

CYNICISM OR CRITICISM?

Developing a Christian Mind at University

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Let me open with a strange question. Do you actually enjoy learning? Do you look forward to the start of a new term of lectures or lab work? Perhaps you think the very notion is absurd! Many students do. "University's no time for work. Not until the last minute, that is!"

Now, if we're honest, there are all kinds of reasons for not showing much glee at thought of work. For example, there is such a phenomenon as bad lecturers who have little concern for their students. Or we might be facing the stress of parental expectations to achieve. Or it might be gradually dawning on you that you are the wrong course.

These are all difficult enough, and need support - but they are not my subject here. Apart from anything else, I don't have power to sack lecturers. But I do want to engage with two other important reasons for people not especially looking forward to their work.

1. LEARNING AS A CHORE?

This is the sort of idea that always sees education as a means to an end and therefore to be endured. But the question then quickly rears its head: *to what end?*

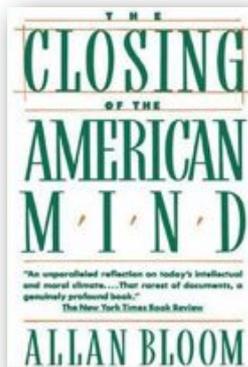
Sheffield University actually has two Latin mottos. One is *Disce Doce* (meaning "learn / teach") and the other is *Rerum Cognoscere Causas* (meaning, "to understand the reason for things"). Now they both hide all kinds of assumptions. But at a basic level, it's not hard to see them as noble aims.

But how many people actually take them seriously? They are only mottos, but the sentiments behind them are important. My guess is that only a few do. For these days, the driving force for the majority is purely what happens after leaving university, and who can blame them? The graduate job market is tougher than ever, after all.



Some years ago, Allan Bloom wrote what is regarded on both sides of the Atlantic as an important book – *The Closing of the American Mind*. He notes in the book the extreme to which this trend went at Cornell University in the USA. His controversial analysis may seem exaggerated, perhaps, but it comes in context of his defence of offering widely based education that broadens mind in several disciplines. While this will not apply directly to most UK courses, I suspect it comes uncomfortably close to some:

No public career these days – not doctor nor lawyer nor politician nor journalist nor businessman nor entertainer – has much to do with humane learning. An education other than purely professional or technical can even seem to be an impediment...



Cornell was, as in so many other things, in advance of its time... The six-year PhD program, richly supported by the Ford Foundation, was directed specifically to high school students who had already made 'a firm career choice' and was intended to rush them through to the start of those careers. A sop was given to desolate [arts professors] in the form of money to fund seminars that these young careerists could take on their way through the College of Arts and Sciences. For the rest, the educators could devote their energies to arranging and packaging the program without having to provide it with any substance. That kept them busy enough to avoid thinking about the nothingness of their endeavour. This has been the preferred mode of not looking the Beast in the Jungle in the face – structure not content. The Cornell plan for dealing with the problem of liberal education was to suppress the students' longing for liberal education by encouraging their professionalism and their avarice, providing money and all the prestige the university had available to make careerism the centrepiece of the university.¹

When seen as the means to *that* end, rather than to feed intellectual curiosity, say, is it any wonder that learning seems a *chore*? It is something that has to be endured; and it may ultimately be futile if a job is not waiting at the end. Unsurprisingly, many people begin to wonder what the point is. This is, I fear, one of the key factors in the prevailing cynicism about learning.

¹ Allan Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind*, Simon & Shuster, 1987, p338-340

● Growing Cynicism About Learning?

A cynic, according to one definition is “one who has little faith in human sincerity, and/or despises all comfort and pleasure.” It comes from the ancient Greek word ‘*kunos*’, meaning a dog. It seems that there had been a group of people who deliberately rejected a life of ease out of philosophical conviction, and were thus branded as living dog-like lifestyles. So to be cynical about education could simply boil down to refusing to reap the benefits of what is on offer.



The problem is that people don't actually believe there are any benefits to be reaped anymore. Bloom compares the situation with people coming off drugs:

In my experience, students who have had a serious fling with drugs – and gotten over it – find it difficult to have enthusiasms or great expectations. It is as though the colour has been drained out of their lives and they see everything in black and white. The pleasure they experienced in the beginning was so intense that they no longer look for it at the end, or as the end.²

The assumption is that pleasures and joys are to be found elsewhere, in clubs or the SU bar, but never in learning. I'm not suggesting that if you find work a chore, you must have been a druggie – but merely pointing out that if perhaps you have found joys elsewhere that have evaporated, then the chances are that you will be cynical about being able to find them anywhere, quite apart from in work and learning.

Cynicism affects us all, whether we're Christian or not. As the result of in peer pressure, it is important not to be too keen about anything, except perhaps sport. It's trendy to despise what is required of us or what the older lecturers teach; it's trendy to say how boring it all is or that there's too much work to do - so let's head off to the bar. Or if someone does work hard, it's perhaps acceptable to claim that it is only because it is necessary for a certain career path. But a big irony these days is that people no longer seem particularly bothered about that either.

2. UNIVERSITY AS A THREAT?

A large proportion of Christians can date their conversions to their student time. But conversely, a significant proportion of those with inherited faith lose it as students. We will probably know people in both groups.

Why? Well, I suppose in some ways, this is merely a reflection of what time at university *should* be like. It *should* be a crucible of ideas, a time to test former beliefs and sift through new ones. It should be a time to test one's foundations, to doubt one's doubts and believe one's beliefs. Sadly it degenerates into the opposite: carelessly doubting one's beliefs while defiantly believing one's doubts.

No wonder, then, that Christians are fearful of the intellectual challenges of university. No wonder some bury their heads in the sand and have as little to do with the implications of what they are learning as possible. At best, this is puzzling to non-believing friends; at worst, it is despised as simply a deliberate evasion of the overwhelming evidence against them.

● It's not paranoia when they really *are* out to get you!

Many have a growing perception of an outright hostility to Christianity on campuses across the UK. Of course, people pour scorn on this, & dismiss it as feeble paranoia. But this sense is not without foundation. Just think: who is likely to encounter more opposition in a student union – the Green eco-evangelist or Christian activist?

Now of course, it is not always the case, and we must not descend into a victim mentality. But we must face the fact that many different agendas floating round lecture rooms – and some are explicitly anti-Christian. It is no surprise that Christians are fearful. Richard Dawkins was for many years a Tutor at my old college and I vividly remember one of those classic library moments when I was having to write an essay. Of course, this



meant that *anything* else was more interesting than the task in hand. I'm sure you have been there. So I picked up a book lying on the table, which happened to be about microbiology (which, as far as I know, is not Dawkins' specialist field). Nevertheless, he had written the preface. Within 3 lines of the opening paragraph, he was busy smashing the icons of Christianity, a target which seemed entirely tangential to the book's primary purpose. It struck me at the time that using a microbiology text book preface to propagate atheism demonstrates quite a real hang-up. But in his

² Bloom, p80

mind, the gospel is fair game as an 'irrational superstition'. Dealing with this can be very hard - especially for a student straight from school who is encountering the reputation, intellectual prowess and experience of professors who have seen such 'Christian naivety' all before.

However, such overt animosity is not the most common threat.

● The Incessant Drip-Drip?

More familiar is what we might call the incessant drip-drip of studying everything without reference to God at all. We may be studying what seems a perfectly neutral and unreligious subject; but, even if we aren't, God is unlikely to get a look in. It is simply the culture of university education in the west: we leave God at the lecture or lab room door. To help deal with this, we need grasp something of how this has come about.

For centuries, the study of religion focused on just three areas of (what was assumed) to be cosmic reality.³ Other aspects of reality were of course important to a theological mindset, but they were covered primarily by other areas of learning. The topics specific to theological studies were:

- The Supernatural
- The Invisible
- The Mysterious

It was almost universally understood that *each* one had a vital part to play in our understanding of life, the universe and everything.

My hunch is that your immediate reaction to the list was to assume that each is irrelevant to your studies, let alone to real life. In which case, the Enlightenment have shaped you. For western thinking has had a secularising tendency over the last four centuries, and it has gradually but successfully erased all three from shared understandings of reality. Once that happens, religious faith inevitably has no place in our education – what you believe is up to you in private, but has nothing to do with the Lecture Hall.

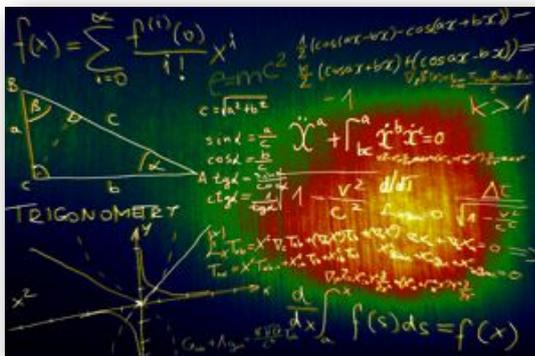
It is a short step from there to some recent headlines about Christians in the workplace. Whether or not one agrees with the significance of being able to wear a crucifix, it is surely concerning to find a legal argument couched in these terms (in an article headlined *Christians should 'leave their beliefs at home or get another job'*):

James Eadie QC, acting for the government, told the European court that the refusal to allow an NHS nurse and a British Airways worker to visibly wear a crucifix at work “did not prevent either of them practicing religion in private”, which would be protected by human rights law... “There is a difference between the professional sphere where your religious freedoms necessarily abut onto and confront other interests and the private sphere. The employees concerned could indeed pursue all the generally recognised manifestations of their religion outside the work sphere.”⁴



● Losing the worldview glue?

I wonder if you realised that Theology used to be known as 'The Queen of Sciences'. The reason was simple. Theology was assumed to provide the framework by which to understand everything in world, its use & morality. It was the glue that held everything together. But this is widely rejected now. The thought seems absurd. Not only is theology based on superstitions, in common with most humanities subjects (apart from languages), it appears to offer no professional qualifications or obvious careers. If theological studies deemed to have any value, it is a reduced to merely examining the phenomenon of faith in human culture, rather than any grounds for faith.



Now, to be fair, not all scientists have accepted this secularising instinct, even in the twentieth century.

Albert Einstein observed that science can help human beings attain their goals; science cannot, however, supply the goals. If we desire to feed the world, science can help us to do so. If we decide to exterminate the world, science can help us to do that also. Science, though, as a method and as a field of knowledge is simply unable, by its very nature, to make the decision for us. Many people assume that what is scientifically possible is always desirable. Einstein would disagree. What is possible and what is desirable involve two separate realms of knowledge.

³ A case developed by Gene Veith, *Loving God With All Your Mind*, (IVP, Downers' Grove, 1989, newly revised 2003)

⁴ Daily Telegraph, 4th September 2012 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9520026/Christians-should-leave-their-beliefs-at-home-or-get-another-job.html> (accessed 7/9/12)

Whether to abort a foetus or to save a foetus' life through high-tech surgical techniques are not questions science can answer for us.⁵

The queen has been dethroned - but the world searches vainly for reliable alternatives to take her place. We need to realise what we've lost: a cohesive view of the world in general, and therefore of education in particular. We have lost a view of the inter-connectedness of reality.

Do you know what 'University' originally meant? It comes from the Latin *universitas* – meaning the whole world, everything together – the Greek equivalent is roughly the word *cosmos*. People used to go to university to learn about everything. Of course, that didn't mean that they literally discovered everything, but that it would help them grasp the big picture. For mediaeval students, the possibility of a cohesive worldview might be illustrated in quite obvious ways:

- **Everything under one roof.**

If you visit the heart of Oxford's Bodleian Library, founded over 400 years ago (and still the university library) you can see that it is made up of an internal quadrangle (*see right*). On each inner wall there are doors with ancient signs above them relating to the different disciplines then taught at Oxford: Music, Moral Philosophy, Logic, Jurisprudence, Hebrew & Greek, Geometry and Arithmetic, and so on. They were all in one building. Of course, such an arrangement would be quite impossible today. Faculties, student populations and education resources require huge geographical areas. Nevertheless, there was a symbolic value in a university housing everything under one roof.



- **Access through one language**

Until surprisingly recently, Latin was an entry requirement for many Universities. Today, such a requirement would be dismissed as hopelessly elitist and pointless. But the original intention was very positive. Latin gave access to all types of learning, regardless of where in Europe it was being taught. With Latin under the belt, a student had access to explore fresh areas of learning from far beyond their specific field. In many ways, (fortunately for us here), English currently enjoys a similar status. English is now a requirement for post-graduate studies in most parts of the world. However, note the purpose in the medieval world: using a common language opened possibilities for learning *anything*.

- **The Over-Specialisation of Knowledge**

These days, faculties of every university are spread far and wide - and logistics aside, that too has symbolic significance. It illustrates a simple reality – each academic discipline is separate and distinct from every other, with hardly any cross-fertilisation between them. So for instance, how much does the History faculty have to do with the English department, or any of the Sciences? But this fragmentation of university life has gone further than that. It occurs within faculties as well. You would be surprised how little academic interaction there is, say, between OT & NT scholars within a theology department.

Part of the reason is that disciplines are growing ever more complex, and basic bibliographies ever longer - it is hard enough to keep abreast of one's own specialism, let alone engaging with someone else's. But there is a sadder reason for this. This is that each of us is, in effect, at a "*multiversity*". We plod on in our own corner, while ignoring the rest. There is simply too much to learn to do more than that. Worse, many don't even *want* to integrate their thinking with others' - to do so is deemed both impossible and unnecessary. A cohesive, all-embracing worldview (a 'metanarrative') is regarded as dangerous and unattainable. Which of course presents Christians with a fundamental problem: for we claim the truth of what could be described as the ultimate metanarrative.

So we can understand the threat many Christians at university feel: God is left out in the cold as irrelevant, or attacked as a dangerous superstition. So drip by drip, either our confidence in the value of what we are learning evaporates, or our confidence in the Christian message does.

3. SO WHAT DO WE DO?

In Deuteronomy 6:4-5, we find the first summary of God's Law:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Do you remember what Jesus does with it?

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

⁵ Veith, p59

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ (Mark12:28-30)

Interesting, isn't it?

If we find Jesus' addition of 'with all your mind' odd, it probably means that we don't really understand love. If we assume it is just feelings & emotions, the mind will have little to do with it. But even at a human level, if love is the highest honour we can give someone, whereby we are willing to share everything with them, then of course the mind will be involved. We will want to be interested in them, and in their lives. It will involve curiosity and compassion, understanding and insight. It might also involve defending their reputation when it seems damaged or under threat, which again will involve the mind. So for example, you would actually be concerned about my marriage if I claimed to love Rachel, while being not the slightest bit interested in her childhood in Africa or her time as a midwife in East London.

Why should there be a difference with God? He wants us to love him with everything – including our minds, whoever we are.

When he says 'all your' mind, He is applying this claim in a very personal way. Not everyone has the same ability. Someone who is physically handicapped may not have the same physical 'strength' that a star athlete does. That does not matter. Whether it means serving God from a hospital bed or from an Olympic pavilion, both are called to love God with all of their strength. In the same way, 'all of your mind' encompasses a wide range of talents and abilities. Some minds are gifted in the sciences; some in the arts. Some minds are oriented to academia and higher education. Some are not. No one set of talents is better than any other. The point is, God demands all that we can do and all that we can think.⁶

To love God involves many things – it will involve enjoying the privilege of getting to know him, it will involve gratitude, praise and adoration, obedience – but the bottom line must always be at least a desire to KNOW ABOUT HIM & his world. That is why the Bible has lot to say about God, to inform us of what we could not otherwise know.

But that is not the only essential ingredient to loving God with our minds. We should also seek to defend his work and reputation.

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Cor 10:5)

So this gives us 2 major aims as thinking and integrated Christians at university

- Understand God and His world
- Defend God and His work

This is a very exciting adventure to set out on – and it gives University a far greater meaning and purpose than merely getting job at the end of it. Even better, I would suggest that it is a great antidote to the cynicism we see all around us.

4. Understanding God and His World

I am no scientist at all. But that doesn't stop me being amazed by footage of human egg fertilisation. It blows my mind to think of that happening every day all around the world, completely out of sight. In fact, anyone involved in scientific research has a real privilege – the being able to delve more deeply into God's world. It is irrelevant if one's lecturers don't share such a view or appreciation – nothing like that should stop us getting interested with the divine perspective.

But it doesn't have to be whether pure or applied. In the Arts, we can marvel at the insights of the people God has made to inhabit his world. Everyone is different. Someone once said that God breaks the mould every time he makes



unique. That is what makes people so fascinating. So we can appreciate that as we read their writings, look at their pictures, assess their actions, and listen to their music. This is not to say that we have to admire or agree with everything. We can look at something in appropriate shock or be appalled. We might have to weep tears at someone's

⁶ Veith p144

death or the terrible sin that has gripped the world. But we can still be amazed at God – not that he caused the terrors of the world – but that he opens his arms wide in mercy to just this sort of world.

All I am trying to do is to urge you to be interested in the world you live in – because it is interesting! Find out about things – even if they don't seem to have much to do with your course. In fact, that's all more reason to do just that – how about going to different lecture – or ask a friend on another course what they'd suggest as most interesting to learn about – give it ago & consider what impact this has on belief in the God who made world. Remember the psalmist

The earth is the Lord's, and *everything in it*,
the world, and *all* who live in it;
for he founded it on the seas
and established it on the waters. (Psalm 24:1-2)

If that thought alone doesn't give us pause, I don't know what will! If everything belongs to God because everything was created by God, then how can there be any gaps between sacred or secular, public or private, or even between natural or supernatural. It is all His. And as His creatures, we will surely long to pursue and explore everything that this means.



Years ago, I was given a MYST for Christmas. It's a totally addictive, geeky and challenging computer game. The player is drawn into a captivating and beautiful fantasy world in order to detect the disasters that occurred in its ancient past. To finish it, you have to accumulate knowledge about this world, otherwise you won't know what to do. It struck me while I was playing, though, that there was me totally absorbed in exploring this virtual world, while there was still so much in our world I don't know about or understand. This is far more fantastic and unlikely than a computer game could ever be.

But our culture seems to have ditched the real in favour of the virtual. What a tragedy that is!

In some ways, what have got to fear from our real world? If we believe God is its creator, then everything real & true about it is from him. All truth is God's truth. What is there to fear from truth? By seeking it out, we honour & love God with our minds. Does that sound naïve or stupid? Perhaps a little naïve – but I'm just suggesting that wanting to study his world is all part of loving God with mind. And that will remove much of our cynicism.

Some years ago, Mike Starkey wrote a great little book aimed precisely at dealing with this: *God, Sex and Generation X*. And so he offers some helpful suggestions to get us curious, and perhaps even smiling, about the world. Don't dismiss them too quickly... or I might just have to dismiss you as a cynic!

12 WAYS TO HELP RESTORE LOST WONDER

- Take a toddler to the zoo
- Start reading poetry
- Give your favourite person a list of 10 things you like best about them.
- Read a different paper/retune to a different radio station.
- Try a different, daring hairstyle.
- Fly a kite.
- Stop watching TV for a month
- Surprise someone close to you with a gratuitous act of wild generosity.
- Read one of the four Gospels straight through.
- Buy a new bike and ride it often
- Put on your favourite music and dance around the room, preferably with small children.
- Take up gardening.⁷



But if that perhaps sounds naïve, then the one area we really mustn't be naïve is in the second.

5. Defend God's and His Work

Paul was well aware of the attacks that the Christian gospel comes under. I'm sure you do as well. There many areas of the Christian worldview that seem to run completely counter to prevailing moods and minds. That inevitably leads to conflict. So surely, we need at least to consider how to help others see that God's ways are not as ridiculous or appalling as might appear?

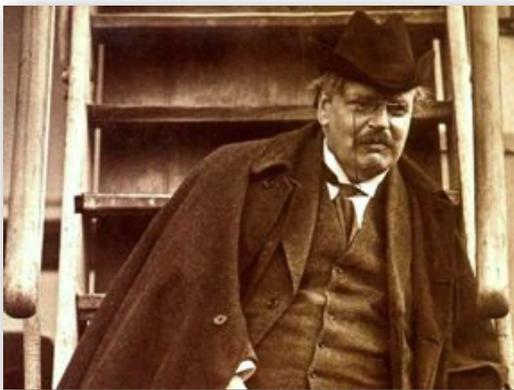
⁷ Mike Starkey, *God, Sex and Generation X* (Triangle, London, 1997) p129

Of course, in saying we should defend God, that hardly means He is defenceless without us! It is simply that if we love Him with our minds we will want to defend His reputation. And He is simply delighted when people speak up and out for him, & promises to help them.⁸ Furthermore, we need to remember: there is nothing to fear from the pursuit of truth. Trusting that all truth that is ultimately God's truth gives us great confidence. It means it doesn't matter where we pursue it - or even who we engage with.

The key to this, I think, is to develop a healthy sense of criticism. That is actually a more positive idea than it at first seems. The Oxford English Dictionary has 2 definitions. We tend to focus on the first (which refers to finding fault with something); but the other is arguably much more important. For criticism in that sense is simply about evaluating the merits or value of something (because it derives from the Greek *krisis* which meant judgement or discernment).

Actually a critic should be involved in *both*. Think about the film critic like Mark Kermode. He needs to evaluate the films he watches, and because of his experience, knowledge and passion, his opinions are trusted by many. He is a good critic. That doesn't mean he dismisses every film he watches as rubbish. He would be out of job if he did. A critic gets involved because of his or her love of the subject or medium. So he or she naturally wants to show appreciation & understanding of things done well.

We should share the same attitude for everything we see in the world around us in and outside lecture room. That is simply an expression of the passion and love for the universe God has made. When we do this, with healthy sense of criticism, will be able to evaluate what we find. This is especially important when God's work is under attack – we should assess what is said, evaluate how fair it is and see where inconsistencies might be. Then we can subvert and undermine every pretension that sets itself up against God. Actually we'll find that often the inconsistencies are huge. Veith puts it well:



GK Chesterton (*left*) has observed how Christianity is attacked 'on all sides and for all contradictory reasons.' He points out how some condemn Christianity for being too pessimistic, others for being too optimistic. Christianity is said to stress sin, judgment, and austerity, to be inhuman in its gloom and bleakness. Others, though reject it for its pie-in-the-sky comforts. The belief in providence and a caring God, they say, hides the true bleakness and meaningfulness of life. The Church is ridiculed both for being anti-female and because in Europe only women still go to church. It is criticised for its austerity and for its extravagance, for being too peaceful and for being too violent. It is attacked

because it lacks unity ("None of the churches agree with each other") and for being unified ("They don't allow differences of opinion").

...The point is not simply that the charges, taken together contradict each other; but that Christianity is more complex, comprehensive and whole than many of its critics realise. Chesterton provides the analogy:

"Suppose we heard an unknown man spoken of by many men. Suppose we were puzzled to hear that some men said he was too tall, and some too short; some objected to his fatness, some lamented his leanness; some thought him too dark, and some too fair. One explanation ... would be that he might be an odd shape. But there is another explanation. He might be the right shape. Outrageously tall men might feel him to be short. Very short men might feel him to be tall... Perhaps (in short) this extraordinary thing is really the ordinary thing; at least the normal thing, the centre."

I do not intend to be glib. Many critiques of Christianity are strong and searching. They must be taken seriously. But many of the criticisms one encounters are glib – they are flippant and superficial, poorly thought out, and intended as cheap shots.⁹

We'll often need to use brains – but it is part of the responsibility of being human to do this as part of our love for the creator God. It is not just for the brain boxes – for us all, as we face different situations.

If you take anything from these rambly thoughts, it is simply this. Recapture a vision for what university is really about: marvelling at the the world as a whole... as God's whole. And understand that God's revealed way of seeing things has something to say about all of it. We'll only ever scratch the surface. But knowing that there is always more out there, I would suggest, is just part of the excitement.

⁸ See Matthew 10:16-20

⁹ Veith, p41-42

No one said this was easy. That's why we need each other. But here are some suggestions.

- This is of course a radical one for students: **read some books!** How many books, other than those set reading lists, do you read in a year? Of the Christian books you read, how often do you read mind-engaging theological or apologetic books (as opposed to more devotional books, important though that they undoubtedly are). We must read to broaden horizons and get to know God's world better – university provides the opportunity like no other to do this, so make the most of it. If you don't know where to start, chat with a church or Christian Union leader.
- Discuss things with friends or in groups. Try to see things through the big picture of living in God's world. Why not start up a **reading group**? Set modest targets so they are not too unrealistic (e.g. To read and discuss one book a term).
- Be deliberate about listening to what people from other worldviews and perspectives think. Perhaps go along to some of their society meetings? It will be challenging. But it will at least prevent you from engaging with 'straw-men'.

I hope your excitement has been fired. If this is taken on board, it will revolutionise your time at University. It is not just the means to a job – it is far bigger than that. And it will start a process and an attitude that will continue for the rest of your life.

But above all:

- **Pray** that you will grow in your love for your Creator and Rescuer God - not just with your minds, but certainly not without your minds either.¹⁰

Two questions for personal reflection:

- Do you sense that the Christian worldview is under attack on your course? Where might you find help to deal with this?
- Are there areas of life and the world about which you are curious, whether related to your studies or not? How can you pursue that curiosity?

A few books to get you started:

Edgar, William	Reasons of the Heart	P&R	2003
Keller, Timothy	The Reason for God	Hodder	2009
Roberts, Vaughan	God's Big Picture	IVP	2009
Sire, James	The Universe Next Door	IVP	2010 edition
Veith, Gene	Loving God With All Your Mind	IVP	1989, revised 2003

¹⁰ All stock photographs taken from Shutterstock.com