

## Theology uncovered: where to now?

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Before having a few last words about *Uncovering Theology*, some thanks are due. I was delighted that Professor Gabrielle McMullen was able to come and launch the book, and particularly honoured by her analysis of its being at heart about spiritual ecumenism, Christian faith and service. I thought I'd written a rather 'dry' text, but to hear it received as a work of theology is most encouraging.

Secondly, I would like to thank ALTC for their support for the project, and more personally for their understanding and extension of time when I faced illness: as it happens, the extra months gave me time to move beyond the 'busy work' of gathering data and shape some more analytical framework. I can warmly recommend their training, too – the workshop attended in February 2008 proved to be invaluable, and I kept going back to the notes from those days to keep on track.

Sir John Carrick was generous in providing a Foreword, and I thank him sincerely for that.

The project team - Mark Harding, Neil Ormerod, Rob McIver and Gerard Moore – have been assiduous in responding to endless emails, participating in phone conferences and three face-to-face meetings. They were especially supportive in helping with the September workshop day, when my chemo was starting to bite.

Hilary Regan and ATF Press were our immediate thought when the idea of a book came into view. Our trust in them has been well rewarded, with the book arriving on time less than three weeks from the final version being submitted. Having skimmed a few chapters, I've already seen a few typos, for which I bear responsibility – and realized that some colleges names have already changed!

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After 30-odd years in teaching theology I found myself invited to the MCD as Registrar in 2003, with a focus on preparing it for the first AUQA audit of a theological college and also of a private Higher Education Provider. I knew about theological education, but nothing of government policies and departments. Little by little I became familiar with DEST and DET, ESOS and CRICOS, AUQA and IGS and RTF and so on and so forth. And now I have just finished eighteen months seeking to 'scope' Australian theological education, in part to help 'place' it within the wider higher education sector, and enable it to make its distinctive contribution.

Having finished the project, I'd like to take this opportunity to offer some notions regarding 'where to now?' from a personal perspective. They are shaped particularly by my involvement in AUQA as both an audit-ee and audit-or, and as ANZATS Executive Officer seeking to encourage understanding and reflection on the rapid changes taking place in higher education.

Last week I was in Alice Springs for the annual AUQA Forum. The major interest was the new *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency* – TEQSA – which will, from 2011, embrace both quality assurance and accreditation (assuming that the states co-operate). I have addressed this in a paper for the ANZATS Council, but want to pick up some ideas from a brilliant paper from Professor Chris Brink, of Newcastle University, England.

Professor Brink noted that by a university he meant a body which explored knowledge (research), transferred knowledge (teaching and learning) and was oriented to civic engagement, facing the long-term challenges and seeking to help make a better society. Standards are best kept high, he argued, through networking rather than competition, affirming diversity rather than imposing uniformity, embracing both the supply (curiosity-driven knowledge) and demand (skills-acquisition knowledge) sides of the 'knowledge economy'. All of this sounded to me very like the style of integrative, communal and formative learning which theological education seeks to embody, and was given a rapturous reception by the university types present!

Yet it also focused more clearly what I believe are the main learnings from the *Uncovering Theology* project, which I would like to set out under Professor Brink's heads:

### 1. Research – knowledge exploration

Theological education will wither if we do not continue to deepen our research activity, and so preserve the important nexus between teaching and research. By research I do not only mean the rigorous exploration of ancient texts, wrestling with new challenges in philosophy or new contexts for ministry. Ministry Studies has opened new vistas for research which integrates library-sourced and field-based

learning, and welcomes the recognition that researchers are participants. We need to get over the lingering suspicion of such approaches – without them, how can we discern God’s wisdom regarding climate change, gender perspectives, technology and the like, as these interact with liturgy, ethics, biblical interpretation, pastoral and prophetic ministry? Yet research is people and time-intensive, scattered across a range of diverse institutions and often squeezed in and around seminary work. Research – of whatever type – needs to be recognized as part of every faculty member’s Christian vocation to teach.

This next statement may be wishful thinking, but I would love to see the day when all Australian Higher Degrees by Research in theology are co-ordinated through and conferred by a single body, using the resources of the present consortia and university theology programmes.

## 2. Civic engagement – shaping society

Theological education is noteworthy for its emphasis on learning which integrates the various dimensions of living, and has a formative character – it both transforms and informs. We will be immeasurably weakened if we do not continue to see classroom, chapel, refectory, field placements, community life, political and cultural engagement as inseparably related in such education (and I include the university departments here).

If there is any place where the risk of wrestling with new ideas, challenging situations and the problems of living in this world can be pursued safely, it ought to be a theological institution. Debate around current issues will not be shirked in a theological college – but never to the point of unreconciled enmity. The wider curriculum will include exposure to the harsh sides of society, and to people different from those encountered in church and college.

Theological education will pursue civic engagement by learning from and contributing to wider higher education, bearing witness to a tradition which spans centuries rather than triennia. And – perhaps its greatest challenge - it will risk calling the churches whose support it needs to live in the light of the new creation, the transformed heavens-and-earth which is God’s covenanted promise in Christ.

## 3. Learning and teaching – knowledge transfer

Against this background, I have come to hold three strong opinions regarding the academic curriculum:

**First, a degree in theology / ministry will have at its centre sustained reflection on the scriptures, faith and life-context of the Christian church.** This means that – like a medicine, law or vet science degree – some 60-70% of the degree will be ‘core’. How this core material is covered can vary greatly, but will include awareness of the contexts in which it is learnt – in particular, the intertwined heritage of indigenous and immigrant Australia.

**Secondly, theological faculty will work hard on becoming more effective teachers.** A unit being taught for the eleventh time will be approached with fresh eyes – reading updated, assessment re-thought, new technologies included carefully etc. Most of us faculty learnt in age of talk-and-chalk – many students have grown up in the web-and-screen era. And faculty – especially in Systematic Theology, my own subject area along with Liturgy – will take care only to make disciples of Christ and not themselves.

**Thirdly, learning in theology / ministry has a transformative goal:** the point is not only to study the world, but change it. A theology graduate should experience their degree as equipping them to think, reflect, pray, live and lead from a Christian perspective, in the household of faith, the communities of kin, work and culture, and in wider society.

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In summary, I believe that theological education in Australia needs to take with full seriousness its vocation to explore in depth the knowledge of God – research; to communicate this knowledge widely and well – learning and teaching; and, with all God’s people, to live by faith in God’s promise to make all things new – a truly Christian civic engagement.

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