



Developing a Christian Mind

**Terry Halliday interviews Donald Hay,
a founder of Discovering a Christian Mind (DCM)
at Oxford University.**

27 July 2018

Donald Hay was an active member of the University of Oxford Department of Economics, 1970-2000. His research interests included applied industrial economics, and the interface between Christian ethics and economics. His published works include with Derek Morris, an advanced textbook, *Industrial Economics and Organisation: Theory and Evidence* (second edition, 1991) and [Economics Today: A Christian Critique \(2004\)](#). He also maintained an interest in the reform of competition policy in the UK. In 2000 he became the first Head of the Division of Social Sciences at Oxford University and subsequently acted as Pro Vice Chancellor for Planning and Resources. He is a founder of the program, Developing a Christian Mind, to enable Christian graduate students, researchers and academics (across all disciplines) to begin to integrate their faith and their academic activities. Further details can be found at www.dcmoxford.org.

Terry

Thank you for the opportunity to learn more about the vision and practices of DCM which have inspired people from many parts of the world. When was DCM founded?

Donald

We experimented with efforts to inspire academics and graduate students to integrate their faith and learning in the 1990s but they didn't work as well as we hoped. DCM has been functioning more or less in its current format since 2008.

Terry

Oxford has many distinguished Christian academics, including theologians, as well as student groups. What was missing?

Donald

Two things. Many distinguished Christian academics didn't see that there was an issue of integration for them to consider. That was partly because many of them came from evangelical backgrounds, and they saw their Christian commitment to be focused on their local church. Where there was discussion of integration, especially among the scientists, it tended not to be a community activity, but one-on-one. There was no sense of joint activity within the campus with a common agenda.

Terry

Do you mean that there were few university or cross-university conversations among Christian academics?

Donald

There tended not to be.

Terry

You had an earlier effort at creating something like DCM in the 1990s. You have said it didn't work. Could you say why not?

Donald

The main reason was that we needed scale to do it well. Neither Alister McGrath nor I had the time to organize a large scale program.

Terry

Why was large scale important?

Donald

We tried to do it within a church rather than the university. That meant it didn't attract people from across all the churches. Also, we found we could not do it as an additional course – because this didn't allow enough time to get as deeply into issues as they required.

Terry

What led you personally, in your own career and as a senior academic leader at Oxford, to hear a new call? I have heard that you retired a little earlier than you might have in order to devote your energies to DCM.

Donald

Effectively I did take early retirement. I had scheduled my retirement at age 60 because I saw one or two older academics who got weary as they continued into their 60s. More importantly, I wanted to do other things in life, and founding DCM was one. Actually I was pulled back into

Oxford university administration as a pro-Vice Chancellor for three years, but I agreed to do it only on a part time basis.

Terry

Did you see your choice to retire early, then or now, as a Christian call?

Donald

I do now, looking back. Then I felt I had achieved what I wanted to achieve as a scholar, university teacher, and administrator. I felt you need to stop, rather than wind down or peter out. So there was an element of closure to my academic career.

Terry

Would you view this conscious decision as a providential moment because God was leading you in new directions?

Donald

Yes, definitely. Stepping down allowed me an opportunity I could not have otherwise seen. Furthermore, the pro-Vice Chancellor position gave me great contacts across the senior levels of university administration. I had a name people recognized. I was trusted to try out new things.

Terry

So, looking back, the pro-VC position equipped you as a kind of Godly provisioning? And retirement gave you the space to leverage it into your vision for DCM?

Donald

Exactly.

Terry

Why did you call this initiative “Discovering a Christian Mind”?

Donald

We puzzled for a long time over the name. We liked the idea of “discovering” – it connoted an unfolding process that never stops. You have to work at it from the beginning to the end of your career. Calling it “a” Christian mind rather than “the” Christian was a deliberate choice. It seemed presumptuous to call it “the” Christian mind, as if there were only one mind to be discovered, so “a” opened up to a diversity of Christian understandings and therefore expanded the space for dialog among those with different understandings.

Terry

You mentioned that the 1990s experiment, running a program as a course or weekly or monthly gathering, didn’t work. What structure did work?

Donald

After experimenting with different formats we eventually settled on two weekend conferences each year. The first focused broadly on integration of faith and learning as a vocation. The

second focused more specifically on clusters of disciplines, and points of theological engagement particularly salient to the humanities or natural sciences or social sciences, and so on.

Terry

I understand that the first DCM meeting in any academic year focuses on the theology. You have said in your video, [The Vision and History of Developing a Christian Mind](#) that “the idea is not doctrine as you might be taught in a theological college but Christian theology as a worldview, as a way of understanding the world.” Can you describe core elements or features of those sessions?”

Donald

In the first gathering we begin by challenging participants to engage in integration, i.e., you cannot live in two worlds. You cannot rigidly separate your life of faith and your life as a scholar or researcher. Alister McGrath, an Oxford theologian, makes that point for us very well, for example, in the video of his 2017 [introductory lecture](#) to a DCM conference. [Nigel Biggar](#), also a theologian, makes a similar point autobiographically. Second, we introduce the students and faculty to core theological themes—creation, the image of God, the fall, salvation, and eschatology.

Terry

Do you follow pretty much the same curriculum and cover the same topics each year?

Donald

Yes. We have the most difficulty with the topic on salvation. We have tried a session on epistemology but without success. We would like to have a session on the people of God, both in the Old and New Testaments, but it has not proved possible to find a presenter. It’s hard to know why those doctrinal themes in particular are difficult to address.

Terry

On salvation and epistemology, what have the theologians addressed?

Donald

Well, the cross is central. But people find it very difficult to relate it to their disciplines. Epistemologies are just too broad, there is just too much variation across the disciplines. If you start with a theological /philosophical topic like “truth,” it is a long way from what people actually do in their disciplines.

Terry

Who presents those topics?

Donald

They are nearly always presented by theology faculty at Oxford. To be honest the theologians are not always successful because sometimes they cannot get out of their theological mindset to address the larger worldview questions. There is a tendency to retreat into theological categories.

Terry

Is this not so much a problem of categories, but of difficulties of translating to other disciplines?

Donald

That's right. We have had good talks on the image of God, and the fall. Creation is a bit more of a problem because many people have hang-ups about evolution and the discussion descends too quickly into apologetics. It is interesting that eschatology, with an emphasis on hope, is of considerable interest to the participants.

Terry

What is the format you have adopted for the first weekend conference?

Donald

We have several sessions, each with the same rhythm: (1) a presentation by an Oxford academic, (2) general Q&A in the whole group, then (3) small group discussions.

In the academic presentation we encourage the speakers to be pedagogic. Even quite committed Christian students may find the idea of a Christian mind in their scholarship completely new to them. Some even are surprised by the idea that there might be a systematic theology that can engage their field. For some students, theological themes are completely new.

Terry

Do you mean they might be strong in their knowledge of the Bible, but they don't have a grasp of big themes in theology that span the Bible?

Donald

That's right. Reading the Bible principally for personal and corporate spiritual growth doesn't go far enough to instruct Christian scholars how to think theologically.

After the presentation there is usually a period of questions. Then students go into discussion groups which are usually led by students who previously have done the course. The student section leaders are given a structured set of questions or issues to pursue with their small groups.

Terry

How does the second DCM event differ from the first?

Donald

We break into disciplinary clusters. And the focus is much more on integration.

For example, on Day 1 for the social sciences track we have a session on human nature in theology and in social science disciplines. Another session is on political authorities, looking at theological materials and the social sciences. Then a session on social ethics – are there

Christian social ethics which relate to the whole community, to institutions, rather than individuals only?

Terry

Do you follow the same rhythms as the first conference?

Donald

Yes. A presentation, followed by open session questions, followed by small group discussions.

On the 2nd day of this conference, for the social scientists we select a theme and then ask Christian academics to talk about it. For example, in one recent year the theme was migration. In 2018 it was trust. In 2019 it will consider attacks on expertise—can social science knowledge be trusted?

Terry

What is the format for these thematic sessions?

Donald

We begin with a roundtable where a panel of 3-4 people make short presentations. The panelists discuss amongst themselves before discussions open up to the students and other attendees. This works well in the social sciences. I am less familiar with what happens in the other streams.

Terry

Do the same people come back year after year during their post-graduate work?

Donald

About 50% come back each time.

Terry

How do you get faculty to participate? In many universities faculty are often remote from Christian engagement or say they are too busy.

Donald

I have two comments.

First, at the beginning of the DCM program, I could leverage my personal contacts and reputation in the university. If I had tried to do it 10 years earlier it would not have been so successful.

Terry

So your seniority mattered?

Donald

Yes, it got me a hearing. Even so it was often a bit of a struggle—some said “we are too busy” – some didn’t get the concept. They might say “I don’t see this as a priority for my Christian

commitments. Or, I am not sure how faith and scholarship fit together.” Parenthetically, it is interesting to me that junior faculty are much more likely to get the concept. The difficult nuts to crack are those who have been around for 25 years plus. Perhaps they are too set in their ways. In effect they are saying, “I’ve navigated around this issue. I don’t need further suggestions on how to be a Christian academic.” Or, “This looks like a huge amount of work to do”.

Second in some disciplines there are too few Christian academics. The same people get weary of being approached year after year – people who’ve already participated.

Terry

I understand that DCM is directed to graduate students and faculty. Why are undergraduates not included?

Donald

In my experience of teaching undergraduates intensively in tutorials, they are not far enough advanced in the disciplines to handle these questions adequately.

Terry

Do you think it is not too early to sow the seed of integration? After all, at Oxford I imagine you are working with very bright undergraduates.

Donald

Yes, they are very bright but they don’t generally have their heads around the whole discipline. Many of the brightest could cope, but many in the middle would struggle. So that would lower the standard of presentations. To do this for undergraduates you would have to do something quite different. Also, Oxford terms are very short and incredibly intensive so the students are too hard pressed to take on this extra challenge.

Terry

If some of the parameters are changed, could a DCM be designed to work for undergraduates?

Donald

I think the problem is still the lack of understanding. There will be large areas of their disciplines where they don’t fully comprehend what is going on.

Terry

How does DCM relate to local churches whose congregations include many of the same graduate students and faculty?

Donald

Before I started I made a point of talking to senior pastors and ministers in all the key churches about what we planned with DCM. I made absolutely clear that we had in mind a division of labor. We were not taking away their pastoral and teaching roles. We are offering what they as a church could not offer.

Terry

Were they persuaded?

Donald

Yes. I leveraged my personal reputation. I had been around for a long time and people in the local church communities knew me.

Terry

What kinds of resources – infrastructure, financial, other – are needed to underwrite DCM in its present format?

Donald

For venues, we have always used university premises. They are more expensive than churches but being independent of a given church is important. I didn't want DCM associated with a given church.

Terry

Did you want a kind of neutrality?

Donald

Yes. If I had done it a big evangelical church we would not have attracted Roman Catholics, who have much to contribute on key topics.

Terry

Is it also important to have the event prominently situated inside the university?

Donald

This is very important. It makes the point that DCM is a proper university activity.

As far as staffing is concerned, I began the program committing about 50% of my time to it, and I hired a grad student for about a day a week. Now we have a couple of administrative people part-time—and I reckon they amount to about 70% fulltime equivalent.

Altogether that has added up to a budget of about £30,000. Staff are expensive. Hiring the venues are expensive. We pay the price for venues that colleges could otherwise get by renting out to outside groups: so to be inside the university the fees for the venues cannot be avoided.

Terry

From your experiences of more than a decade of DCM activities, what are the institutional conditions you believe are necessary for DCM to work?

Donald

I see four institutional conditions.

1. You need enough committed Christian academics inside the university—a kind of critical mass.

2. You need at least the tacit consent of university management.
3. You must get buy-in from area churches.
4. And this can probably only work in a residential university community. If people have to travel daily distances, it would be incredibly hard to run something like this. For instance, it would be really difficult to run DCM in London. People live all over the place. It is just much harder.

We have a high level advisory board or steering group of senior academics who have exercised leadership in the university. They are very useful in actively being involved. But they are also an important 'protection' policy – if someone in the higher echelons of administration asks, "what is this, why are they doing this inside the university," we can respond, "We have senior academics who consider it entirely proper." So we are insured to some extent against attacks from inside the university.

Terry

Can you imagine a thinner version of DCM operating in other circumstances?

Donald

I find it hard to think about other contexts.

Terry

Is there theological diversity among faculty leading DCM? If so, how do you deal with it? In fact, do you actually want theological diversity?

Donald

I knew best the theologians who were evangelical Anglicans, so they were my starting point, including scholars such as Nigel Biggar and Alister McGrath. We actually have had quite a few Roman Catholics involved. My view is that they are very orthodox and I think we have common cause with them. On the other hand, there has been a bit of uneasiness with some theology faculty because many of them are quite liberal.

Terry

What are open issues the leaders of DCM continue to grapple with?

The theological presentations at the first conference still need work to ensure that they address the need to provide a theological framework within which to interpret the academic disciplines. It would be good to extend the framework to include salvation and the people of God. Epistemology remains an issue, and it is hard to find a good way of addressing it. It is hard to sustain the enthusiastic participation of some Christian academic staff who have given a lot over the years. We have still not succeeded in finding a means of sustaining the momentum among participants after the conferences. Students especially are just too hard pressed to do more. My hope is that they will come back to the DCM challenge later when they are settled in an academic or other career.

Terry

Overall, how would you describe the impact of DCM on the development of Christian minds at Oxford?

Donald

The most notable positive is that it has had a large impact on the students. Every year the feedback ranges from “I enjoyed it” to expressions of great enthusiasm. 80% are overseas students. They haven’t encountered anything like it elsewhere. We hoped, but it hasn’t happened yet, that we would stimulate a number of Christian academics to put the concerns of DCM about integration on their personal agenda, and form an academic Christian community within the university, but we haven’t so far been able to create that.

Terry

What would such a community look like?

Donald

There is a lot that can be done with one-on-one meetings between academics in similar areas, encouraging each other, e.g., thinking and writing together. My prayer would be that this could build into groups of like-minded academics who would meet and share their experiences on a regular basis. The difficulty, as always, is that many faculty are very hard pressed with research, teaching and administration.

Terry

Do you maintain a hope for adaptations of the DCM model elsewhere?

Donald

Yes. It is perfectly clear that this doesn’t exist elsewhere in quite the same way. It would be great if Christian academics in other universities picked up the concept and developed a program to suit their local circumstances.

Terry

Finally, what advice would you give persons in other universities who want to sponsor an event of this sort?

Donald

I have two thoughts. First, it must be faculty-led, and not led by churches or para-church organizations. Otherwise it won’t have a scholarly reputation inside the university and that is not helpful for the students. An advantage of DCM is that they see speakers as one of them: they are in the faculty, department, library, lab, just “like us.” If run by a para-church organization, the people who are running it are not “like us.” Second, you have to get commitment across faculties, including theologians. Why across faculties? Because it needs to be cross-disciplinary to cover the faculties broadly. And why theologians? Because Christian academics in other fields don’t know enough to do it themselves. I was hugely advantaged in my engagement with integration by knowing Oliver O’Donovan and Nigel Biggar, who graciously guided my theological thinking. Even so, it was hard work.

Terry

Thank you. This is both inspiring and encouraging.

Author: Donald Hay

Date: 27 July 2018

Event organizer:

Event topic: Discovering a Christian Mind

Location: University of Oxford

Country: UK

Participants:

Language: English