoint which had earlier been assumed by the left or the right pole. The neu-

tralist is therefore *forced* to change position because of a shift on either the right hand side or the left hand side.

- \* In the fourth place neutralism is in fact *impossible*, because man is not a neutral being, and can do no other but choose. The Bible teaches us explicitly that it is impossible not to choose and to try and serve two lords at the same time. Neutralism is therefore nothing other than a hidden betrayal of our King, Jesus Christ. This is also true in the field of scholarship.

Most misconceptions, as indicated by the following five, are the result of the fact that a clear distinction is not drawn between two different societal relationships, viz. the church and (Christian) university.

- "Christian" should not have a merely historical meaning

The fact the a university developed from a missionary endeavour, a specific church or a theological school (as was the case with the Potchefstroom University) is not in itself wrong, but is not enough to guarantee the Christian character of the institution. History offers many examples of such institutions which are today merely secular institutions.

The reason for this is that an origin in the church and the control or influence of a Christian theology do not guarantee the Christian character of an institution for Christian higher education. A *Christian* university is different from an *ecclesiastical* university or a university which is under the rod of *Theology*, however true it might be to the Bible. In earlier times the Potchefstroom University also thought that by appointing as many ministers as possible (in, for example, Philosophy of Science)➔

the Christian character of the University could be promoted. Even a solid Biblical foundation, striking aims, an inspiring mission or a carefully formulated private act does not offer any guarantee that an institution will act in a Christian manner in its daily activities.

- "Christian" should not be interpreted in terms of church activities on campus

Many institutions for tertiary education in the U.S.A. and especially the East (Korea, Taiwan and Japan) call themselves "Christian", because they have a chapel on campus or have ministers on their staff. This is not wrong in itself, but the same argument as before is applicable here: Church work does not guarantee the Christian character of another societal relation, viz. a university.

- "Christian" does not indicate that Christian evangelization or missionary work is being done on campus

This work can be done by churches or by a whole range of parachurch organizations (such as Campus Crusade). They are often also very successful - students are converted to the Christian faith. However, the mere fact that this type of work can be done on any campus - also those of the so-called outspoken "neutral" or secular universities - indicates that this kind of work and the number of converts do not have anything to do with the Christian character of a university *per se*. Of course it would be hard to call a University Christian if the majority of its students were not of the Christian faith, but it is the task of the church and its confessing members to bring people to faith - and not that of the university. The task of the Christian university is to *build* on this faith and to indicate to students what the *implications* of their faith are for their calling at university, viz. to engage in Christian scholarship.

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- "Christian" is not located in specific or additional subjects taught at an institution

Institutions often call themselves "Christian" merely because they offer a (compulsory or optional) course in, for example, Biblical Studies or Systematic Theology (Dogmatics) or something which other institutions regard as the task of a theological school or the Department of Religious Studies.

Of course a study course which can improve the knowledge of the Bible of students and staff can make a valuable contribution to the Christian practice of other disciplines. The Christian character of an institution, however, does not lie in something which one can *add* (or subtract), but in the *perspective* from which one engages in a scholarly discipline.



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A compulsory course in Philosophy of Science will therefore also not succeed in making or keeping the Potchefstroom University Christian if it is perceived as something *detached from* or *additional to* other courses. To the extent that it aims to

offer students a *wider worldview* and a *more profound philosophical perspective* and tries to help them to concretize this perspective in their different subjects, it does have value, however.

- "Christian" does not only refer to the religious convictions of students and staff

It goes without saying that it is an impossibility to have a Christian university which does not have devoted Christian staff and at least majority of students (not necessarily all) who are willing to listen to the staff.

But even this does not guarantee the Christian character of an institution. Why? For the simple reason that one could well be a devoted Christian (in the church, at home, and even in ones interaction with students) without revealing one's Christian commitment in one's *scholarly practice*. A lecturer can, for example, practice his discipline and teach it as prescribed by the current secularist belief - no science is neutral - without being bothered by it. His students could accept this in the same uncritical spirit, instead of both lecturer and student being aware of the schizophrenic dichotomy that they are indulging in - they serve God on Sunday and in their personal lives, but in their academic work they are the victims of scientism, the god of science.

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### THE FOUR BASIC REQUIREMENTS OF A TRULY CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY OR COLLEGE

Now that we have indicated what does not necessarily constitute a Christian institution, it is important to know what then are essential conditions for its Christian character.

Allow me to use the image of a table which needs four legs to stand solidly. The four "legs" needed by a ➤

Christian university in order not to "woble", are the following.

- **It has to be a free university**

In the section above, concerning what a Christian university is *not*, we have already implicitly indicated that a Christian university has to be free from domination by the church. It is not an *ecclesiastical* institution. The same is true with regard to the state: it should not be a *state* institution.

This does not mean that a Christian university has no links with church or state. All societal relationships are mutually linked. A marriage, for example, is not only something personal between two people, but the family, the church (in the case of Christians) and the state are also involved. Because a university is such an expensive institution, and because it trains essential high-level manpower for a country, the state should support it financially and also exert supervision over standards. This does not mean, however, that the state may dominate the university and impose prescriptions with regard to the internal affairs of universities. The principle of sovereignty in its own sphere applying to every societal relationship prohibits this. For that reason a state should not prescribe to a university what its character (be it Christian or secular) should be. A university should be free (from the state) and be able to determine its own identity.

**The lecturers and (the majority of) students** should not only be

- (a) *devoted Christians*, but
- (b) should also have the *necessary insight* into what true Christian scholarship means, and
- (c) *be willing* to give themselves to the task. All three these elements are important. We cannot succeed with-

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out a *desire* to serve the Lord in this area too. But if we do not know exactly *how*, we will not achieve anything. And all the insight of what should be done, without the *will* to persevere in obedience would also be useless, because a Christian practice of scholarship is not something which merely drops into one's lap - it demands painstaking research, years of hard reflection, originality, struggle, perseverance and prayer.

- **All the fields of study should be studied in the light of God's revelation in Creation, in Scripture and in Christ**

This revelatory light should be used to develop a Christian worldview, a Christian philosophy, and a specific Christian subject theory of History or Physics, for example.

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An academic who wishes to practise Christian scholarship and who thinks that he can limit himself to the "facts" relating to his field of study is in a *cul-de-sac*. A Christian scholar

- (a) has to have a Christian worldview,
- (b) has to know how this worldview

has to be worked into a Christian philosophy, and

(c) be able, in the light of these perspectives, to construct a theory for his own subject.

**The Christian approach to science** should, in the final analysis, not be limited to the heart or intellect, but - the proof of the pudding! - *it should be made visible in its results*. A tree is, after all, known by its fruit!

Of course it will not emerge equally prominently in all subjects. As one's Christian convictions are more visible in prayer than for example when one is gardening or driving (which does not mean that they do not play a role in the latter activities), so too in the field of scientific endeavour: we will more easily be able to pinpoint it in Sociology than, for example, in Mathematics. One also has to remember that the difference from a non-Christian scholarly practice is not the *condition* for a Christian practice of science, but the *result* of it.

From the results of a Christian scientific practice - the way in which one teaches, researches, the contents of publications, etc. - it should clearly emerge that one's work stands in the service of God and his Kingdom.

### In brief:

A Christian university demands the following:

- (a) a free institution where
- (b) people redeemed in Christ, (c) study reality or a field of study illuminated through God's revelation and
- (d) in this way arrive at redemptive, liberating results which will be in the service of God and mankind.