

DOING THEOLOGY DOWN UNDER – YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

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In making some general comments about theology in Australia and New Zealand I was wondering if I might be permitted to begin briefly within the comfort zone to my old discipline, Church History. It's my hope that in doing this – that is, by being a little more informed of the past – we might more easily master the challenges and events of the present. Bishop George Augustus Selwyn, the first (and only) bishop of New Zealand, in response to the question of how he would like his own life to be written, replied: 'Tell first of all my faults, and then tell whatever the grace of God has enabled me to do in spite of them'. That's what I propose to do in recounting, however so briefly, a little of the story of theology 'Down Under'.

Yesterday

Up until recent times actual departments of theology have been conspicuously absent from the faculties of most of our public Australian universities (and in New Zealand as well). Instead, private colleges of divinity were formed to take their place. This absence was largely the result of the establishment of Australia's first universities at a time when the effects of sectarian bitterness were being felt most keenly at all levels in society. The establishment of a university in Australia requires an Act of Parliament, and state governments in the mid-nineteenth century, not wanting to see religious bigotry carry over into its fledgling seats of learning, were far from keen to have divinity or theology included among its programs. Nothing was said, for example, in the 1850 Charter of the University of Sydney (Australia's first university) about theology. Although there is a vague reference to the 'advancement of religion and morality', the emphasis is very much on the 'encouragement for pursuing a regular and liberal course of education'. On the other hand, the Charter of the University of Melbourne (Australia's second university) specifically excluded the teaching of theology or divinity from all curricula. Of course, this was the very antithesis of the European universities, or of several of the early American foundations, for here it was the study of theology that had first called a community of scholars together, and then other disciplines such as law and medicine had developed

Two institutions were therefore called into being. The first was the Australian College of Theology (ACT), founded in 1891 by the General Synod of the Dioceses of the Church of England in Australia and Tasmania for 'the systematic study of Divinity, especially among the clergy [of the Church of England].' The second was the Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD) which was constituted by an Act of the Victorian Parliament in 1910, on the understanding that all the major Christian churches should consent to its establishment, even if all did not take part.

In Sydney, my home city, the first developments came much more slowly. Here the Anglicans were not pressing for a state-based award, and were content with teaching programs authorised by the Australian College of Theology. Moreover, as the Melbourne College of Divinity offered its BD externally from the beginning, several of the other Protestant colleges presented candidates in this way, although the degree could only be taken by graduates.

However, by the 1950s forces were at work in New South Wales (although the participants didn't recognise it at the time) that would eventually see (although some three decades later) the establishment of an ecumenical college with a primary degree in theology. Such an institution would be private, thus guaranteeing an acceptable level of autonomy and allowing its Member Institutions to teach theology from a confessional base, but it would be structured in such a way that processes for association and accountability would guarantee academic standards comparable with, or even better than, those at a university.

In Sydney, the Sydney College of Divinity (SCD) of which I was the Dean for over thirteen years, and in Brisbane, the Brisbane College of Theology (BCT), consortia were formed in both instances in 1983.

But what of the Present?

In some of Australia's newer metropolitan universities, however, during the last 25 years or so formal theological studies have appeared, but in a different form to that of the two I've just mentioned. For the most part the process has been one where a number of former private theological colleges have formed a regional consortium, and then affiliated with a university for the purposes of accreditation and funding. Examples of this are the Adelaide College of Divinity (1979) with Flinders University, the Perth College of Divinity (1985) with Griffith University, and St Mark's College Canberra – joined by UTC in 2007 – with Charles Sturt University. There has also been the establishment of the Australian Catholic University

Another most significant force has been the Australia and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools (ANZATS), the body that I represent. ANZATS has become a peak organizing body for theological education and the accreditation of theological schools and colleges since its establishment in 1968. As Professor Petros Vassiliadis told us in his presidential address yesterday: 'All major events concerning theological education in our ecumenical era are linked – perhaps by God's providence – with a year ending in 8!' It now has some 70 member schools and this list keeps growing. Its major counterpart overseas is the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS), which has under its wing more than 250 Graduate Schools for theological education.

The history of ANZATS was only published earlier this year – Geoffrey L. Barnes, *ANZATS: The First 35 Years* – and it was my particular privilege to be able to launch it in Melbourne. Barnes admits in his Introduction that ANZATS at the beginning

lacked resources and encountered significant problems yet the story of ANZATS, while acknowledging the influence of other movements, indicates the value of maintaining an institution with a distinctive emphasis on ministerial and theological education.

It is not without significance for this conference to hear that the first chapter in the book is entitled 'The Ecumenical Imperative'. The growth of ecumenism certainly underpinned and informed the genesis of ANZATS, as our author puts it so well:

There was a sense among theological teachers that pastoral frontiers were changing, and that ecumenical endeavours gave them a better chance to develop a theology relevant to the issues of the day.

In two months time ANZATS will be exactly 40 years old. In August 1968, at Ormond College, in the University of Melbourne, ANZATS met under the chairmanship of McCaughey, who had initially been diffident about the association. 'The ANZATS Constitution was approved by 36 colleges, with just two amendments. ANZATS was now a reality'.

This book tells of experiences both in Australia and New Zealand in:

- The development of theological curricula
- Contextuality
- Windows of Opportunity
- Collaboration
- The World and the Church
- An Australian Theology
- The importance and impact of the many ANZATS conferences
- The pastoral care of students and their families
- The nexus between theological education and ministerial formation
- Financing a voluntary association

This work concludes:

This history concludes in 2003. For 40 years theological educators, with minimal resources, have sought to enhance academic excellence and pastoral wisdom. At first it was suspected that it would be yet another educational enterprise dedicated to the raising of academic standards so essential for ministers and priests. But the academic goals that teachers espoused contained the essential element of pastoral calling. The first secretary of ANZATS developed the accreditation procedures, which challenged colleges to meet standards and thus become eligible for membership of ANZATS. It is significant that almost every theological and bible college in Australasia is now a member of ANZATS and that the ecumenical emphasis which characterised it from the outset has blossomed so that 87% of all theological colleges in Australia and New Zealand now participate in consortia.

The contemporary Church shows some impatience with long-standing institutions, which seem to betoken a past era. Umbrella organisations and consortia, crucial developments now well recognised by ANZATS, threaten its structures and denominational identities. But new occasions teach new duties, and ANZATS has still a role to interpret the critical importance of theological education for the Church, for tertiary institutions, and the contemporary world

What of the Future?

I am delighted to be able to report that a government-funded and detailed study of theology 'down under' has just commenced. This exciting project is titled: *Uncovering Theology: the depth, reach & utility of Australian theological education*. This is not a 'radical re-appraisal' but rather a first time 'radical appraisal'.

As I mentioned before, the Theological sector has been present in Australian higher education since the C19y. At the beginning of the C21y it holds a distinctive place, operating largely in the private sector through a varied and complex network of some two dozen Higher Education Providers, mostly private consortia embracing several colleges. As a discipline, theology remains largely isolated from the universities, though considerable care has been taken to maintain the same high academic standards.

The traditional role of theological education in preparing people for professional Christian ministries continues, but today these students form a minority in our colleges. Even so, colleges continue to depend upon their churches' and supporters' donations for their ongoing viability. People studying theology in Australia currently represent 4,000 EFTSUs (or approximately 7,000 persons), of which only some 15% are ordination candidates.

Operating largely through 'private providers', theology has received little government funding. Indirect support commenced when Austudy (a living allowance) was opened to theological students in 1992, and some Commonwealth-supported places have become available in recent years in the university sector and to colleges in which theology services teacher and nurse education. The Introduction of FEE-HELP from 2005 has brought significant benefit to theology: student loans now approach \$10 million per annum. FEE-HELP not only lowers the barrier of upfront fees, and reduces bad debts: potential students view a FEE-HELP course as 'normal' higher education.

Theology thus operates largely 'beneath the radar' of the Australian Higher Education Sector. The use of the *Australian Quality Framework* in the sector, the emergence of theology in some universities, and the creation of the HEP category and consequent Australian University Quality Agency (AUQA) audits, are remedying this circumstance. So the time is ripe for a comprehensive 'scoping' of the theology sector in Australian Higher Education.

The Research Project

The Uncovering Theology project seeks to provide a comprehensive account of theology as a discipline in Australia. It aims to gather data to assist benchmarking both across the discipline and with comparable institutions, to identify best practice in teaching and learning, and to discern curriculum emphases in the sector, their strengths and weaknesses.

Related questions will include: to what extent does the growing use of flexible delivery shape curriculum and graduate outcomes? How does teaching theology as a discipline interact with some components servicing other disciplines? What approaches are being taken to identify, train and employ future staff, and how might these be better coordinated across the sector?

The project was established with a view to including all tertiary institutions teaching theology in Australia. Active participation by all such bodies will enable a full portrait to be drawn, so that all may benefit. Colleges will not be compared or ranked, nor any theological position excluded or favoured. The project will allow institutions to gain a clearer picture and greater sense of the sector as a whole.

The research will have both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. Quantitative data will be gathered as far as possible from existing sources – DEST and ANZATS publications and institution websites, supplemented as necessary with surveys. Qualitative data will be gained through a conspectus of historical information and college handbooks, interviews with key stakeholders (church leaders, college heads, key faculty, librarians, public servants) and surveys and/or focus groups with faculty, students, administrators and graduates.

The *Uncovering Theology* Report will be widely disseminated, with the hope that it might stimulate fuller co-operation and improved teaching and learning across the sector. The Chair of the project team, Professor Neil Ormerod from the Australian Catholic University, has said: 'This project marks the emergence of theology as a recognized component of the higher education sector in Australia. It will help shape the future of our discipline'. While Dr Mark Harding, Dean of the Australian College of Theology is reported: '*Uncovering Theology* is an exciting and historic development in Australian theological education. the project will for the first time establish the scope of the teaching of theology in this country. The final report will be essential reading for all theological educators.'

Aims

Teaching and learning within the disciplines

- To evaluate the needs, expectations and goals of stakeholders, including students, and how current curricula meet those needs
- To establish consensus on what would be a set of clear national standards for the sector in terms of quality of awards and a process for achieving and benchmarking quality outcomes

- To identify current areas of strength and potential resources in the discipline area, both nationally and internationally, and ensure their distribution across the theological sector
- To identify the impact on teaching and learning, and curricula, of the 'service' teaching which theology offers to other sectors
- To identify the needs of the sector for improving the quality of teaching and learning and to establish priorities and processes for meeting those needs

Structural development

- To develop a sector-wide strategic plan to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, set national standards, and meet the needs of stakeholders, including those sectors which engage with the discipline of theology in the main as a service provider
- To consolidate the role of the Committee of Deans of Theological Consortia and University Departments as a peak body in the discipline area across public and private providers, in taking responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning, and national standards across the sector.

International collaboration and benchmarking

- To formulate productive relationships with key international bodies, namely The Carnegie Foundation of the Advancement of Teaching (Clergy Study), The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, and the UK Higher Education Academy (Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies)
- To collaborate further, emphasizing benchmarking with:
 - those theological providers in New Zealand that have similar tertiary structures;
 - members of the Committee of Deans of Theological Consortia and University Departments; and,
 - various other theological bodies such as the Australia and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools (ANZATS)

Support and Management

Support for the *Uncovering Theology* project (\$Aust 100,000) has been provided by the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Ltd., an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The project was initiated and is being overseen by the Committee of Deans of Theological Consortia and University Departments. It is being administered through the Australian Catholic University.