

Universities on the Mission Field?

Christian Universities as a Mission Strategy: Recovering the Lost Vision

by Paul F. Scotchmer

While Joel Carpenter concerns himself mainly with the present and the future (see the previous article in this issue), Paul Scotchmer ranges boldly into the past, into the roots of the university phenomenon, and even makes a strong case against Christian higher education. But Scotchmer comes out finally, with Carpenter, soberly suggesting ways in which the university pattern can go right, and in the International Council for Higher Education, of which he is Vice President, he is bending every effort to make sure the non-Western “take” on the university pattern does go right. He believes in it strongly.

Is it possible to rescue the university tradition for the purposes of the Kingdom? This is an unresolved frontier of mission. Scotchmer lightly but comprehensively provides the basis for wrestling with this question. It ought not to be that in universities people are trained how to do while in seminaries they are trained how to think.

One thing is sure. The medieval student tomfoolery of which Scotchmer speaks may well be exceeded in US universities, where up to 50% of the students are binge drinking weekly. But the overseas schools are (at this stage anyway) far less likely to maintain that tradition. Many, if not most, students overseas do not study full time but sandwich courses into packed, productive schedules, which is inherently a superior way to go.

Carpenter sets forth the evidence of a large trend. Scotchmer pursues further the kind of a university that can truly serve the Kingdom. It is a husky global tradition by now. Will it be healthy as well? This is a crucial frontier.

Ralph D. Winter, Editor

In the mid-19th century, a Scottish crofter's son named Alexander Duff made the case for Christian higher education as a means of evangelization in India. Timothy Richard, a Welsh Baptist converted during the revival of 1858-60, made a similar case for missions in China. During the next hundred years, Christian colleges and universities were founded in both places, and others besides, with remarkable fervor. By the middle of the 20th century, however, mission boards and churches had turned off the spigot. Since then, the university has ceased to be seen as an instrument for Christian outreach.¹

Exactly why this change took place is not the subject of these pages. The question here is whether Christian universities should be given fresh consideration as an essential mission strategy. At the very least, let us note the irony of the present situation: While Christian colleges are regarded as indispensable in the West, western Christians view them as a luxury elsewhere. Folks

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beyond the North Atlantic quadrant need missionary training centers, Bible colleges, and other such institutions to train church-related workers, but not Christian colleges and universities. Or so it is thought.

The hidden prejudice behind this view is that a real missionary is a minister. Frequently, auxiliary services are wedged into the package, but the essential item is still the minister. Somehow, the age-old Protestant idea of equipping the entire laity for ministry—as lawyers, doctors, engineers, corporate executives, government officials, educators, and so forth—is lost on the western church when it comes to missionary activity in other lands. We can promote such professions in the West, but people “over there” face more urgent needs.

This bias has begun to crack. One reason is that so many western lay persons are now engaged in missions themselves—as tentmakers, prayer warriors, or members of short-term mission projects. These folks are more likely than ecclesiastics to see the need for developing the full range of talents of lay persons in other lands. A bigger reason, though, is that Christians in developing countries now yearn to contribute—as Christians—to their own cultural and national life.

To make this possible, they need more than degrees or certificates from institutions for training ministers.

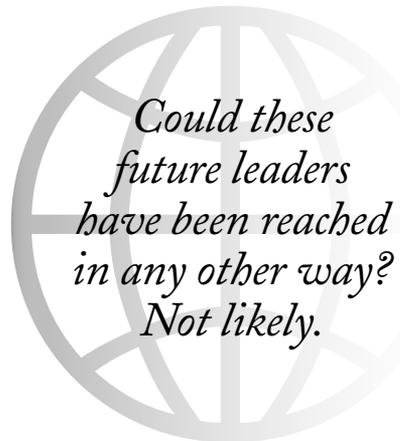
In the face of these developments, western mission heads must now ask themselves: Is it at least possible that many of these people will serve Christ’s kingdom more effectively as lay persons than as ministers? If so, it follows that Christian colleges and universities can indeed help advance the gospel in non-western regions of the world.

A Vignette from the Past

On the first day of class, in 1830, Alexander Duff and five students sat under the shade of a banyan tree. By the end of the first week, enrollment had ballooned to more than 300 stu-

dents. The following year, hundreds of prospective students had to be turned away. In the years ahead, enrollments averaged around 800—roughly equal to the number of books that Duff had lost in the first of two shipwrecks experienced en route to India.

Within a decade, the hard-driving Scot had succeeded in his ambition to found a Christian university in Calcutta, offering a course of studies not unlike the one he had enjoyed



at the University of St Andrews. By enabling the Brahmans to study the liberal arts and sciences (to which they were clearly attracted), he reasoned that he could also expose them to the Bible and a Christian worldview. And from this exposure, they would turn to the Christian faith. But did he succeed?

Judged strictly by the number of converts, Duff’s efforts to use higher education as a means of evangelism were an egregious failure. Just four converts were made in the first three years, and the public reaction in India, even to this level of conversion, threatened to undo the entire enterprise. The Brahman class was open to western education, but not to religious conversion. By the time he finished his work in India, just 33 baptisms had been recorded, despite the sustained (and costly) exposure of thousands of Indian students to the gospel.

Duff, however, did not view this work as a failure. Nor have thoughtful observers since then, who stress the multiplication effects of this work. From the handful of initial conver-

sions came many thousands of secondary conversions. The reason, of course, is that these 33 individuals—from the highest ranks of Indian society—went on to become influential leaders of the church and society. In these positions, they were able to influence the lives of many others.

Could these future leaders have been reached in any other way? Not likely. To reach the intellectual and cultural elite of India required the presence of Christian scholars able to exchange ideas with the best young minds from other faiths. And it required a place where such exchanges could take place on a daily basis over the course of several years. The same is true today, if we want to bring the gospel into the upper echelons of government, business, and the academy.

The Case against Christian Higher Education

Serious issues, however, must be taken into consideration before promoting greater reliance on Christian colleges and universities as a means of world mission. If not addressed, Christian liberal arts education will indeed become a luxury item, serving the personal interests of people in the two-thirds world without serving the church.

(1) *The external threat.* On several occasions, reaction to conversions at Duff’s school almost torpedoed the new institution. The same thing happened at other Protestant schools set up at that time. And within a generation, education in India was officially secularized.

It is one thing when poor lepers are converted. It is quite another, though, when the cream of society is poured off into “foreign” vessels, or when Christians attempt to empower the poor in a social system adamantly opposed to advancing people on the basis of personal merit. In our own day, as in Duff’s, pressure can be expected from the power structure whenever western education migrates from the purely *useful* to the *purposeful*. Outside the Christian community, western education is valued only for its material benefits, not its

spiritual ones. Consequently, insofar as Christian institutions limit their impact to the useful arts, they will be welcome. But the moment it becomes clear that their education has moral and spiritual impact as well, there will be problems.

(2) *The internal threat.* In part, because of these external pressures, Christian institutions of higher education are often compromised. In order to meet the requirements (whether real or perceived) of the power structure, they adjust their educational standards downward, diminishing the importance of faith. Like politicians, they figure that “unless I am in a position of influence, I can do no good; and unless I make a few compromises, I will not be in a position of influence.”

But that is the least of the problems affecting the integrity of Christian colleges and universities. The stronger force, by far, is the intellectual milieu, which acts upon scholars in a far more insidious fashion. And that is the operative word: fashion. Relatively few scholars can resist the intellectual trends. It’s understandable. We are social creatures. We like a good party. And not many of us want to be the skunk at the party. The result is sometimes a faculty of chameleons—as pious as you like for the folks back home (who pay the bills), but Sadducean in their approach to the academic disciplines.

(3) *The religious mix of students.* If a Christian college serves only as a “hot house” for children from Christian homes, a place to protect them in their early years from the carnality and corrosive ideas associated with secular institutions, it will not be of much help in world missions. And that, of course, has been the attraction of most Christian colleges in the West, which have only recently begun to emerge from their defensive, fundamentalist shell.

On the other hand, if a Christian college is attended predominantly by nonbelievers, as was the case in India when Duff and his fellow Scots first got established, evangelization

will be exceedingly difficult. Peer relationships between sincere believers in Christ and seekers from other religious backgrounds are essential for effective evangelism. But creating and maintaining a healthy balance between the two is not easy.

(4) *The high cost of higher education.* Cost-benefit analysis is inescapable in today’s world, even in the area of evangelization. It’s also useful—to a point. God probably doesn’t care any more for the Christian spendthrift than he does for the Christian tightwad; either one wastes the resources entrusted to us for his purposes.

So it is right to ask if Christian colleges and universities represent a good investment for world missions. The reality is that they are costly. Compare a college with a church, for example. A church can get along with just one pastor for, say, 400-500 parishioners; a college needs a professor for perhaps every 20 students. A church can get by with just one building, plus an educational wing; a typical small college will have a dozen buildings or more. The comparison is not lost on investors in world missions. Nor should it be. And the fact that most western churches would fold if subject to a comparable cost-benefit analysis—dollars spent per convert, for example—doesn’t change the picture for Christian colleges and universities: they’re expensive.

(5) *The relationship between faith and learning.* On this matter, two questions must be asked. First, what can a Christian liberal arts college do that no other institution can? Second, how many Christian liberal arts colleges are doing that? If the aim of a Christian college is simply to provide “a good education plus biblical studies in an atmosphere of piety,” as a friendly critic described the situation at many institutions, the opportunity is largely wasted.² Good education is available elsewhere at less expense (state-subsidized institutions) and with more prestige (older private institu-

tions); Christian fellowship and Bible study groups can be found at campus ministries and neighboring churches.

The Case for Christian Higher Education

The real value of a Christian college lies in its unique ability to affirm the fundamental unity of all truth, in ways that serve the deepest needs of the human person. This is done by using Christian theology as the starting point of an education directed toward all aspects of culture. This theological commitment does not mean that the scholars in these institutions can afford to be any less open to facts and ideas from outside their immediate religious tradition than other scholars are. On the contrary, Christians must be all the more open to “outside” information, trusting that God is the author of all truth.

The absence of a theological commitment at other institutions should not be mistaken for neutrality or greater openness. Non-Christian scholars are as certain as Christian scholars to approach their disciplines with starting points of some sort. Wherever formal religion is removed as the overarching philosophy of life, other ideas come into play, filling the void. In the 20th century, naturalism, pragmatism, Nazism, Marxism, feminism, narcissism, and multiculturalism have all had their run. One ideology or another, or a combination of them, has generally reigned supreme for a time as the touchstone of scholarly judgment in a vast array of academic disciplines. The only fields of study even remotely safe from such assumptions are technical ones, such as engineering, chemistry, physics, math, and medicine. But engineers, scientists, mathematicians, and medical doctors are by no means safe from interpretations of life offered by the passing parade of philosophical trends, for they must seek meaning for their own lives outside of their disciplines. Occasionally, they are drawn to the most irrational cults and ideologies on the market, perhaps in

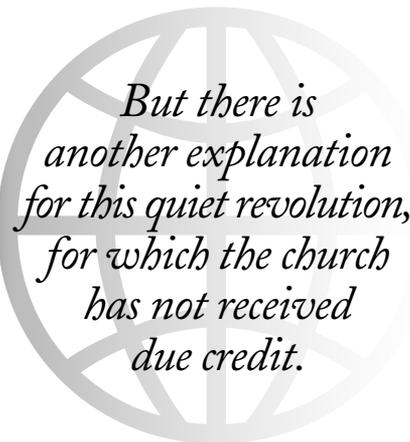
reaction to the analytical rigor of their own work. And all too often, their technical expertise is commandeered or recruited for destructive and dehumanizing ends.

Unless all higher education is abandoned, it should be clear that Christian higher education is needed to instill humane values, or to preserve sanity, on our planet. Obviously, higher education is not being abandoned. It's been around for more than 800 years. And today, "a quiet revolution ... is transforming societies around the world. Enrolments [*Brit*] in higher education have surged in the past two decades, and the trend, if anything, is accelerating rather than slowing down," notes the *Economist*. In China, despite stiff tuition fees, enrollments jumped 200 percent between 1999 and 2001. Throughout the developing world, demand has far outpaced access in recent years. And in many nations within the developed world, nearly half the student population enters post-secondary programs.³

Globalization explains much of this demand. There is almost no place left in the world where the material fruits of the global economy are not known, and once having witnessed the vast cornucopia of consumer goods churned out by the modern economy, almost no one wants to be left out. Ballooning enrollments reflect the growing aspiration around the world for knowledge and skills that open the door to meaningful participation in the global economy.

But there is another explanation for this "quiet revolution," for which the church has not received due credit. Students cannot qualify for universities without first completing primary and secondary programs—and they cannot complete these programs without being literate. Literacy is now taken for granted in most countries. But in the early 1920s only 25 percent of the children born in poor countries had learned to read. By 1999, the numbers were reversed: three out of every four adults in developing nations could read.⁴ Precisely

what portion of this leap the church is responsible for, either directly or indirectly, is hard to say. But there is no denying the church's leading role in this campaign, both in the developing world, during the past century-and-a-half, and in Europe and America before that. Universal literacy is the natural outgrowth of a universal faith



that looks to written revelation as an essential source of guidance for faith and life.

Having done so much to prepare the soil for higher education in the developing world, the question before us today is whether the church is prepared to turn over the entire field, or most of it, to others. On several continents, corporations and western universities are quickly capitalizing on the current demand for higher education. Via the Internet, they are developing massive educational enterprises to attract eager young minds—and dollars. Meanwhile, the church looks on.

The preferable place to look is ahead—and to the past. Given the church's crucial role in bringing the first universities into existence, it may surprise us what clues can be found in that early history for the best use of higher education today.

Back to the Future

What is a university? The word itself, from Latin, means "the whole." In the Middle Ages, it referred to any group with legal status, much like the word "corporation" today. Initially, the word was applied to any guild, such

as those for merchants, craftsmen, artisans, and mechanics. But in time it came to be associated primarily with the guild of "masters and scholars" (teachers and students) engaged in the advanced study of several academic disciplines. "Making the grade" was of course a big part of it. Just as trade guilds ranked members as apprentices, journeymen, and masters, medieval universities ranked them as bachelors, masters, and doctors, conferring degrees (or licenses) as a mark of success and a permit to teach. Besides studying the arts and sciences (based on the classical *trivium* and *quadrivium*), students at the earliest universities specialized in theology, medicine, or law (both civil and canon).

Most medieval universities grew out of the monastic and cathedral schools, the staple of education in the Middle Ages. While these schools were adequate for teaching the seven liberal arts, a new institution was needed to accommodate the 12th-century infusion of knowledge from classical texts and manuscripts—many of them translated and copied by monks, after being obtained from Arab scholars in Spain. As if drawn to a great feast, masters and scholars came together in convenient cities, especially those with cathedral schools, to learn or teach the new knowledge.

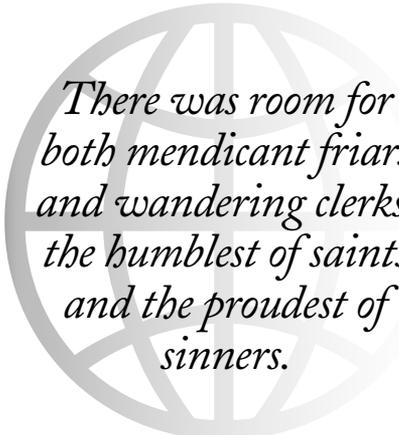
As early as the 11th century, students came to Bologna from all of Italy and beyond the Alps. Their main interest was the revival of Roman law, conjoined with canon law. Famous teachers included Irnerius and Gratian. But it was the students, not the teachers, who organized the union, as it were, at Bologna. By banding together, they were able to protect themselves against escalating rents (driven by the influx of students), the high cost of books (all copied by hand), and exorbitant lecture fees (set by the masters). They also enforced terms of employment upon the masters, ranging from the question of leave (even for a day) to the schedule of materials to be taught. Until the end of the 18th century, the rector of the University at Bologna was a student.

At Paris, where the masters were in charge, the *pièce de résistance* was philosophical theology, rather than law. But all four of the standard disciplines were taught: the arts, law, medicine, and theology. Like many other universities begun in the 13th century, the one at Paris grew directly out of the cathedral school. Geographically, it migrated from Notre-Dame, on the Île de la Cité, to the Little Bridge connecting the island with the Left Bank of the Seine, and from there to the Latin Quarter, where it remains to this day.

Significantly, there were no buildings at the first universities. Students simply rented rooms for lodging and ate at taverns. Lectures were held in churches, rented halls, or in the master's own residence. Administrative details were easily discharged at the Two Swords, the Falcon, the Arms of France, or any number of other taverns—"drinking up the surplus," as they put it, from assorted fees.⁵

Besides having no buildings, the original universities had no endowments, no libraries, no laboratories, no museums, no athletic programs, no performing groups, no boards of trustees, no college catalogues, no student newspapers, and no student societies (other than the university itself). What they did have was a large community of faculty and students—possibly as much as 10 percent of the population of Paris.⁶ This community was dedicated to a course of instruction leading to degrees upon the completion of rigorous exams. Before long, most medieval universities also had colleges—essentially sub-guilds formed by faculty members, each with its own social services, such as dining and residence halls, and its own standards for admission. In most instances, these colleges were established for the benefit of worthy but impoverished scholars. Many of the colleges were endowed. And some, such as those at Oxford (Balliol, Merton) and Cambridge (Peterhouse), offered courses as well as living arrangements.

Clearly, much of what we consider "essential" to a university today is not.



There was room for both mendicant friars and wandering clerks, the humblest of saints and the proudest of sinners.

Many things may be good or helpful or even inevitable in due course. But not essential.

What, then, is essential? Ultimately, the question must be answered by each institution. Nonetheless, I shall make bold to present, in very broad strokes, what appear me to be some of the basic elements of a genuine university:

First, the heart and soul of every university is a *society of students and teachers* committed to learning and teaching together. At a university (unlike an American-type college), some of these scholars must be engaged in work (in graduate schools) at the highest levels of their respective disciplines.

Second, *the academic disciplines* of a university must be carefully chosen for their significance to the human person and wider culture. The debate about "useful" education and "learning for its own sake" is pointless.

Third, there must be basic agreement on what constitutes reasonable *academic standards* and how students and teachers will be evaluated on their performance. These standards must apply to every aspect of higher education: learning, teaching, training, research, collecting, and publishing.

Fourth, in an age that is glutted with printed books and journals, even more attention should be given to the quality than to the quantity of *the university's collection*. (The earliest universities had no libraries. In 1338, the Sorbonne, the most highly

regarded theological institution at that time, had just 1722 volumes.⁷)

So far, nothing has been said about the "essentials" of a specifically Christian university. That is because a Christian university must meet the requirements of any other university, and others besides. Again, there is room for disagreement, even if all of our ideas are based on Scripture. My own recommendations borrow in part from the four agreements of Father Karol Wojtyła and his colleagues in the philosophy department at the Catholic University of Lublin, the only Catholic university behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War.⁸ Another important source of ideas is Arthur Holmes' *The Idea of a Christian University* (1975, 1987). A third source, naturally, is John Henry Newman's classic, *The Idea of a University* (1852).

The six recommendations that follow (on top of the previous four) are not offered as the *sine qua non* of Christian higher education, nor even as *obiter dicta* on the same topic. They are offered simply as a basis for discussion by all persons who wish to give serious thought to Christian universities as a means of world missions:

First, all teachers must have a desire and capacity to *integrate the Christian faith* with their academic disciplines, insofar as the Christian faith is meaningfully related to a given discipline (Ps 111:10; Col 3:16-17).

Second, students and teachers alike must have the *courage to search for truth* in all things, understanding that truth is grounded not only in beliefs but in a *realistic view of the natural and human world*, insofar as the world can be known (Prov 11:1-2; John 1:14; 3 John 4).

Third, since work and learning are for man, not vice versa, education must be *directly tied to human experience in its fullest sense*—spiritual and material, personal and communal (Gen 1:27-28; Ps 8:3-5; Luke 12:6-7).

Fourth, Christian higher education must be seen not merely as a project of “the ancient and universal company of scholars” but of “*the communion of saints*” (Mt 5:17; Rev 1:8; 6-7).

Fifth, *Christian ideas must not only be taught and studied, but lived*, finding particular expression in the personal lives of those entrusted with the responsibility to educate others (Mt 23:27-28; 2 Peter 1:5; James 2:20).

Sixth, as a means of world missions, the Christian university must “welcome the stranger,” not simply as a matter of admissions policy but, more importantly, by creating *an atmosphere of freedom, joy, and love* (Deut 10:19; Mt 9:10-13; 11:19; John 15:9-11; 2 Cor 3:17).

On this last point, the medieval university stands apart for its remarkable balance. It was far more open to religion than most of our secular universities are today. And it was far more open to sinners than most of our religious ones are today. There was room for both mendicant friars and wandering clerks, the humblest of saints and the proudest of sinners. The better known, of course, are those who broke the rules. The Goliardi, in particular, made a mark in that most Christian of times for their satirical verse, crude manners, ribald humor, and convivial spirit:

We in our wandering,
Blithesome and squandering,
Eat to satiety,
Drink with propriety;
Laugh till our sides we split,
Rags on our hides we fit;
Jesting eternally,
Quaffing infernally.⁹

Add the wine, the tune, and the refrain—Tara, tantara, teino!—and you’re almost there again. But that was just one part of a larger mosaic. Other scholars left their mark on life with a steadier hand. The more serious student did not wander from Paris for a morsel of theology, and from there to Salerno for a bit of medicine, and from there to Bologna for a dainty of law. More likely,

he stayed put for many years at a stretch to absorb the deepest learning from the best and brightest of mentors. If necessary, he copied his books by hand, hours on end by the light of a candle, until at last he had amassed, like the clerk of Oxford immortalized by Chaucer, his modest collection of “twenty bokes clad in black or reed.”

For such as these, the Community of Poor Masters and Scholars, a college for theologians later known as the Sorbonne, was formed in 1257. The idea was to provide the necessities—room, board, books, lectures, and eventually a library—to serious students without means of their own. It was one of the first colleges (of 68, by the year 1500) at the University of Paris. Its founder, the distinguished professor, preacher, and confessor to King Louis IX, Robert de Sorbon, once delivered a famous sermon comparing the examination of students with the Last Judgment. Among the many parallels drawn in this sermon was the following, courtesy of Charles Homer Haskins:

Robert begins with the statement that if any one decides to seek the *licentia legendi* at Paris ... he would much like to be told by the chancellor, or by someone in his confidence, on what book he would be examined. Just as he would be a crazy student indeed, who, having found out which book this was, should neglect it and spend his time on others, even so is he mad who fails to study the book of his own conscience, in which we shall all, without exception, be examined at the great day.¹⁰

In much the same vein, John Calvin, a famous alumnus of the University of Paris, wrote that “true and sound wisdom consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”¹¹ What other university besides a Christian one can blend so well these two necessities of life? And what other Christian institution besides a university can help us apply this knowledge to as many areas of life? Clearly, it is time for Christians to recover the lost vision of the university as a means of missions, for the sake of the church and for the sake of the world. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ India now has more than 240 colleges and universities begun by Christians, according to Dr. Ralph Winter (conversation, 14 October 2002). China has far fewer, but not for lack of effort by mission boards, churches, and both faculty and students at sister colleges in the West prior to the communist takeover in 1949. St John’s College (Episcopal) opened in Shanghai in 1879. A college in Tung Chow, east of Beijing, was opened by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (Congregational) in 1890. A Presbyterian college was started in Canton in 1890. In 1910, the University of Nanking was formed with the merger of three colleges, including a Methodist institution begun in 1899. Many other examples can be cited, including Shandong Christian University (1898), West China Union University (1906), and Ginling College (1915). What is noteworthy for our purposes, however, is the neglect of Christian higher education as an instrument of world missions in the second half of the 20th century. From World War II until the 1990s, western churches and mission boards attached almost no importance to the idea of using Christian higher education as a means of bringing a well-rounded Christian message to other peoples and cultures of the world.

² Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987): 5.

³ *Economist* (23 September 2002).

⁴ *Economist* (8 November 2001).

⁵ Charles Homer Haskins, *The Rise of Universities* (NY: H. Holt and Co., 1923; New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 2002): 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xxiii. Lionel S. Lewis, in his Introduction to Haskins’ newly published book, cites this figure as “one estimate.”

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 53.

⁸ A brief summary is found in George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Cliff Street Books, 2001): 133f.

⁹ Haskins, *Rise of Universities*, p 117.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 63f.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1.