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# Refiguring Universities in an Age of Neoliberalism

Creating Compassionate Campuses

Louise J. Lawrence

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## Introduction

The UK higher education sector in which I work seems increasingly marred by structural discontent, social disorder, and psychological vulnerability. 74 UK universities were recently involved in a sustained period of industrial action disputing salary inequalities, pensions, insecure contracts, and unwieldy workloads.<sup>1</sup> Distressing (and persistent) cases of sexist, racist, and xenophobic incidents on university campuses—including latterly anti-Asian slurs related to the Covid-19 outbreak<sup>2</sup>—can mark these environments as unsafe, toxic, and dangerous for those marked as ‘other’ to a presumed normative identity. The university sector is also seeing unprecedented surges in anxiety and depression: many students struggle to manage on a daily basis, or withdraw entirely from their courses, due to mental ill health; the numbers of students who experience suicidal ideation, and/or go on to act on this, are alarmingly high.<sup>3</sup> Such scenarios are regrettably, for many on university campuses, the forbidding current realities.

Many cite the ascendancy of neoliberalism—‘a varied collection of ideas, practices, policies, and discursive representations ... united by three broad beliefs: the benevolence of the free market, minimal state intervention and regulation of the economy, and the individual as a rational economic actor’<sup>4</sup>—as a political, ideological, and discursive force in higher education, as in part accountable for this state of affairs. Carol Mutch and Jennifer Tatebe accordingly posit ‘universities as instruments of neoliberalism’, ‘academics as managed subjects’, and ‘students as consumers’.<sup>5</sup>

Within such constructions there has been an associated tendency to accentuate education as ‘product’ (a means to employment) as opposed to formative ‘process’<sup>6</sup>:

Rather than promoting their potential to be uniquely-positioned spaces to foster empathetic, civically engaged, critically thinking, and globally minded change-makers, colleges and universities [too often] function as certifiers. They sustain the ‘information-services-credentialing complex’ by marketing to social fears about gaining and maintain[ing] traction in the economy.<sup>7</sup>

Henry Giroux, from a US context, talks about the ‘corrosive effects of corporate culture’ which produces ‘self-interested individuals’ who are content to ‘either ignore or cancel out social injustices in the existing social order by overriding the democratic impulses and practices of civil society through an emphasis on the unbridled workings of market relations’<sup>8</sup> Martha Nussbaum similarly in her rousing tract, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*<sup>9</sup>—which calls out those neoliberal dynamics within universities which lead to the perilous neglect of the arts, humanities, and social sciences—laments the compulsion for voracious economic gain, and the narrow (and mechanistic) identity models of ‘productive citizens’ manufactured and marked by self-interest and disregard for others:

Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. The future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance.<sup>10</sup>

Others see neoliberal forces as complicit in the marketisation of education,<sup>11</sup> the global rise of far-right politics leaking into university campuses,<sup>12</sup> and mental ill health experienced therein.<sup>13</sup>

This book will give clear instances and specific examples where universities can be perceived as serving neoliberal purposes, but it will also suggest that university campuses are contested spaces, where neoliberal demands frequently and uncomfortably co-exist alongside other more affiliative values. Moreover, it is often these affiliative values which are under particular strain from a neoliberal frame and therefore need specific defence and

support as a primary objective and viable and meaningful operative mode for higher education institutions. Accordingly I will ask how can the sector reclaim the ‘university’, as the Latin etymological origins of this word indicates—*universus* (‘whole, entire’)—as a collective, inclusive, safe, and healthy community of ‘persons associated into one body, a society, company, community, [or] guild?’<sup>14</sup> I will also probe what moral principles and competencies would need to be championed and instilled in university cultures to build inclusive citizenship, positive associations with others, and models of other-regard for campus communities to flourish. ‘Compassion’ will be posited as such a value, and bodies of emergent work on compassion from diverse disciplinary perspectives will be drawn upon here in reflecting on institutional, cultural, pedagogical, and lived experiences within universities. Compassion, a term derived from the Latin ‘*com-pati*’, meaning to ‘suffer with’, is understood in transdisciplinary terms ‘as the *noticing* of distress and/or disadvantage to self or others, and a commitment to *take action* to reduce it’.<sup>15</sup> Compassion is an ‘other-regarding’ response and prompt to action that bridges the interpersonal, intercultural, and international. It stands in many ways counter to neoliberal dynamics which focus on marketisation and competitive individualism. It is also a value which is too scarcely taught, experienced, or advocated as a principal purpose in higher education contexts. Kathryn Waddington calls out this ‘Compassion Gap’ within the sector where instrumental views of education in economic terms identify students as ‘consumers rather than learners with power’.<sup>16</sup> She invites reparative compassionate academic reflection and practice through a threefold lens: (a) using narrative methodologies and critical appreciative inquiry to ‘reveal, and rectify, failures of compassion’, (b) encouraging brave whistle-blowing with regard to ‘dysfunctional organisational systems and processes’, and (c) promoting leadership development to ‘include the application of skills of compassion in organisational settings’.<sup>17</sup> These lenses will be important and recurring stimuli for reflection throughout the ensuing chapters of this book.

Illustrations and case studies herein will be drawn primarily from my own research fields and location: (i) theology, religion, and biblical studies, and (ii) disability studies. These fields can aid in tracing cultural, spiritual, embodied, and material archaeologies of compassion. Beyond nested illustrations, these disciplines too, I maintain, offer useful resources to critically think with in relation to compassion and neoliberal university dynamics, discourses, relationships, and values. Compassion has been posited as a trait common to many religions,<sup>18</sup> particularly popularised within

Karen Armstrong's work on the Charter of Compassion (see Chap. 3).<sup>19</sup> This Charter's rallying call is

to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and peaceful global community.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond a focus on compassion, Timothy Peters maintains that neoliberalism itself functions in some ways as a quasi-'religion': 'one which intensifies liberal individualism and involves a faith in the market redefining all social interactions in terms of contract'.<sup>21</sup> And therefore 'part of the solution may be a theological[ly reflective] one' in imagining alternative values and forms of inclusion, participation, community, authority, sociality, and corporate-ness to those centred on 'neoliberal state', 'corporation', or the 'contracting individual'.<sup>22</sup> Disability studies too resists neoliberal focus on hyper-productivity, individual meritocracy, and a valuing of individual bodies through capitalist economic lenses. Akemi Nishida, among others, has shown not only how neoliberalism feeds ableism and sanism (prejudice and discrimination against those bodies and minds perceived as 'non-normative') but also how the social model of disability, and disability advocacy, offers alternative models to a biomedical model which views individual minds and bodies as problematic and in need of cure, to rather celebrate diversity, justice, and 'democratic ways of living'<sup>23</sup> within organisations and learning communities. In this sense, disability studies is potentially incredibly useful in identifying and framing ways in which types of 'othering' occurs (in relation to 'other' non-normative—'dis-abled' bodies—often marked along intersectional lines of gender, race, mental ill health, etc.) in neoliberal institutions. The European, and more broadly Western, academy traces its origins to an Enlightenment scientific paradigm which constructed the disembodied (and often white, male, able, and sane) scholar as a 'rational subject positive outside of time and space'.<sup>24</sup> This has inevitably mitigated against an embodied regard for the other in both practice and certain cultural discourses within the academy.

I will also critically reflect on illustrations and incidents from within the particular institution in which I am employed—the University of Exeter—a

Russell Group, research-intensive university, in the South West of England.<sup>25</sup> The University of Exeter has in particular advocated compassion and intercultural competence and sought to develop (among other initiatives) compassionate anti-racist pedagogies and compassionate approaches to mental ill health, within its institutional culture. In this sense, it offers an illuminating case study for this book. Much of my work here is drawn from my experience in institutional educational leadership, and therefore accents and focuses on student voices, lived experiences, and practical interventions within programmes. As Covid-19 erupted, certain themes in this project have been sharpened and given greater urgency as I wrote the manuscript. Reflection on an emerging re-imagination of values based on collaboration and connectivity within the pandemic, as opposed to individual competition, offers a unique opportunity to re-imagine and re-figure higher education along more compassionate lines. This book's aims can therefore be summarised as threefold:

- (a) To trace selected cultural constructions of compassion within my own field of biblical studies. Employments of compassion within Western discourses can often be traced in some way to classical and biblical texts, including in the current Covid-19 era which has variously cited compassion as a primary objective in different spheres.
- (b) To offer through the examples of disciplinary case studies in theology, religion, and biblical studies, and disability studies, the valuing of compassion as a primary objective in affiliative communities posits this as both challenge and alternative to neoliberal dynamics and discourses.
- (c) To trace and evaluate, through the University of Exeter institutional case study, the beginnings of a move to embed compassion within a whole institutional approach. Also the practical interventions, challenges, and transformations that have been (and continue to be) demanded as a result. Whilst there has been a lot of literature generated in different disciplinary domains on compassion, seldom are these transdisciplinary insights critically synthesised in relation to diverse aspects of a single institution's life (from curricula to sexual misconduct).

## OVERVIEW OF BOOK

Chapter 2, ‘A Prolegomenon to Refiguring the Neoliberal University: Reading with Early Christian Traditions of Compassion in the Throes of a Pandemic’, will seek to trace the emergence of so-called catastrophe compassion (affiliative responses within and after crisis situations). Tracing selected cultural histories of compassion within biblical traditions (in particular ‘the view from the ditch’ in the parabolic ‘Good Samaritan’ tradition) and their ‘afterlives’ and receptions (including in the midst of Covid-19), this chapter will argue that the present moment provides an opportunity, like never before, for neoliberal imaginaries to be transformed.

Chapter 3, ‘Envisioning Compassionate Campuses: Critically Probing Organisational Values and Mission Statements’, will posit compassion as a value which has been at the fore-front of instruction for affiliative community development in many spiritual and religious traditions, professional care bodies, and justice systems throughout history.<sup>26</sup> Most crucially, the tutelage and conventions of compassion in such traditions often deliberately develop mutual regard for those beyond the known or agreeable (unmarked) ‘us’.<sup>27</sup> Visions of modern secular universities as sites of formation for ‘intellectual virtue, in sustaining vibrant communities of inquiry, and in serving the public good’<sup>28</sup> and for the development of ‘moral compassion’ will be central. Compassion-centred institutional examples outside higher education, including Armstrong’s ambitious development of a ‘Charter of Compassion’, a principle she sees as lying at the heart of many religious, ethical, and justice-driven traditions, and Britain’s National Health Service (NHS), will be employed as examples to ‘think with’.<sup>29</sup> This chapter will then trace higher education institutions across North America and the UK, who have variously signed up to or sought to implement the charter or moralised compassion, within their organisational cultures.

Chapter 4, ‘Compassionate Curricula? Northern and Southern Epistemologies and Cognitive [In-]Justice’, will employ southern, feminist, and postcolonial perspectives to trace the outcomes of global knowledge economies patterned by colonial histories and north-south inequalities. Focusing on biblical studies and disability studies, here southern perspectives will be seen as important stimulants for destabilising and limiting the dominant and dominating ‘global north’ patterns of knowing.<sup>30</sup> Such perspectives are critical sites for cultivating compassionate and intercultural competent modes of learning. Attuned to the politics of

citation with regard to geography, gender, race, ability, and epistemological diversity, we must honestly ask ‘Whose methodologies and worldviews do we privilege?’ ‘Who are we reading?’ ‘Who is excluded?’ ‘Why and how can we address this?’<sup>31</sup>

Chapter 5, ‘Compassionate Campus Climates: Confronting Privilege and Prejudice with Compassionate Citizenship’, will focus on the handling, fallout, and institutional reforms emerging from highly publicised racist incidents on campus at Exeter.<sup>32</sup> It explores the prejudices arising from both ‘whiteness’ and ‘laddish masculinities’ and interventions based on compassion and other-regard which have been integrated institutionally to seek to prevent prejudice, bigotry, and hate speech/crime.<sup>33</sup>

Chapter 6, ‘Compassion and Kindness: Refiguring Discourses of Student Mental Health and Wellbeing’, traces an institutional response to the *Universities UK Stepchange: Mental Health in Higher Education Framework*<sup>34</sup> particularly regarding (a) neoliberal discourses surrounding student mental (ill) health and wellbeing within the institution and (b) whole campus ethos and interventions, with compassion, care, and kindness in particular promoted. Informed by critical disability studies, this chapter will outline associated models of slow scholarship—subverting neoliberal transcripts of time, performance, and hyper-productivity—which are known causes of distress.

Chapter 7, ‘[Mis]Directed Compassion? Power, Sexual Violence, and Misconduct in the Neoliberal Academy’, will take a number of high-profile cases in biblical studies, religion, and theology relating to sexual violence and staff sexual misconduct. It will petition for a ‘detoxifying’ of the curriculum whereby individual convicted scholars’ ideas, despite their individual renown or celebrity, are not preserved or perpetuated at the expense of their victims. It will also explore compassionate reforms in the Church of England in this area, to think about ways in which restorative practice, focusing not just on individuals involved nor single case management but rather more thoroughgoing processes of collective and cultural change within institutions, can be achieved.

In short, this book is an invitation to critically reflect on selected aspects of the neoliberal identity, discourses, and practices of the higher education sector, and propose compassion (focusing attention on those frequently rendered ‘other’ by dominant transcripts) as a viable alternative and meaningful operational mode and purpose for universities. Whilst ‘suffering’ might well be an inevitable part of all organisational lives,<sup>35</sup> surely higher education should never be a perpetrator, but rather always an incubator of

preventative forces against such suffering. In William Kahn's terms, university campuses must re-conceive of themselves as 'care-giving institutions'<sup>36</sup> in which human beings in all their diversity can feel safe, flourish, and succeed. Leaders of compassionate campuses would not fear stepping outside the dominant neoliberal transcripts, or venturing beyond the routinely accepted, to rediscover, imagine, or co-design inclusive models of citizenship, that have at their centre values which generate kindness, respect, and genuine openness to collaborate and connect with others, and serve the public good.

## NOTES

1. 'UCU announces 14 strike days at 74 UK universities in February and March' *University and College Union* (3rd February 2020). Available online at: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10621/UCU-announces-14-strike-days-at-74-UK-universities-in-February-and-March>
2. In Exeter 'A 19-year-old university student was punched, kicked and spat at while being told, "go back to your own country – you must have coronavirus"'. See Paul Greaves, 'Exeter is Better Than This' *DevonLive* (6th March 2020). Available online at: <https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/exeter-better-this-racist-coronavirus-3923885>. Sussex University too noted: 'The Students' Union has been made aware of students experiencing racism, hate crime and discrimination both on campus and in town, in light of the recent coronavirus outbreak in Brighton.' See 'Statement: Hate Crime and Corona Virus' *Sussex Student* (11th February 2020). Available online at: <https://www.sussexstudent.com/news/article/ussu/Students-Union-statement-regarding-hate-crime-and-coronavirus/>
3. 'In the 12 months ending July 2017, the rate of suicide for university students in England and Wales was 4.7 deaths per 100,000 students, which equates to 95 suicides or about one death every four days.' Samira Shackle, 'The way universities are run is making us ill': inside the student mental health crisis' *The Guardian* (27th September 2019). Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/sep/27/anxiety-mental-breakdowns-depression-uk-students>
4. Daniel B. Saunders, 'Neoliberal Ideology and Public Higher Education in the United States' (8th January 2002). Available online at: <http://www.jceps.com/wp-content/uploads/PDFs/08-1-02.pdf>
5. Carol Mutch & Jennifer Tatebe, 'From collusion to collective compassion: putting heart back into the neoliberal university', *Pastoral Care in Education* 35:3 (2017), 221–234. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2017.1363814>

6. William Carpenter, 'Finding Compassion in Higher Education: A Provocation' *Bringing Theory to Practice* (Winter 2018), no pages. Available online at: <https://www.bttop.org/news-events/feature-finding-compassion-higher-education-provocation>
7. Carpenter, 'Finding', no pages.
8. Henry Giroux, 'Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education: The University as a Democratic Public Sphere' *Harvard Educational Review* Vol. 72, No. 4 (2002), 425–464. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.72.4.0515nr62324n71p1>, 425.
9. Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
10. Nussbaum, *Not for*, 2.
11. Roger Brown, Chris Pratt and Trevor Curnow, 'The abject failure of marketization in higher education' *The Guardian* (5th April 2019). Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/apr/05/the-abject-failure-of-marketisation-in-higher-education>
12. 'Right-wing populism has been on the rise in recent years, intensifying following the 2008 global financial crisis. 2016 marked a key moment in the right populist turn, with both Brexit and the US Presidential election constituting formal political legitimacy for right-wing populist leaders and movements. Despite widespread opposition following the election of Donald Trump—itself often taking populist forms—a range of right-wing populist forces continue to push forward. In both Europe and North America, anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic rhetoric and violence has escalated. Populist figures are giving voice to and emboldening longstanding racist and xenophobic currents in western societies. Other variants of authoritarian right-wing populism are also growing. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government in Turkey has now dismissed over 7,000 academics and in some cases jailed scholars.' See Steven Tufts and Mark Thomas, 'The University in the Populist Age' *Academic Matters – OCUEA's Journal of Higher Education* (2017), no pages. Available online at: <https://academicmatters.ca/the-university-in-the-populist-age/>. See also Mike Finn, *British Universities in the Brexit Moment: Political, Economic and Cultural Implications* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018).
13. Ruth Kain, 'How Neoliberalism is Damaging your Mental Health' *The Conversation* (30th January 2018). Available online at: <http://theconversation.com/how-neoliberalism-is-damaging-your-mental-health-90565>
14. 'University', <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/university>
15. NHS Professor of Clinical Psychology, Paul Gilbert OBE (and founder of the Compassionate Mind Foundation that focuses on the empirical study of compassion) takes the current (multi-disciplinary line) that compassion is a 'sensitivity to the suffering of self or others and a commitment to

- reduce or prevent that'. Paul Gilbert, *The Compassionate Mind* (London: Constable & Robinson Ltd., 2010), 2. Also Paul Gilbert (ed), *Compassion: Concepts, Research and Applications* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2017); J. L. Goetz, D. Keltner, E. Simon-Thomas, 'Compassion: An evolutionary analysis and empirical review' *Psychological Bulletin*, 136 (3) (2010), 351–374; Clara Strauss et al., 'What is compassion and how can we measure it? A review of definitions and measures' *Clinical Psychology Review* Volume 47 (2016), 15–27. In teaching, learning and assessment in higher education (HE) specifically, Theo Gilbert has applied this and the theoretical base behind it, so that compassion can be assessed within filmed HE student group work. For pedagogically practical purposes, he resets the above definition of compassion specifically for student group work as: 'the noticing of distress and/or disadvantage to self or others, and a commitment to take action to reduce or prevent it'. See Theo Gilbert, 'When Looking Is Allowed: What Compassionate Group Work Looks Like in a UK University' in P. Gibbs (ed), *The Pedagogy of Compassion at the Heart of Higher Education* (Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 189–202.
16. Kathryn Waddington, 'The Compassion Gap in UK Universities' *International Practice Development Journal* 6 (1), (2016). Available online at: doi:<https://doi.org/10.19043/ipdj.61.010>
  17. Waddington, 'The Compassion'. See also Kathryn Waddington, 'Understanding and Creating Compassionate Institutional Cultures and Practices' in P. Gibbs, J. Jameson, and A. Elwick (eds), *Values of the University in a Time of Uncertainty* (Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 241–260; Kathryn Waddington, 'Developing Compassionate Academic Leadership: The Practice of Kindness' *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*. 6 (3), (2018), 87–89; Kathryn Waddington, 'Creating conditions for compassion' in P. Gibbs (ed.) *The Pedagogy of Compassion at the Heart of Higher Education* (Switzerland: Springer. 2017), 49–70.
  18. Amanita Nihongi Balslev and Dirk Evers (eds), *Compassion in the World's Religions: Envisioning Human Solidarity* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2010).
  19. Karen Armstrong is a former Roman Catholic nun. She is well known for her popular books on comparative religion. See, for example, *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2000); *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006); *The Lost Art of Scripture* (London: Bodley Head, 2019). She was the winner of the 2008 TED prize, in which she posited the founding of a 'Charter of Compassion' as her major idea.
  20. Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (London: The Bodley Head, 2011), 5.

21. Timothy D. Peters, 'Corporations, Sovereignty and the Religion of Neoliberalism' *Law and Critique* 29 (2018), 271–292, 271. Moreover, selected religious discourses have been seen to have been absorbed in certain ways by neoliberal universities. Luke Winslow, for example, traces echoes between evaluation of staff's ability to garner external grant funding, and 'discursive structures of prosperity theology', a theological stance particularly found in American Evangelicalism, (controversially) centred on 'competitive-egotism', equating health and wealth as blessings for elect or religiously loyal and 'measure of personal worth', and so on. Luke Winslow, 'Rich, Blessed, and Tenured: A Homological Exploration of Grant Writing, Prosperity Theology, and Neoliberalism', *Western Journal of Communication* 79 (2015), 257–282. Available online at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10570314.2015.1035748>
22. Peters, 'Corporations', 271–275.
23. Nishida, Akemi, 'Neoliberal Academia and a critique from Disability Studies' in Pamela Block, Devva Kasnitz, Akemi Nishida, Nick Pollard, *Occupying Disability: Critical Approaches to Community, Justice, and Decolonizing Disability* (Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 145–157, 145.
24. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 92. See also Louise J. Lawrence, *Bible and Bedlam: Madness, Sanism and New Testament Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 17–44.
25. The University of Exeter. <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/>
26. 'In the US, compassion is enshrined in the American Medical Association's (AMA) Principles of Medical Ethics, with Item 1 stating that "A physician shall be dedicated to providing competent medical services with compassion and respect for human dignity" (AMA, 1981). In the UK, compassion is one of the six core values in the NHS constitution (Department of Health; DoH, 2013), and calls for a greater focus on compassion have been driven in part by high profile exposés of serious failings in compassionate care at some hospitals and care homes. The international "Compassion in Education" foundation (CoED, 2014) offers a range of services to educational professionals in order to promote compassion in the education system. It has also been argued that compassion should lie at the core of the ethical framework guiding our justice systems' (Norko, 2005). Clara Strauss et al. 'What is compassion and how can we measure it? A review of definitions and measures' *Clinical Psychology Review* Volume 47 (2016), 15–27.
27. Dalai Lama notes: 'Without an enemy you cannot practice tolerance, and without tolerance you cannot build a sound basis of compassion'. Dalai Lama, cited in Strauss et al 'What is compassion', 16.

28. Mike Higton, *A Theology of Higher Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
29. Karen Armstrong views compassion ‘calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect. It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity.’ Karen Armstrong, ‘Charter for Compassion’ (2008). Available online at: <https://charterforcompassion.org/charter>. See also Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (London: Bodley Head, 2011).
30. See Raewyn Connell. ‘Using Southern Theory: Decolonizing Social Thought in Theory, Research and Application’ *Planning Theory* 12 (2), (2013), 210–223. Also Debbie Epstein and Robert Morrell ‘Approaching Southern Theory: Explorations of Gender in South African Education’ *Gender and Education* 24 (2012), 469–482.
31. Raewyn Connell optimistically notes: ‘The global workforce has more room for manoeuvre than the bald facts of Northern hegemony and Southern extraversion might suggest. Researchers and teachers can respond to regional needs, developed distinctive research centres and agendas, renovate curricula and create links with local communities, while staying within the research-based knowledge formation. It is also possible, though more difficult, for university staff to move outside the dominant knowledge formation, connect with other formations and move towards epistemological pluralism.’ Raewyn Connell, *The Good University: What Universities Actually Do and Why it’s Time for Radical Change* (London: Zed Books, 2019), 94.
32. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018\\_Bracton\\_Law\\_Society\\_Scandal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018_Bracton_Law_Society_Scandal)
33. Sefer discussed in Dave Mercer ‘Imagined in Policy, Inscribed on Bodies: Defending an Ethic of Compassion in a Political Context Comment on “Why and How Is Compassion Necessary to Provide Good Quality Healthcare?”’ *International Journal of Health Policy Management* 4 (10) (2015), 681–683. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.15171/ijhpm.2015.125>
34. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/stepchange>

35. Jacoba Lillius et al 'The Contours and Consequences of Compassion at Work' *Journal of Organizational Behaviour* 29 (2008), 193–218, 194.
36. William A. Kahn, 'Caring for the Caregivers: Patterns of Organizational Caregiving' *Administrative Science Quarterly* Vol. 38, No. 4 (Dec., 1993), 539–563.



# A Prolegomenon to Refiguring the Neoliberal University: Reading with Early Christian Traditions of Compassion in the Throes of a Pandemic

In spring 2020, amidst UK lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic,<sup>1</sup> medical students at the University of Exeter opted to graduate early and join colleagues in the National Health Service (NHS) caring for communities across the UK. The Vice-Chancellor commended their compassion, courage, and service to others, and how ‘humbled and inspired’ he felt ‘by their selflessness’:

Now, in the time of our greatest national and global crisis since the Second World War, we see the young people of this country and of our University standing up to be counted and making huge personal sacrifices.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst ‘the themes involved [in] plague[s] and people are ancient’<sup>3</sup> (divine wrath and judgement, and/or protection of elect and apocalyptic refiguring of future worlds),<sup>4</sup> the ways in which roles and identities can transform in such situations continue to be enlightening and instructive. Covid-19 will be posited here as a ‘prolegomenon’ to refiguring the identity and vision of the neoliberal university: in particular, in relation to northern hegemony, discourses of mental ill health, and systems of prejudice and privilege (all themes to be developed in later chapters of this book). The pandemic provides an opportunity to address the vision of the modern UK neoliberal university and promote compassion as the centre of this re-imagining. In this current moment within higher education, delivery and