

## Comment:

### *Theological Research Initiative*

According to surveys, the mainstream churches in Britain are in terminal decline; some even suggest that those who still go to church mostly do not believe in God anyway. On the other hand, other surveys claim, many people who never enter a church *do* believe in God, or anyway often *pray*. However all that may be, theology departments in British universities still attract students, particularly if they offer religious studies and the study of non-Christian religions. In particular, while theology may be marginalized in many universities, vulnerable to cuts, and increasingly under the same management as arts or cultural studies, postgraduate research flourishes. The North of England Institute of Christian Education in Durham has listed the research projects in British and Irish institutions of higher education, from 1994 to the present. Not all the institutions invited to provide information did so; even so, however, the database registers almost 4000 projects.

About twenty academics from the main institutions and the same number of church leaders or their representatives from the major churches met last month at Queen's College, Birmingham, to consider how churches can make better use of this theological research and how universities can become more responsive to the churches' needs. The database will soon be on sale on floppy disks to anyone in the churches or the universities who needs to know who is doing what research. This will help prevent duplication as well as locate uncultivated fields. The point, however, is not simply to catalogue the *projects* — regularly updated bibliographies in various journals do that — but rather to list the *people*, whose current research interests might indicate their competence and perhaps likely willingness, to help church organizations prepare documented interventions in the public arena. Keywords in the database would, for example, immediately signal the names of people who might be approached to collaborate in background work on topics such as authority, bereavement, conflict, conversion, creation, culture, and death, to name only a few. Church leaders and organizations might also be interested, and even disturbed, at finding many topics apparently not on anyone's research agenda. For example, the database reveals a lack of academic interest at present in many topics of ecumenical concern. Again, surprisingly few projects show much acquaintance with contemporary Anglo-American analytical philosophy, which (one might think) exerts considerable influence, for better or worse, on neighbouring disciplines and the general intellectual climate in our culture.

The project is ecumenical. The churches represented at the Birmingham conference were approached as members of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (CCBI in the jargon). There were eight Roman Catholics among the thirty eight participants at the Birmingham conference, including the Bishop of Lancaster. True, the Bishop of Ely, formerly Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, and thus himself a church leader and a distinguished theologian, was the principal agent of the initiative. In the past, bishops of the Church of England must often have provoked theologians at Oxford, Cambridge and Durham, over the port at college dinners, to undertake or promote research *in areas of interest to the Church*. It is not so easy to imagine Catholic bishops, or the Archbishop of Thyatira and Great Britain, or the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, looking with much confidence to theologians in the universities for assistance in the production of doctrinal statements. On the other side, divinity faculties, perhaps particularly in Scotland, that have only recently abandoned their original denominational allegiance, might prove equally suspicious of appeals for help from church organizations, let alone signalings of neglected topics. If church leaders can lack confidence in what goes on in theology departments, academic theologians can be very wary of pressures on their autonomy, however well meaning, even (and perhaps especially) when — in their 'private lives' — they are regular church-goers.

Tact is clearly required, but it would be absurd if churches and theology departments did not sometimes combine intellectually on matters of common interest. The Birmingham conference marks an important step in setting up a permanent body which will facilitate church-related theological research. Much detailed work remains to be done, but there should soon be a representative trust to mediate between 'The Church' and 'The Academy' — phrases much disliked by some at the conference! — in hopes that the churches may be able to draw upon much academic work of which they have been largely ignorant, while theological departments may sometimes find opportunities to direct scholarship towards matters of urgent importance to the churches. At the very least, this Theological Research Initiative marks an important step forward for the churches themselves, working together in what is often perceived as the doldrums of ecumenism. In addition, at a time when the universities are unprecedentedly under pressure from a market-dominated culture, they should welcome any allies in improving the provision and appreciation of theological research in these islands.

F.K.