

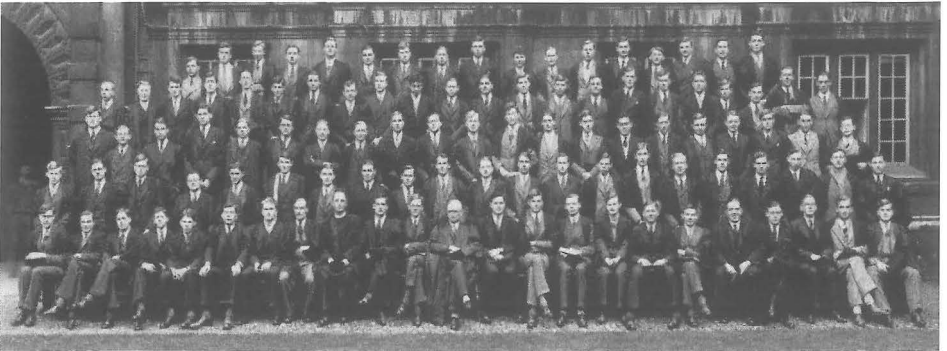
Then & Now: Thomas Merton and Cambridge

Susanne Jennings

Among the old family photographs included in Michael Mott's exhaustive biography of Thomas Merton, there is one that is especially memorable. It is an outdoor scene of his father and paternal grandmother smiling down at Merton's younger brother, John Paul. Merton is also present but has deliberately separated himself by ignoring either his family or the



camera, staring off into the distance, his line of vision entirely his own. He was four years old. Fourteen years later, Merton's matriculation photo at Clare College, Cambridge tells a similar story. One of a vast number of students, on the end of a row, his is the only face looking away from the camera which, paradoxically, means that he is the only person who stands out.



Much that is known about Merton's chequered time at Cambridge and of the great antipathy he felt about the university, the place itself and his time there which lasted just one academic year derives from his own account in the *Seven Storey Mountain*. As with so much of his writing, his emotions are projected through the weather. For him, the bucolic 'Backs' under a blue sky – one of the many idyllic images associated with Cambridge – were nothing but an illusion; the Cambridge he experienced

was one of 'damp and foetid mists' which poisoned his youth. By all accounts, a change came over him from the outset: he behaved recklessly by drinking too much, running up bills he could not afford to pay, missing lectures and eventually, getting a poor young woman pregnant. All this after an apparently settled time at Oakham, a small public-school set in the Midlands.

Cambridge in the early 1930s has been depicted as a rarefied place of privilege. At Clare, where he had been awarded an exhibition to read Modern Languages, there is little in the archives that survives his time there except for his matriculation photo, his signature in the exeat book, and some random photos of his birthplace in Prades, France. While at Clare, he apparently only went to a single service at the college's 18th century chapel during which it was not religion that caught his attention but the gracefulness of the chapel's fine architectural lines. What little is known of Merton's time at Cambridge is that he was called upon perhaps more than once to 'explain' himself to the college tutor and Dean of Chapel, the Reverend William Telfer.¹ What we do not know is whether the Reverend Telfer or others with a duty of care towards students sought to question whether Merton's apparent lack of focus might be due to unprocessed grief and unresolved issues surrounding the deaths of his mother (when he was just a child of six) and his father less than a decade later and just three years before he became an undergraduate. One can only speculate whether Merton's short and disastrous time as an undergraduate at Cambridge was, in fact, a kind of mental breakdown. A lingering question is whether someone kind and approachable and charged with the pastoral care of students may have made a difference. The obvious person in Merton's case would have been the Dean.

Cambridge now

Cambridge in the 2020s appears light years away from the collegiate university from which Merton fled never to return. For one thing, its student body is increasingly international and drawn from a more inclusive mix of private and state schools. Strikingly, the provision of pastoral care is generous, though there are variations from college to college. As in Merton's day, students have recourse to their college tutor and the Dean of Chapel &/or College Chaplain, but they also have access to the college nurse, student welfare reps, the University Student Counselling Service, and, for those religiously affiliated with faith traditions outside Anglicanism or Christianity, an impressive array of university chaplaincies and societies.

It is with the religious and pastoral elements of chaplaincy care for students with which this article is most concerned. In Merton's day, mental health issues and bereavement counselling would not have been referred to in those terms and would almost certainly have been the province of the college chaplain. Following his father's cremation, Merton spoke of his faith as having 'fallen away' to be replaced by what, at the time, he perceived as a new spirit of 'freedom'. To try and weigh up where students were, emotionally and in terms of faith or no faith, compared to what comes through from Merton's experience of Cambridge, I spent time speaking individually with four college chaplains from Clare, Queens', Selwyn and Downing and the Assistant Chaplain at the Cambridge University Catholic Chaplaincy at Fisher House.² I wanted to see what may have shifted or remained the same nearly a century on from Merton's time at Cambridge.

Clare College

Reverend Dr Mark Smith

At Merton's alma mater, it seemed that the entire college was encased in scaffolding. Having arrived a few minutes early, I visited the chapel where a weak winter sun fell across the black and white slate floor tiles. Reached via a beautiful antechapel in which can be found memorials to students who had lost their lives in both World Wars, it was empty save for a music scholar who could be heard practising overhead in the organ loft. A painting of the Annunciation by Giovanni Battista Cipriani hung at the far end of the chapel - a reminder that the chapel, along with the rest of the college, was dedicated by its foundress, Lady Elizabeth de Clare to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Soon, I was met by the Dean of Chapel, Mark Smith, a congenial presence who led the way to his temporary wood-panelled rooms adjacent to the chapel.

He spoke about how, as Dean of Chapel for the past five years, he has been integrated institutionally into the life of the college which he thought partly attributable to Clare's religious foundation. Remarking on the composition of current students, he said that the majority 'come with little or no faith background. The big difference between now and the students of the 1930s 'is that your default is someone without faith, which is not to say that they are necessarily atheistic or secular but simply, they are nothing. They are a blank slate [religiously speaking].' Ministering to students now was a 'double-edged sword. You're starting



from scratch, but you don't have the baggage of, oh well, I've always been to church. I know what it's about and it's not for me ... that kind of thing. So, you're not un-teaching people.' He sees his style of ministry as essentially 'missional because you have people who are searching for some sort of meaning or purpose in life, precisely because they have not been formed by a religious tradition that might otherwise give them some answers or give them a firm foundation on which to stand.'

Asked how the pandemic had affected the students at Clare, he said that 'for some students, it did bring thoughts about death to the forefront of their minds. But more broadly than that, I think it uncomfortably destabilised that basic confidence that life would be settled and secure, with regular rhythms, peaks and troughs. And it was that "shaking of the foundation", if I can put it that way, that I think helped to make room for deeper searching about where real identity and security can be found — security of the sort that even Covid couldn't touch or imperil. So, I'd say it opened up fruitful conversations and it led to my decision to preach the Michaelmas Term sermon series on the theme of "hope" — as in, what does real hope look like in the face of Covid?'

As is the case with other college chaplaincies at Cambridge, the job description of Dean or Chaplain often expands to include other overlapping roles. For Mark, in addition to being Dean of Chapel, he is also Director of Studies in Theology with an academic specialism in the Early Church and a tutor. He finds this advantageous because it allows him to get to know students beyond the confines of chaplaincy, allowing for a more 'seamless integration of [the] Dean within the wider College life'. He feels that his primary purpose at Clare 'is to be a pastor [...]. It's a kind of seed-planting ministry. Fundamentally my job in Chapel is to talk to people about the good news in Jesus Christ and things will follow from that, it's something I don't want to lose. I want to do that sensitively in a warm and welcoming way allowing room for disagreement or reflection.' What kinds of questions is he asked by students? 'I do get questions which require pastoral unpicking. As in if someone comes and says, "What do you think about X, Y and Z?" there's often something deeper going on there. As a pastor, rather than give a knee jerk reaction, you often say, Look, let's have a coffee, let's talk things through. So, often the intellectual gotcha question is actually [about something else]. But equally, I do believe there are intellectual answers to questions that students have, and I want to give proper responses, not 'just believe, and it doesn't matter if it's not true or if it doesn't make sense.'"

In the context of chapel services, he has found that students respond more positively to those held after dark such as Compline and has

extended this to Ash Wednesday and All Souls. Liturgically, he is 'naturally averse to silence' which he puts down to being a reformed protestant. He thinks it can represent a 'power play somehow' or simply be uncomfortable. 'You can get silence right or wrong [...]. There was one preacher last year who left such a long spiritual silence that you thought, Is he all right?' He also spoke of the difficulties of 'living in a student culture, a wider Western culture, where it's very hard to hear moral absolutes, or an objective truth claim without that feeling oppressive. There's a strong sense of emotional jump from an objective truth claim to an oppressive kind of thought system. And I think the way around that is to show that the person communicating the truth is themselves not out on some power trip or out to coerce or dominate [...]. I think that the student issue would be around authenticity. Students are very good at sniffing out authenticity, or the lack of it.'

Speaking about what was of concern to students just now, he thought that 'the greatest anxiety centres around identity as in: 'How do I find a solid identity? How do I know who I really am in this world? Where is my rock? And where do I go when everything else seems to have been taken from me?' He believes that in addition to the 'roller coaster' of being at university and without the traditional structures of belief for making sense of things, 'there is a deep existential searching for something which is not merely tied to worldly circumstances such as popularity and academic achievement. [When] things are going well, the students aren't knocking on my door because everything's fine in the world with life, but when these are suddenly taken from you, when the bad exam result hits or [...] people of your friendship group have disowned you because of something you've said or done, then you think hang on a second, that was where I was rooting my identity and security. What happens now? So, I think existentially, that's the issue. And that's a sign of secularism.'

Downing College Reverend Dr Keith Eyeons

Founded in 1800, Downing College lies within a 20-acre site in the heart of Cambridge just off a very busy street which is home to an increasing number of small ethnic eateries and cafes. Framed by tall iron gates, the college grounds are an oasis of calm with their neo-classical buildings, great spreading trees and beautifully tended grounds. Keith's room at the top of a staircase is a hospitable space being



light and airy and filled with books. In common with the other chaplains interviewed, he undertook degrees at Cambridge including a PhD on Karl Barth's interpretation of John's Gospel. Having come from a background where religion did not feature, he came to religious belief, being baptised in the Church of England and ordination through his interest in the Sciences, most notably, astronomy. Prior to the pandemic, it was not unknown for him to share the sense of awe that astronomy could spark by helping students navigate the college's telescope.

As the longest serving chaplain I interviewed, he had witnessed a gradual change over his 20 years at Downing – change, which partially reflected the roughly 60-year decline of the Church of England. He felt that the church had been 'struggling against the tide' of a very evident process of secularisation. Thoughtful, and at times self-deprecating, he observed that today's students were 'lots politer' ('perhaps because I'm older and they're scared of me?') than earlier on. 'I'm argued with a lot less and I miss that.' Continuing in this vein, he said that he 'miss[ed] the high point of the "New Ageism" [which] generated argument and led to interesting conversations about the nature of reality and goodness through which we found some common ground. The changes in the way people interact now meant that 'people are scared to talk about anything religious because it could be offensive ... so, no one must question.' Students, he found, seemed to speak about life and meaning less openly. By contrast and as a consequence of the University's increasingly international year-on-year intake, students from other cultures were more openly curious about Christianity 'and about tradition ... they're more open to investigate things.' The British 'don't talk about it [Christianity] nor do they seem to know much about it.' What he termed the 'closing down of rational discussion' at Cambridge could also be traced to the backlash that could be fuelled by social media. Greater tendency towards judgementalism could mean that freely expressed opinions 'might result in being piled on by thousands', a prospect few would wish to experience, let alone repeat.

He spoke about his own time as an undergraduate which he had experienced as a 'gift' and about the implications of the introduction of tuition fees and student loans. Arts & Humanities subjects were under threat in favour of STEM subjects which could lead to lucrative future careers.³ 'From my perspective, they've been under attack from left and right politically [with] the right saying that you need to become engineers to contribute to the economy, and the left has said that really, we should be ashamed of our culture. So, the idea that you can come and read the great books of western culture for 3 years and you will emerge a better

person is harder and harder to believe in today.' Opinions were increasingly black and white with no room in which to demur or explore a more nuanced approach.⁴ This often led to self-censorship, creating another kind of anxiety. Students were naturally also worried about the same issues that concerned those of Thomas Merton's generation such as the environment and the possibility of nuclear warfare. With a 24/7 news cycle, their fears are magnified. As chaplain, Keith has attempted to assuage their fears by pointing out historical crises such as the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis which did not end in the annihilation of life on earth. He mentions the pandemic and about its culminative effect which is still an unknown. 'I think a lot of them are quite scared about the state of the world but in a way that they don't really have the tools to grapple with.' He references this with the four stained glass windows in the college chapel which depict the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. 'They were donated in the 1960s, quite close to the darkest point of the Cold War [...] and I don't have any evidence that there's a direct logic behind them being there but it comes from an era that was really grappling with a sense that you might go to bed and there would be nobody alive in the morning because all the missiles were poised and ready to destroy us all. That's the thing I can point to students now who think we are in this uniquely apocalyptic kind of situation.'

From the perspective of college chaplaincy, what most engaged students were those services and activities which allowed for a certain degree of individual receptiveness such as Compline 'which, unlike listening to a sermon, makes no demands [...]. They can just sit in the quiet and the candlelight and let it wash over them.' For similar reasons, Evensong also spoke to some. Attendance at Compline now runs to between 20-30 'whereas before Covid, we were having to put out extra chairs for 100 or so.' One ironic example of what Covid restrictions meant for a college choir was that social distancing measures meant that there was only room in the chapel for the choir. 'Things fell apart because of Covid. I have a theological discussion group that I've just managed to get going again.' Intriguingly, the most popular of his initiatives is 'Keith's Café' which has been running about 15 years and takes place on the steps to the entrance to the chapel. There, members of the college meet on Wednesday afternoons to interact without pressure or expectation over coffee and doughnuts. 'It attracts more than 100 people ... It has no spiritual content whatsoever but is about being hospitable which is how I try to run my ministry, really. People can engage with me and with the chapel on whatever level they want to.'

He finds that students talk about mental health far more than before.

How, I wondered, did they grapple with the reality of death? Was it something they talked about? ‘They find that very difficult. We have had deaths of students while I’ve been here and so I’ve been very much involved in memorial services and other events to help them through that. In fact, as you came in here if you looked in the gardens you would have possibly seen a little tree that we planted three years ago commemorating a student who died right in the heart of lockdown when we weren’t even allowed gatherings of more than fifteen people outdoors. I’m not sure how much they managed to talk about it. They do have a lot of support here. And they do talk to me. To a certain extent’.

Since Keith was an undergraduate at Clare, I asked if he was familiar with Merton. He wasn’t that well-known a figure which he thought, half-seriously, might be down to his having been so unhappy at Clare. Asked the hypothetical question as to how he might have dealt with Merton during his disastrous time at Cambridge, he reflected that though his approach was to try and be as hospitable as possible, the question remained whether this would work with somebody ‘who has an extra layer of bravado and something very complicated going on underneath. The truthful answer is that I wouldn’t be able to get below the bravado.’ However, if someone in Merton’s state had sought him out, ‘I would try to engage as gently and sympathetically with him as I possibly could.’

Queens’ College Reverend Anna Jones

I met with Anna, Chaplain at Queens’ College on a day of bright winter sunshine. She had just been on a walk with a few students which was advertised on the termly Chapel Card as an invitation to ‘walk away the cobwebs’. With an academic background in Music (her MPhil thesis focused on musical literacy in 17th Century England), she went on to follow a career as a college and faculty librarian at Cambridge. Her vocation to the priesthood, for which she undertook Cambridge’s B.Th. degree, came some years later. Ordination at Ely Cathedral was followed by an incumbency spent serving five rural parishes before her appointment at Queens’.



We crossed over the infamous ‘Mathematical Bridge’ and passed through the lovely half-timbered quad known as Cloister Court before going over to the Faith Centre. Housed in a modern self-contained flat given over to the chaplaincy, it overlooks the Cam and even boasts a

terrace. The first room off the entrance hall was what she called a ‘soft space’ where students were free to gather from time to time. When events were held there, she ensured it was also a ‘dry space’ so that those students who didn’t drink (often for religious reasons) were made comfortable in a college environment where drinking was very much a part of the culture.

Asked her thoughts about the much-vaunted decline into secularism, it was her belief that it had not been overstated but that it needed qualifying. Elaborating, she spoke of an ‘unchurched generation’ coming up to Cambridge which posed new challenges for college chaplaincy. She wasn’t convinced that it necessarily pointed to a conscious refusal to embrace religion so much as a ‘lack of awareness’. Students were increasingly coming from backgrounds in which faith did not feature. Additionally, the Religious Studies syllabus at GCSE had become something of a well-meaning journey through relativism with few going on to study RS at A-Level. At Queens’, students reading for the Tripos in Theology and Religious Studies in a typical intake ran to no more than two for which she thought the motivation was culturally rather than religiously driven.

In terms of where she thought students ‘were’ generally-speaking, she had the troubling perception that they were ‘enormously anxious’ with many experiencing mental health issues. This, she believed, was not divorced from the pandemic, the fall-out for which still wasn’t fully understood. She felt that many ‘lacked an anchor’ which she thought a terrifying prospect for a student trying to navigate a political climate which at times seemed ‘almost apocalyptic’. She thought it painful that individuals were not turning to faith as in previous generations during times of extraordinary threat and uncertainty. Why might this be? She thought perhaps it might be explained by fewer wars [in Europe] over the past decades and this having created a false sense of security or simply by a ‘lack of curiosity’ rather than an outright rejection. She felt that there was a ‘strong sense of indifference that leads nowhere and that the frightening world they’re faced with isn’t pushing them towards God.’

As College Chaplain, Anna said that she made a point of always wearing her collar as a visible sign of what she was called there to represent. This led to a discussion of religious dress and a growing affinity with Muslim students, particularly women ‘because we have that in common: expressing faith through dress’. But on the flip side, she found that there were students who had no idea what her collar meant. ‘And so, you know, I say, “I’m the chaplain” and they say, “What does that mean?” I wasn’t expecting that, to be honest’. In addition to being

chaplain, she had also recently been made a tutor which presented double opportunity to contribute to student welfare. Overall, the provision of available help and support for students was, in common with many of Cambridge's thirty-one colleges, very good. At Queens', it's known as the 'Welfare Response Team'. She let the students themselves be her guide should they wish to approach her. '[But]some don't see the point of the chaplain or even recognise them as such ... Some are politely dismissive.'

Asked her thoughts on the 'politicisation' of issues which increasingly discouraged respectful debate, she thought it 'a squandering of intellect, really by retreating from different, issue-driven subjects. You're either black or white and if you don't find yourself in either of them, you withdraw altogether, rather than saying, 'Can we make a grey space?' She sees this withdrawal within the undergraduate population as 'scary' and wishes that these 'intellectually gifted students could be provided with tools or put in more Christian and religious terms, some *wisdom* that provides an anchor to something deeper that might help build some resilience.' She contrasted this with her experience of parish curacy where she had encountered wisdom 'largely among people who had very little education or aspiration in the world but had deep down roots of wisdom, practical wisdom that equipped them well for life. This is what I crave for some of our students who are struggling so much [...]. Because their great gifts and the education with which they've been gifted so far, what they have here, is equipping them but not fully and wholly. And what I'd like to say is that a life of faith can add to that.'

Selwyn College

Reverend Dr Arabella Milbank Robinson

Arabella Milbank Robinson grew up in Cambridge and Virginia and has an academic background in English Literature and Theology — her PhD thesis focused on the role of fear in faith in Medieval English prose, poetry and drama. Just eighteen months into her post at Selwyn College, there was a clear sense of enthusiasm for her role as Dean of Chapel at Selwyn — a role which also encompasses acting



as Chaplain of Newnham College — tempered by a reflexive thoughtfulness. We met on a grey, chilly afternoon in her wood-panelled office overlooking the college's main quad. Asked her impressions of where students were, religiously speaking, she said that few identified as

atheist or agnostic but that those who came from traditional religious backgrounds were in the minority. In conversation, many mentioned the influence of a close relative whose faith had made a lasting impression. In her first year at Selwyn, she put out an open invitation to the new intake to come and meet her and reckons that she saw at least 90 students. Aware of changing perceptions around organised religion, she nevertheless thought it important to close these encounters with a religiously grounded question: 'So do you bring to your time here at University any kind of religious background or spirituality of your own that you might like to explore or deepen whilst you're here?' Surprisingly, no one seemed shocked or offended. Academically engaged students often expressed an interest in religion or the spiritual life along the lines of 'I think it's interesting in history, literature, current events and I'd like to know and understand more about religion.'

Regarding the vexed topic of technology — explicitly, the use of smart phones and social media — and its effect on social interaction, she admitted to being 'quite negative' but had noted a shift. 'A lot of them are now quite suspicious about social media so they're not universally on [it] which is interesting, [and] some seem to have opted out altogether.' She reflected on a visit by an alumnus — now a political correspondent — who had come to screen a film he'd made of a Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. What struck her was that though those on pilgrimage had stripped away everything in order to respect the prescribed religious code of dress, 'they all had their smartphones ... They've let go of all the things that connect you to the world except their iPhones.'

Moving on to the sensitive topic of mental health and crises of faith, Arabella mentioned that during her time as chaplain, there had been student suicides but that these had happened at other colleges. 'And you will always think as a chaplain, what could I have done?' It was, she said, an 'if, and when, probably when kind of question'. Asked if she, personally, had ever suffered a crisis of faith, she said that there was a point when she had but that this hadn't caused her to lose her faith. At that time, she had been living on her own in Paris and recalled it as a 'very lonely and pretty dark time', not least because she was bereft of the usual framework of her life 'where you don't have to ask questions, it's just given.' She emerged from this time with the knowledge that it had shown her of the 'need to turn and return. What I do know is that God has faith in me even when my faith in God is tested.'

Asked about her experience of being approached as a chaplain over crises of faith, she recollected one which involved a student's need to be helped to work through a conflict over their identity from a cultural and

faith perspective. After a few sessions, they turned to literature. 'We just used poetry ... We used Rumi and Hafiz to try and find something that was of her tradition, and [this] opened out onto questions of spirituality and faith. I did think it worked and was interesting, really interesting.' She found that students were anxious overall about the 'big human questions such as how to be forgiven, how to forgive. They are also worried about the state of a world in which there is a climate crisis alongside the bombardment of Gaza and the atrocities of Hamas. Students also have a lot to carry in terms of their anxieties about themselves, especially in the face of academic pressures, and being away from their families.'

We touched on Thomas Merton's experience at Cambridge and I asked hypothetically if he might perhaps have handled things better had there been the kinds of pastoral help available to students now? 'It makes one seriously ask oneself who are the seekers in your community? Are they the ones you think of as seekers or rather the ones desperately painting the town red and drowning?' She saw in Merton's experience a 'lost child, someone looking for direction [but] quite possibly he would just have been seen as a troublemaker or somebody open to discipline rather than needing direction.'

In terms of whether she felt that students were mature in their faith or retained a childhood faith, she responded with a question of her own: 'What exactly is it to be mature in our faith?' She thought that it was partly giving up the search for 'a certain kind of answer [and] moving back to a trust that might be reminiscent of some of the feelings you had as a child. Personally speaking, some of my strongest religious experiences were childhood ones, treasuring those and taking them seriously.' Did students tend to talk much about God? 'Yes, yes, they do but ... I suspect there is a certain nervousness. Maybe we should all be a little nervous talking about God.'

The Cambridge University Catholic Chaplaincy at Fisher House Dr Sr Ann Swales, OP

The day I visited Fisher House, the difference between college and inter-denominational university chaplaincy was palpable.⁵ Situated in two small houses dating back to the 16th Century, the chaplaincy bears no resemblance to its college counterparts. Described on its website as the 'collective spiritual home to all Catholic members of the University', it occupies a space between two busy shopping precincts.



Here, all seemed full of activity with much coming and going. The Chaplain, Fr Paul Keane was just on his way out, a Dominican friar in full habit was standing in the entrance hall and a bicycle was propped against a wall. Dr Ann Swales, OP, Assistant Chaplain and a Dominican nun whom I'd come to interview was deep in conversation with a young man dressed in a suit who was coming up to Cambridge in Michaelmas.⁶ A few minutes later, he went away clutching a term card and she turned her attention to me. In connection with this article for the *Merton Journal*, she thought it a happy coincidence that she had undertaken her undergraduate studies at Merton College, Oxford and more recently, had completed a doctorate on the relationship between the mystery of suffering and our understanding of the nature of the Church, a topic for which, she drew on mid-20th Century and medieval texts including those of Julian of Norwich, at Merton's alma mater, Clare College.

Reflecting on the kinds of pressures students now face, Ann thought the pandemic responsible for a certain amount of what she called 'generational angst' which could be a contributory factor to there being increasingly complex mental health issues among students.' Also implicated were academic, financial and social anxieties, all of which can leave students 'overwhelmed'. While insecurity over appearance or social skills have always featured in university life, the constant focus on image in the age of social media has caused this to be magnified. Though she could see that social media/technology had its uses, it also gave pause for thought. One of these was the part they played in causing younger people to consider the valuing of friendships which she thought 'beautiful'. Less positive was that 'there is also almost a commodifying of friendship and saying that certain kinds of friendship are toxic and should just be got rid of which concerns me.' Against this background, she and the rest of the 4-strong chaplaincy team seek to provide a hospitable environment where students are nurtured pastorally, liturgically, theologically and communally. One of the ways they do this to 'bring a bit of home to students' by cooking supper for a small, invited group each week. Liturgically, there are weekday and weekend Masses including a (new rite) Latin Mass and a Sung English Mass which is so popular with students that it is sometimes difficult to fit everyone into the chapel, a large austere space dominated by a massive and beautiful reconstruction of a 13th Century Cimabue crucifix. Having given away her last Term Card, Ann reeled off the numerous activities, past and present, to which students can participate. These have included series of talks dedicated to the role of faith in literature and in science, a Dante Circle and talks given by eminent Cambridge theologians and historians such as Eamon Duffy.

There is also a weekly student-led event on Thursday evenings called *Apologia* which begins with drinks, dinner and a talk and ends with Compline.

Far from being insular or inward looking on account of its Catholic identity, the chaplaincy participates in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and associated events. Ecumenically, its chaplains celebrate Mass once a term in the university's college chapels and are often invited to preach at Anglican services by the college chaplain. This synergy is not simply beneficial for strengthening ecumenical ties; it can also be a means for the confidential sharing of concerns about a particular student who may have come to the notice of college or Catholic chaplain. It is also not uncommon for student members of Fisher House to be organ scholars or members of a college choir and thus exercise their ecumenism musically. In terms of interfaith, Ann highlighted a recent event in which she and the university's Buddhist chaplain, Rachel Harris conversed on what it is to be human from the perspective of the two different traditions. 'We looked a little at the question of suffering, which both Christianity and Buddhism have rich things to say about. Partly I think because she is a fellow of Clare, Thomas Merton's name was very much in the air throughout. I think that's one of the ways in which he's very interesting – in terms of his kind of openness which was completely faithful to his own Catholic identity – but nevertheless his faithfulness to truth and insights from elsewhere.'

Mention of Merton led to discussion around his troubled time at Cambridge and there being no particular kind of person who was or wasn't welcome at the chaplaincy. 'We do obviously have students who come from all kinds of backgrounds, have all sorts of complicated complex issues when they arrive. [In the case of Merton] I think we would do our best. The idea that we would think we had all the answers to somebody who presented chaotically – we *don't* have all the answers. All we can do is receive that person and accept that person.' Continuing after a thoughtful silence, she said, 'I've been doing a lot of talking recently at different events here, and what it means to say that we're made an image of God. And I think one of the things that it means is to say that we can never – and it always sounds kind of negative, but which I actually think is extraordinarily positive – we can never fully understand each other because if we're made in the image of God, we're made in the image of ultimate mystery. And there is that kind of mystery in all of us which is a reflection of the divine.'

Conclusion

While today's students at Cambridge share many of the same anxieties and pressures as in Merton's day, there are inevitable differences. Many are still susceptible to 'imposter syndrome', — one chaplain I spoke to thought it currently 'endemic' – that sense of its having somehow been a mistake that they had ever been accepted to study at Cambridge. In the early 1930s, as now, they are expected to work incredibly hard within an intensive and highly competitive academic framework. And, in common with students everywhere, they remain vulnerable to homesickness and relationships which can play havoc with their emotions for good or ill. There is also the deeply troubling reality of student suicides which, despite the extensive support network now available, still do sometimes tragically occur. What separates a great many students from the past apart from the twin pressures of finance and career prospects is the lack of exposure to any discernible religious foundation with which to make sense of a world moving at incredible speed into uncharted territory. Leaving home for university as one of an increasingly 'unchurched generation' presents as a bleak, and often terrifying, prospect.

From the student perspective, how easy could it have been to live through a pandemic which effectively upended the 'university experience' they dreamt of, or to try to grapple with the dark side of a technology that plays host to a social media which, at its most toxic, can send a vulnerable person over the edge? How to navigate an increasingly politicised university environment whereby dissenting opinions and respectful debate are essentially closed down or 'cancelled' – therefore, obviating what university has been *for*? Add to that a 24/7 news cycle which thrives on the sensational including fearmongering over the possibility of WWII and nuclear annihilation. Against this background, it is not surprising that the numbers of students afflicted with mental health crises, including those of considerable complexity, have risen exponentially.

Had Merton had recourse in the early 1930s to today's chaplaincy and student welfare network at Cambridge, things may arguably have worked out more favourably for him. Today's students have the advantage of not being stigmatised by the prejudices of the past relating to mental health issues. Additionally, today's chaplaincy can and does offer a more approachable space which students of any and no faith can enter without risk of being judged or proselytised. The challenge lies in identifying a non-coercive means by which to convince them that a foundation rooted in a search for meaning can be both unthreatening and universal.

Notes

1. '[William Telfer] was chaplain of Clare from 1921 but presumably resigned when he became Ely Professor during the war. He was an army chaplain in WW1 and got an MC for conspicuous courage in tending the wounded under fire. He wrote books on patristics and practical divinity. He was elected Master of Selwyn 1946-56 because at that time Selwyn's statutes required the Master to be ordained and because of Selwyn's poverty (the Master needed to have a full salary). [Telfer] was unmarried and brought a vinegary spinster to live in the Lodge with him. I remember few stories about him. He was efficient, courteous but old school formal. No one I ever asked had a bad word to say about him nor a good word to say about him.' [Rev. Prof. John Morrill, email correspondence, 11/04/2024.]
2. All interviews were held in Cambridge in January & February 2024.
3. STEM is an acronym for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.
4. Interestingly, the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge, Dr Deborah Prentice, a psychologist by training, has been actively seeking to safeguard debate and free speech in education by launching the V-C's 'Dialogues' through which the some of the most difficult issues of our times may be safely discussed. — ('the Rules are: we love debate but this is not a debate. This is a dialogue.' CAM, issue 101, Lent Term 2024, p. 15.)
5. Fisher House is named after Bishop St John Fisher, one of the 40 English martyrs and spiritual advisor to Lady Margaret Beaufort, foundress of Christ's and St John's colleges.
6. Women in Catholic chaplaincies are prevented from being formally designated 'Chaplain'. Canon law defines a chaplain as 'a priest to whom is entrusted in a stable manner the pastoral care, at least in part, of some community or special group of Christ's faithful, to be exercised in accordance with universal and particular law' (Canon 564).

The image of Merton's matriculation at Clare College is used with permission of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Thomas Merton Centre at Bellarmine University.

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