DIVERGING PATHS?

Study and Spirituality

By GEMMA SIMMONDS

GETTING INTO UNIVERSITY these days can be tough, especially if you are trying to get into the University of Cambridge. Surviving the course can be even tougher. Coming out at the end of three or four years with a personal faith founded on intelligent, adult theological concepts and a functioning spirituality can seem as likely as winning the National Lottery. The task of the university chaplain in the pastoral care of students of whatever age and stage is to be midwife to an adult faith which is born from that of the child. One can watch over many stillbirths and cases of sterility. One can struggle over long months in the most painful of labours. But compensating for everything is the quiet joy or the relieved exhilaration of seeing God's patient work bear fruit at last in the human heart and mind.

For many undergraduates, this is the first time of leaving home and family and striking out on their own. Increasing numbers of postgraduates both from home, and abroad, start out on an academic journey which proves more lonely and requires more courage, resilience and self-determination than anything they have previously encountered. All of them put their belief systems, their sense of personal identity and culture, their hopes for the future at risk in an environment which, if it is to be successful at all, must challenge what and how they think to the very roots.

I cannot speak in general about all students at all universities. Each institution has its own dynamic and its own character. With over 31 colleges dominating a small city, each one with its own identity, traditions and familiar spirit, Cambridge can seem like a small, self-enclosed world, made up of smaller worlds, each complete in itself, hermetically sealed and sure of its purpose and nature. But for most undergraduates, their arrival here represents a major assault on the boundaries within which they have lived out their identity and faith and system of values. The personal and spiritual changes that come about in a person who dedicates three or more years of their life to the profound challenge of advanced studies can be huge. This may entail an awakening to who one is and how one is called by God to be and act in the

world. We may be talking deep conversion or the slow dawning of a sense of rightness and identity, of being *bien dans sa peau*. Or we may be talking the abandonment, either progressive or sudden, of all the markers that previously gave a sense of belonging to a system of thought and values or a way of life that have never been appropriated at a personal level.

Having worked in a Catholic school for seventeen years, I am used to the adolescent struggle to loosen the bonds of parental belief. I watch from the sidelines as students come to mass more or less regularly in their first term, then come less and less frequently and finally cease to come at all. I know that some continue to practise their faith at home, in the family context, but cease to worship at university. Here the choice to remain within the mass-going community can feel too great in the face of peer-group incomprehension or other more immediately understood options. Others prefer the safer intimacy or the statelier liturgy of their college chapel, and participate fully in the Anglican liturgies without any apparent question about the theological implications this raises. I meet them in other contexts. Some shuffle awkwardly, others carry the matter off with *insouciance*. One member of my own former convent school tells me blithely: 'You see, I used to go to mass when I felt lonely or miserable, but I'm so happy now, I don't need to go any more'.

This is a bright, thinking young woman whose approach to her own subject is meticulous, and whose attitude to the study of her material is fiercely dedicated and critical. Yet there appears to be little carry-over of this commitment or this critical awareness in matters of faith and the thinking through of beliefs and their implications for life. Another former pupil has little time for organized religion but is renowned throughout her college and within the wider university as a driving force in student charities within the community. In a university that sees many in single-minded pursuit of the glittering prizes, this brilliant young woman puts her money where her mouth is and makes a conscious, prophetic commitment to justice. But when we speak, there is no consciously articulated sense of the relationship between faith and justice.

The very notion of 'practising one's faith' is still as rigid and largely unhelpful notion in many of their minds as it was in my own generation. For us, it basically meant going to mass on Sundays. For them this continues to be one of the markers, perhaps the great marker between faith and lapsation. Some feel so guilty if they cease to come to mass that they cannot bring themselves to come and argue out the

essential process of doubt and struggle which is going on within them. It is a rare student who comes to slug it out over matters of doctrine and morals, armed with a sense of the validity of their own questions. Others feel diffident at expressing their anger and frustration with the Church, or prefer to make the journey on their own, but are so ill-equipped by the catechesis of their childhood that they become hopelessly lost in a morass of half-digested doctrines, rejected before they have been understood.

Most of us, by the age of 18, have a picture of ourselves that we project to the world. It may be largely a do-it-yourself model, carefully constructed to keep the outside world and its terrors at bay, but it usually includes, if Erikson's stages of development are to be trusted, a sense of identity, of being separate from our parents and authority figures and of self-validation. The move towards adult autonomy will include the examination, questioning, possibly the rejection of the faith in which we were brought up. New undergraduates face a massive assault on that projected identity. The Holy Grail of a place at Cambridge may be something that they, their school and their family have aspired to for years. They may have been in the top five per cent of their class ever since primary school. Prizes and achievements have rained down on the heads of many of them since as long as they can remember. And suddenly, often for the first time, they find their peer group. The range of talents, the openness of possibilities is terrifying in its breadth and variety. Many have had a 'gap year' between leaving school and coming up to university. Their sense of self-worth, of achievement and self-confidence may have been strengthened by a year trekking in the Himalayas, teaching orphans in Romania, building wells in India or running a business in America. And suddenly, everyone is as interesting as the next person, has done brave and exciting and independent things. Everyone seems to be special, so that the individual's sense of specialness becomes insignificant and meaningless. Above all, everyone else seems to be clever. The first-time appearance of academic peers to someone whose self-identification has been based on a sense of their own intelligence and competence in a subject can be a severe blow to their security.

The social challenges are matched by the academic challenge of meeting people as clever or cleverer than oneself, people who will stand their ground in an argument, and argue from wildly different viewpoints, which they hold with a passion equal to one's own. The academic challenge that comes from being in a ferociously competitive environment is matched by the challenge of the subject itself, and of

the many different subjects being studied all around one, each clamouring with its own version of the truth, or its rebuttal of safe and cherished thought-patterns and structures of belief. The struggle against confusion of identity, both personal and intellectual, sees students trying to cobble together differing sets of values, defining themselves by or against the prevailing ethos in an attempt to maintain their integrity and survive. This is meant to be, and often is, a golden time of life, a time when horizons seem without limit, or where the only limit lies in the availability of time and energy. Everything else is seen as possible. At a wide variety of levels, people may be having the time of their lives. But this can also result in students being valued for what they do and get involved with, rather than for what is within. And it can be deeply frightening to explore what lies within, when without there are so many affronts to previously held securities and beliefs.

Students whose sense of self-worth and identity survives the onslaught of radically opposed and formidably argued world-views may find an unexpected sense of their own strength. Through being challenged and opposed their intellect may emerge as a trustworthy weapon in the fight for truth. But the first step in this process is to recognize the validity of study as a vocation, even a short-term one, and the importance of their particular subject as a vehicle for learning how to think and to investigate the possibility of arriving at truth. Taking one's studies seriously, while taking the opportunities for play and self-development seriously, is a precarious balancing act. Acting or hang-gliding or running a society or finding a social circle will often win over finding a bedrock of personally assimilated truth through the medium of study. But there will always be those for whom the first three years of university education becomes an introduction to what it might be to be a thinker, a person whose courageous journey through the tangle of the mind becomes a vigorous source of potential change.

For Christian students, there is often a problem that their understanding of their faith, and their capacity to theologize has been left far behind their general intellectual development. Many have already been engaged over a long period in the struggle to understand and accept the faith of their family. Suddenly, within the university, they come up against the full blast of atheism, cynicism and post-modern scepticism. The power of a formidably well-informed teacher or an impressively cultured and articulate peer to hack away at the foundations of faith is considerable. Literary theory, scientific advances or socio-political doctrines can seem to unravel or blow right away whole systems of belief. The instinctive reaction of the individual animal under attack is

to flee back into the herd. Sticking together for safety and a sense of identity can seem the best way of handling the threatening emptiness. This can mean drifting away from the practice of faith into a crowd where issues seem easier and challenges less frightening. Or it may entail embracing one's traditional faith or a new one with fundamentalist vigour in order to build the protective walls of the fortess. Both may be necessary stages in the development of an adult faith and identity, but neither can replace the need to travel the road without maps. The world outside may seem too uncertain, too de-structured itself to dare to do this in the context of faith.

How does a university chaplaincy respond in a way that provides both a strong sense of corporate identity and belonging for those looking for community, and a vigorous intellectual and theological challenge for those searching for meaning and coherence? Groups and institutions tend to mirror the reactions of individuals. Chaplaincies are criticized by some for being too cosy, for providing a false sense of security: fortress-church, fortress-faith in a world of increasing insecurity and fluidity. Yet for those who find the change from home to university a major shock, the sense of familiarity and belonging may be part of an essential bonding process. The fact that a faith-community is there, with familiar patterns of worship and belief, may be the decisive factor in a student's ability to hold on to a sense of identity and individual worth. But if the Church embodied in the chaplaincy presents itself as a safe system of belief whose venerability protects it from the attacks of modern thought, then it can appear stifling and dishonest to students grappling on all sides with the counter-culture of unbelief. For many students the structures of the Church and its internal culture come to appear intolerable in a world that is encouraging free, critical thought and self-determination.

Recently, a visiting Catholic expert on the Church's social teaching referred to the student audience as Catholic intellectuals. Each time he used this title, I could feel the *frisson* of surprise, perhaps of dismay, within the audience. It may be because calling oneself an intellectual is not a very British thing to do, even if one is such a thing. It may also be because of a failure to recognize the vocation to be a thinker as part of a God-given gift. The single-minded dedication to learning as an apostolic task is seen by many of our students as the province of the clergy and religious. Having three religious as chaplains who have made learning part of their vocation and apostolate may be more of a hindrance than a help in role-model terms. Students come to consult chaplains on many matters from faith enquiry to personal crisis, but the

challenge to their world-view presented by other systems of belief or non-belief does not generally feature at the top of the list.

Every once in a while, students will appear who have responded to the challenge to see themselves and their faith through others' eyes. They will stand back from the familiar, comforting ritual and see the foreignness and apparent lack of coherence and feel the alienation that others feel who look on without the eyes of faith. If they can bear the insecurity this engenders, they may come to a stronger and more informed assimilation of the faith and its practices. They may also learn, in humility, from the deep commitment in some non-believing friends, about the human ability to make meaning for ourselves. This may result in a sense that their notion of God entails the curtailment of free-ranging thought and the limitation of human possibility. Their vision of God is seen as too small to embrace the questions that emerge, and they must abandon either the vision or the questions. A university chaplaincy must be open to the experience that students may have of a deep level of truth-seeking through the radically different discourse of their academic subject. Membership of the Church may appear to require the embracing of fixed and immutable beliefs. If this happens, then for these learners, making the connections between the liturgy, where they meet the worshipping community *en masse*, and theological issues and the discourse of their social and academic groups, made up mostly of non-believers, becomes too difficult. One or the other has to go.

This paints a picture of students as being radically aware of the spiritual, theological and pastoral issues at stake in the process of learning, and for the majority that would be false. When people come to see a chaplain, it is often with questions about spirituality or sexuality or social dysfunction, rather than about meaning and theological coherence. The medieval idea of a university was based on the search for truth. Modern university students are not so much seeking to find the truth as to acquire the expertise and skill to equip themselves for a job. Learning as vocation has been replaced by functional, non-vocational learning. In the Middle Ages learning was perceived as being a means to an end for many and the cynical manipulation of knowledge for self-advancement was a feature of the career ecclesiastic in particular. But there was also a view of learning as carrying responsibility with it, as being at the service of the Christian commonwealth. This view, picked up again by the European Catholic intelligentsia of the early twentieth century has largely disappeared. What we as chaplains perceive among so many, both undergraduate and post-graduate students, is a disjunction between their professional expertise

and knowledge and their willingness to wrestle with questions of faith and meaning. Intellectual giants in their own field are content to be religious and spiritual pygmies. The language of personal conversion is replaced by the language of personal achievement.

How does this translate in terms of spirituality, and what can be done through spiritual direction to confront these questions? In the university, as elsewhere, the avoidance of theology can be matched by the enthusiasm for spirituality. A recent Week of Guided Prayer drew 90 applicants. Perhaps it is the very lack of a sense of theological coherence that draws so many to a deeper spiritual search. There is no shortage of students wanting to know how to pray, to connect with God, to reflect on and make sense of their own experience. But this quest is also dogged by an extraordinary dualism, and by the total disassociation of the world of academic work from that of the personal spiritual journey evident in matters more metaphysical. Again and again students one knows to be brilliant, brave and innovative in academic matters will reveal self-doubt, fear and a sense of deep inadequacy when dealing with their relationship with God. Their image of God, largely undeveloped since childhood, hinders them from bringing the same fearless spirit of adventure and enquiry into prayer.

Here in Cambridge a previous Week of Guided Prayer resulted in the founding of two Christian Life Community groups, meeting weekly or fortnightly to pray with Scripture and use it as a tool for reflection on their lived experience. The flexibility of Ignatian spirituality is both attractive and helpful in a fluid, quick-turning world. But I notice, as I listen to the groups and to individuals I see for spiritual direction, that there is the same inability to see their work and their Christian calling as having any real connection. Again and again I hear: 'I didn't/couldn't pray at all – I had so much work pressure. But I did get some good work done' (this last said rather apologetically). The idea that God could be praised and worshipped in spirit and truth through a mathematical problem solved, an experiment completed, a literary text appreciated is too unlike their notions of prayer to be comfortable.

In a university that operates in three eight-week teaching terms and demands of some students a phenomenal output of work, the competing demands of work and prayer appear a real dilemma. I work at helping them to see their studies as part of their engagement with God who is present in the task of truth-seeking, but it entails for many a radical reappraisal of the relationship between spiritual life and 'real' life. The tools of the Examen of Consciousness and of contemplation in action remain the most effective remedies, and the Ignatian/IBVM

Constitutions provide a rich source of reflection for lay people trying to balance a life of work that is deeply rooted in prayer. But notions of spirituality more suitable for a medieval cloister than for a modern university remain hard to eradicate. The Sacrament of the Present Moment fights for recognition.

The chaplains remain important figures both as role models and as providers of aspirations. A lack of lay chaplains and the excessive promotion of candidates for the priesthood as 'success stories of the year' can lead to a sense of worthlessness in the lay vocation. I work in the university for half the week. Much of the other part of my week is spent in vocations ministry. It is interesting to compare the number of young men going to study for the priesthood with the almost non-existence of women feeling called to religious life from the same chaplaincy. Many of our highly articulate, intelligent, capable women look for a place and a ministry as laywomen in the Church, only to find that there is little or no room for them at the inn. They look at my role as a woman chaplain with questioning and critical eyes. They are, I hope, able to see the joy and the privilege of such a ministry. But they are also challengingly aware of the conflicts and frustrations for a woman in such a context. They do not always see a road they themselves could follow with integrity.

The clericalization of a sense of vocation can in turn compound the notion that learning and theological awareness are the province of the religious 'specialists'. A spiritual approach that speaks out of its own experience of doubt and struggle is probably more helpful, if less reassuring, than one that speaks out of pontifical certainty. A chaplain who is perceived by the students as another fellow-Christian trying to be real will be more challenging than one whose struggles for authenticity are hidden. Reassurance is sometimes needed, but a greater need is that for solidarity in the task of truth-seeking. This has to include a willingness to enter into the complexity surrounding human relationships. The challenge for a chaplain here may be to be prepared to hallow the whole of a person's existence without descending into moral relativism. It can be tempting, when faced with a deeply hurt or confused student, to avoid speaking a truth that the Spirit is offering to and through the Church.

And where does it lead after the student makes the next big leap into reality after graduation? A chaplaincy that has been too much of a theological or spiritual hothouse will be a poor preparation for parish life. The questions re-emerge when a graduate seeks integration into the world of work and a faith-community that may be even less

inclined to ask the awkward questions than at university. If any synthesis has been reached between the world of learning and that of faith, there is a chance that this will be extended into the world of work. But the world of Mammon can seem even more alien to those seeking God than that of academia. We need a spirituality of work even more desperately than we need a spirituality of learning. Perhaps the one flows from the other. I confess to a sense of relief that this is the task for some other pastor, not for me, as I try to make sense of the ministry of university chaplaincy. Sufficient unto the day is the challenge thereof.