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## **Difficult Texts: Ecclesiastes 12: 12 compared with John 21:25: What does a Canon Theologian do?**

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### **Abstract**

Ecclesiastes 12: 12 and John 21: 25 appear to offer starkly contrasting perspectives on the relationship between church and academy. Taken together they prompt reflection on the role of a Canon Theologian within a cathedral.

### **Key Words**

Theology, University, Church, Cathedral, Canon Theologian

‘Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh’. Canon theologians will recognise that we need to do so much more than merely write endless books and lament the low returns on royalties. So what does a Canon Theologian do?’.

The first role of the Canon Theologian, as I see it, is to be symbolic. Within a cathedral, where common ground and sacred space collide, a Canon Theologian represents the conversation between two worlds: the world of Church and the world of Academy. Here are two worlds that ought to understand each other, that ought to enrich each other, but so often fail to cement the right relationship. In Warwick University my faith commitment is looked at by some with suspicion. Those who signed off on the label for my office door carefully omitted the title ‘Revd Canon’. However, the postgraduate learning community for masters and doctoral students convened at Coventry Cathedral openly mixes formation with academic rigour. For some, to see a secular university so closely engaged with the practice of

faith is profoundly problematic. Surely, they muse, academic integrity and academic rigour must be contaminated by such old-fashioned superstitious behaviour. Unfortunately, the standoff between the Academy and the Church is not all one-sided. The Church, too, may be weakened by fear of academic scrutiny and academic critique. Yet surely such fear is alien to the very identity of Anglicanism?

Within a cathedral the role of a Canon Theologian is properly symbolic. It shows that Church and Academy can be good friends. Ecclesiastes reminds us that academic enquiry may be vanity of vanities and that much study is a weariness of the flesh. However, John reminds us that books can be life-giving, especially sound scholarship that opens eyes to God's activity in God's world, 'that through believing you may have Life in his name.'

The second role of a Canon Theologian is to be prophetic. Back in the Academy my job is to engage in conversation with other disciplines and to demonstrate that the body of knowledge we know as theology has something to contribute to wider debates. Of course, as a theologian, I cannot expect to contribute to serious debate across the university campus. Knowledge is too diverse, too specialised. I just do not grasp what is going on in many of the debates. But I can at least take one other discipline seriously and explore in depth the dialogue there. Back in the Academy I live in two worlds – the world of theology and the world of psychology. I am deeply interested in the dialogue between those two disciplines. I believe that theologians have much to learn from psychologists. I believe, too, that psychologists have much to learn from theologians. So what have those two disciplines in common? My answer is that both psychology and theology are concerned with the science of what it means to be human. Viewed in that way the two disciplines have much in common, although the assumptions on which they build may, at times, be miles apart. What is different is that Christian theology sees humanity as created in the image of God.

Within a cathedral the role of a Canon Theologian is properly prophetic. It tries to show that Church and Academy can be good friends. Perhaps, after all in dialogue with Ecclesiastes, all indeed is not vanity, and in spite of the weariness studying may bring, theological enquiry may open up new horizons. Perhaps, after all in dialogue with John's Gospel, theological enquiry may enrich our understanding of what it means to be human and to access Life in his name.

The third role of a Canon Theologian is to be pastoral. What is a theologian? Literally a theologian is someone who thinks about God. Within a cathedral, where common ground and sacred space collide, I am by no means alone in thinking about God. I suspect that everybody working, worshipping, or even visiting within a cathedral cannot avoid doing theology within this special place, where common ground and sacred space collide. In that sense we are all theologians, people actively reflecting on our experience of God, on our encounter with God, on God's revelatory presence, and on God's salvific activity. It is to Jeff Astley that I owe the concept of ordinary theology, ordinary not in the deprecating sense of inferior, or in the Tesco sense of less expensive, but in the technical sense of 'non-expert'. Inside Jeff and inside me remain the ordinary theologians that responded to God's freely given revelatory encounter and to God's freely given salvific grace, long, long before we began the journey to study theology seriously in the Academy. That veneer of academic expert learning must never be allowed to suppress the ordinary theologian within.

Within a cathedral, where common ground and sacred space collide, the role of Canon Theologian is properly pastoral. Here is the pastoral and eucharistic community in which ordinary theologians engage in theological activity side-by-side, each contributing one to another. My veneer of 'expert' theological thinking needs to be tested against those ordinary and profound theologies that have shaped and are shaping each of us – those ordinary and

profound theologies that we have found liberating and life giving, expressing our grasp on revelatory encounter and our grasp on salvific experience.

### **Author Biography**

Leslie J. Francis is Professor of Religions and Education at the University of Warwick. He also serves as Canon Theologian at Liverpool Cathedral, England and at Cathedral of St John the Baptist, Newfoundland.