

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE AND THE IMPACT AGENDA



INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the UK's Research Councils have placed an increasing emphasis on 'impact'. Impact is the 'demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy'.

It embraces 'all the extremely diverse ways in which research-related knowledge and skills benefit individuals, organisations and nations', and can include:

- enhancing the research capacity, knowledge and skills of public, private and third sector organisations
- changing organisational culture and practices
- enhancing cultural enrichment and quality of life
- increasing public engagement with research and related social issues

It 'can be generated through a range of diverse pathways, take many forms, become manifest at different stages in the research lifecycle and beyond, and can be promoted in many different ways.'¹

This developing agenda has had significant implications for researchers in Christian doctrine. Research into doctrine has often been undertaken in close engagement with Christian churches, but that close engagement has sometimes been viewed as an embarrassment, or as an unfortunate throwback to the time when universities were effectively ecclesiastical institutions.

The rise of the impact agenda has, however, made it easier to make sense of this kind of engagement with the Christian churches, and to see it as a benefit rather than a drawback.

Research into Christian doctrine is a form of academic study that engages critically and creatively with the historic and present patterns of practice, speech and thought in specific non-academic communities. It has the capacity to make a significant

difference to those communities, and through them to the wider social world to which they contribute. In short, here is a form of academic study that comes with pathways to impact built in.

That, at least, is how many researchers in Christian doctrine have understood the positive possibilities created by the rise of the impact agenda, whatever their reservations about its implementation in the Research Excellence Framework, or in Research Council funding schemes.

Our project set out to explore this landscape more carefully, and to ask about the forms taken by impactful work in this area, and about the prospects for such impact in the future.

We created a core group of doctrine researchers,² all of whom had experience of research in Christian doctrine at the highest levels, and all of whom had extensive experience of engagement with non-academic audiences.

We then hosted a series of symposia in which we invited a variety of people to speak to us. We talked to doctrine specialists about where they judged their most important engagement as researchers with non-academic audiences had been.

We also talked to people from several non-academic organisations that had engaged with doctrine specialists, and asked them what they had hoped to gain from such engagement, and what it had looked like when it worked well.

Our aim throughout was to deepen our understanding of the nature of impact in our area, and to identify possibilities and challenges for impact in the future.

¹ RCUK, 'What do Research Councils mean by "impact"?' www.rcuk.ac.uk/ke/impacts/meanbyimpact, no date.

² See the list at the end of this report.

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE?

At its simplest, ‘Christian doctrine’ refers to statements of Christian belief with some kind of official standing or authority for a church or Christian community.

It can also refer to the topics and ideas set out in those statements. Doctrines are taught and passed on in a Christian community, and are regarded (at least by some in that community) as defining what members should say or believe or do.

Christian doctrine is, however, no one thing. Where, how, and by whom doctrinal statements are made, what they say, how they are understood to be authoritative, how their authority relates to other sources and norms for Christian life, how they are passed on and put to work, how they are actually involved in the processes by which Christian speech or practice or belief are shaped, how the boundaries of the community governed by them are defined – all these have differed from time to time and place to place, and continue to differ in the present.

‘Doctrinal theology’ refers to the processes of discussion by which the meanings, connections and implications of Christian teachings are explored.

It refers in the first place to the discussion of doctrine internal to Christian communities – one element of the process by which some such communities make sense of themselves and explore their possibilities for future development. It also refers, however, to the study of Christian doctrine that takes place in university settings.

There is a complex relationship between doctrinal theology as a church discourse and doctrinal theology as a university discourse.

Some see no real distinction: the university simply provides one context in which the church’s doctrinal deliberation is carried on.

Others see a very clear distinction: academic researchers in doctrine observe and comment upon the church’s doctrinal deliberation, rather than participating in it.

The reality is, however, normally much more complex than either of these simple pictures allows.

On the one hand, even where academic researchers see themselves as participants in the church’s doctrinal deliberation, they carry out much of their work in the context of academic communities of discourse, in conversation with other disciplines, and drawing on academic methods, which can create various kinds of critical distance between them and the church. The question of whether this work is ‘internal’ or ‘external’ to the church can quickly become very confusing.

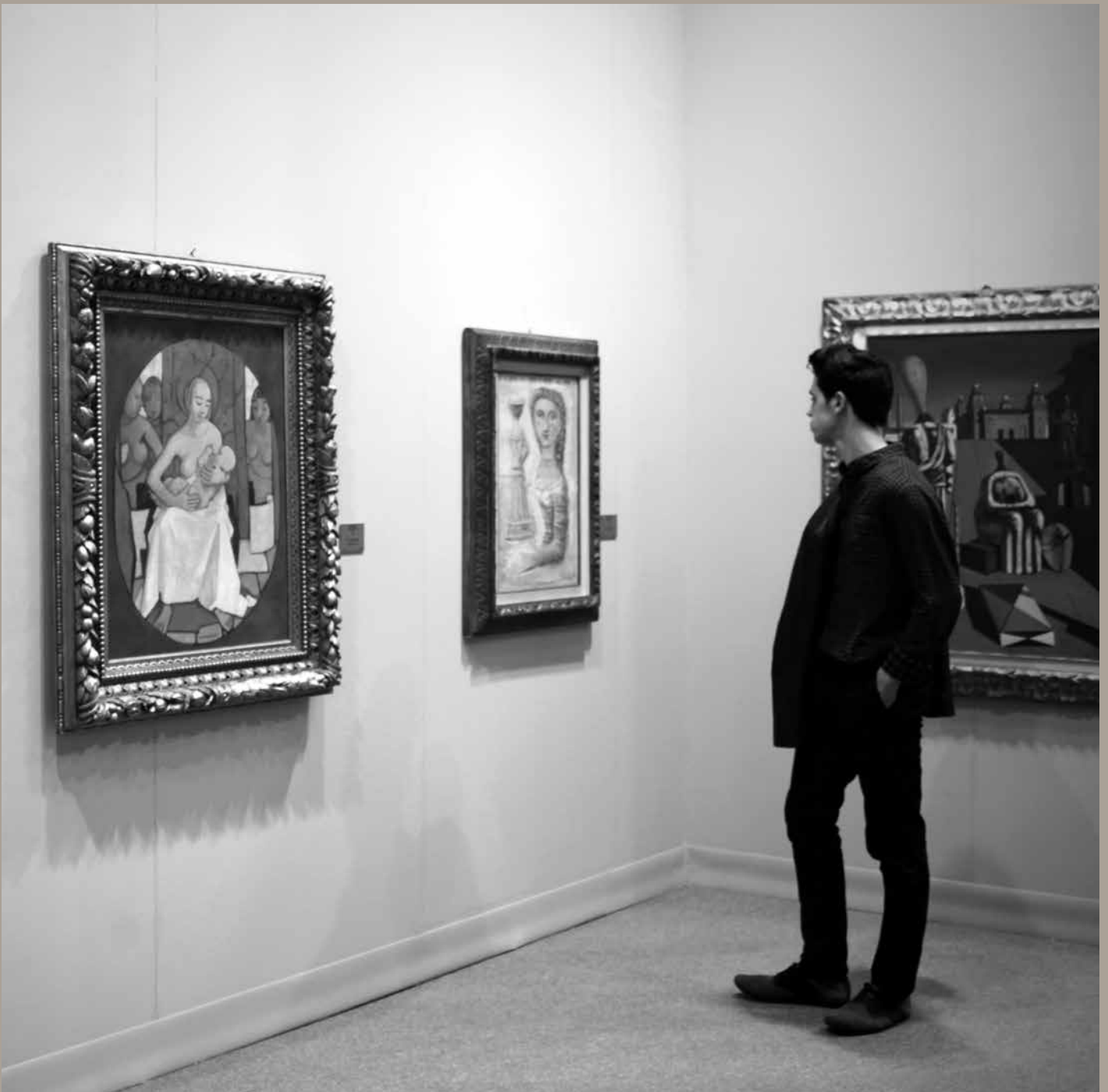
On the other hand, even where academic researchers see themselves as mere observers of the church’s doctrinal deliberation, their work can nevertheless shape the way in which doctrinal ideas are developed and communicated in the church. The networks of communication and dissemination involved in church and university discourses overlap, and questions about ‘internal’ and ‘external’ once again become very messy.

This complex relationship is, however, inherent to the discipline, and there is no version of the discipline that is not in some way involved in negotiating it. Engagement (the activities by which researchers in doctrine attend to, interact with, and learn from the processes by which doctrine is communicated and discussed in the church) and impact (the effect that the researchers’ own work has on those processes of communication and discussion) are central features of the life of the discipline.



CASE STUDIES

We spoke to many people over the course of the project, and explored many examples of impact. The following four case studies are just a sample of what we heard.





FINDINGS

Various themes emerged strongly and consistently in our discussions.

RESEARCHER IMPACT

We asked everyone who attended our symposia to identify compelling examples of impact – instances where the work of those who pursue the academic study of Christian doctrine had made a telling difference in some context outside the university.

The most striking thing about the many answers we received was that specific research outputs – books, articles, and chapters, of the kind that might be submitted to the REF – featured hardly at all. Neither did specific research projects of the kind that might be funded by a Research Council grant.

Rather, most of our conversations focused on the ways in which individual researchers and groups of researchers had become involved in institutional contexts outside the university where they were able to draw on their whole accumulated scholarly expertise, and put it to work in versatile and creative ways.

Our discussions focused in particular on some of the distinctive patterns of reasoning that researchers in doctrine develop in and through their projects and publications, and which they are then able to bring to bear in a variety of settings, in response to very different questions.

Individual research outputs, if they featured at all, appeared as additional expressions of the researcher's expertise, existing alongside the impactful engagement. Individual projects, when they were mentioned at all, most often appeared as contexts within which important relationships had been formed, or conversations started, that had helped to create later opportunities for impact. And both outputs and projects, when they featured in stories of impact at all, could appear at almost any point in the chronology – from well before the impact to well after. The RCUK insistence that impact 'can become manifest at different stages in the research lifecycle and beyond' is therefore very important.

- Impact comes from researchers more than from research outputs or research projects. Further development of the impact agenda, and of related patterns of funding and reward, should therefore focus on the long-term career development of researchers.
 - Templates for describing potential or achieved impact need to be very flexible about the role that formal research outputs and projects play, and particularly about the timing of such outputs in relation to the specified impact.
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THE CENTRALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

Consistently, across every example that we explored, the most important ‘pathway to impact’ was the building of relationships. Researchers have an impact because of the relationships in which they are involved – particularly the sets of relationships that allow them to be significant contributors to the deliberations of specific institutions and groups.

All sorts of factors contributed to the establishment of those relationships. The researchers’ academic reputation is certainly important, including the reputation built up through publications, conference presentations, and the like, but it is by no means the whole picture. We repeatedly heard that researchers need

- To show willingness to engage with organisations and groups outside the university, serving on committees, attending events, and putting the time in to developing relationships over long periods of time
- To be adept at communicating with widely differing audiences, which normally means having spent time assiduously learning to understand the contexts, background assumptions, specialist or ‘in-group’ vocabularies, and needs of those audiences
- To be willing to respond to questions outside the narrow area of their expertise, and to have the kind of broad grounding in the field, and in its modes of thought or methods, that allows them to do so
- To be sensitive to the different kinds of input for which they might be asked – whether it is for briefing on the state of some debate, for help identifying an answer that makes sense for this specific institution, or for their own reasoned judgment on an issue – and to be flexible enough to provide the kind of input that is needed in each situation.

If we are interested in pathways to impact, the key question to ask of any specific project is, ‘How likely is this to contribute to the formation of significant relationships, and to the researchers’ ability to engage flexibly and responsively within them?’

- Further development of the impact agenda should focus on the means by which, over time, researchers develop appropriate networks of relationships.
 - Further development of the impact agenda also requires attention to the cultivation of appropriate virtues, skills and capacities in researchers – the virtues, skills and capacities that underpin fruitful engagement.
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IMPACT AND CHANGE

In several of the case studies that we explored, a researcher had a very significant impact, but it would be misleading to describe him or her primarily as an agent of change.

This is not because it was hard in those cases to attribute change within a community to the activity of a researcher. It is, instead, because the researchers were engaging with communities that were already involved in internally- and externally-driven changes, and they did not initiate those changes but played a variety of other roles in relation to them.

We heard examples, for instance, of researchers speaking to some group where there had already been a significant shift in opinion and behaviour in recent years, but where there was uneasiness or controversy about the intellectual underpinnings of that development. We heard other examples of researchers speaking to some group whose members were actively resisting a change in the culture around them, and yet felt unsure of the grounds on which they were doing so. The researchers' contribution, in these contexts, had been to help articulate or to underpin these existing patterns of thought and action, or to give theological 'permission' or legitimisation for them.

The researchers were often engaging with dramatic and far-reaching changes in or around the group, and their work had made a very significant contribution to the group's life and to the integrity of its action in relation to those changes, but the researchers were not themselves the primary drivers of the change.

Impact might sometimes involve a researcher prompting a community or organisation to move in a new direction, but it might equally well – as the RCUK's description of impact in terms of 'enhancement' as well as 'change' rightly suggests – involve enabling, facilitating and supporting existing dynamics within a community's life.

- Templates for describing prospective or achieved impact need to avoid too narrow a focus on researchers as the primary agents of change in the communities with which they engage, and instead encourage description of a wider range of patterns of engagement.

THE POLITICS OF IMPACT

Our recognition of the last point went with a deeper unease about some ways of talking about impact.

To talk about the ways in which researchers might become embedded in the relationships and processes of deliberation that shape the life of some community is to talk about the polity of that community. Impact is therefore inherently a political matter, in that it is bound up with issues of the distribution of power and accountability in that community – and a good deal of our discussion involved critical examination of the role of experts in the deliberations and governance of churches and other bodies.

One of the problems with some versions of the impact agenda, for instance, especially if we place the cultivation of relationships at centre stage, is that it encourages the cultivation of relationships with the powerful – with leaders, opinion-formers, and other obvious agents of change. This might mean that, even when researchers do have a significant impact on a community, the deeper effect of their engagement will be to reinforce existing structures of privilege.

A call to greater impact should go with serious critical thinking about the politics of that call – or, in doctrinal terms, the ecclesiology implied by it.

- Further development of the impact agenda requires critical attention to its politics: to the ways in which models for ensuring, measuring and rewarding impact relate to the power structures of communities and institutions.
- Researchers need to be sensitive to power structures and deliberative processes within the communities and institutions with which they engage, and to how they affect and are affected by 'impact' activity.



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Further information about the project is available at:

[www.durham.ac.uk/theology.religion/
common.awards/
projects/doctrine/christendom](http://www.durham.ac.uk/theology.religion/common.awards/projects/doctrine/christendom)