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From Queen of the Sciences to the Rebel Alliance: Religion in the University

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Within the history of Western universities, it may come as some surprise that in many cases the first or most prominent faculties and first chairs of study were in theology. There was a Theology Faculty at the University of Paris from 1253, and it was here that theology was dubbed the queen of the sciences, “Madame la haute science” (Haskins, 1957: 19). The Theological Faculty at the University of Tübingen was founded in 1477, in the same year that the university was founded.¹ In England, the University of Cambridge founded its first chair in 1502, the Lady Margaret’s Professorship in Divinity.² Such prominent Faculties of Theology attracted their share of famous scholars: Thomas Aquinas taught at Paris from 1252-1259; Erasmus of Rotterdam pioneered the study of the Greek New Testament at Cambridge from 1511.

Theological faculties in European universities performed well as they moved into the modern era. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Tübingen University in Germany nourished the radical biblical criticism of German theologians, Ferdinand Christian Baur founding the “Early Tübingen School” as a member of the Theology Faculty in 1826. At the same time, Cambridge University developed one of the most eminent Theology Faculties in the world, John Lightfoot’s New Testament commentaries in the nineteenth century challenging the radical German biblical criticism. At universities such as these, theology retained its high status, although perhaps no longer reigning as queen. Theology at Paris did not fare as well. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the theologians at Paris became out of step with the times, resisting intellectual and scientific advances.³ Added to that, and as a serious factor in its decline, the Faculty of Theology at Paris was too closely aligned with the Church in France which was itself corrupt and too closely aligned with the oppressive monarchy prior to the Revolution.

Departments of Studies in Religion,⁴ in comparison to university Faculties of Theology or Theological Colleges, appear rather late within Western universities, mostly within the second half of the twentieth century. In some cases, Schools of Divinity enlarged their programs to incorporate Studies in Religion, whilst retaining the title of School of Divinity. Others simply added "Religion" to their title, becoming Schools of Theology and Religion. In 1970, for example, Cambridge changed its course title to "Theology and Religious Studies", incorporating the study of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism alongside Christianity. With this change came some degree of change in focus. The Cambridge University website describes its present staff as "predominantly lay and includ[ing] members of most of the main Christian traditions, a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim",⁵ the dominance of the Semitic/Western religions still obvious. In some European universities, in Germany in particular, theology remains clearly dominant over Studies in Religion.

Theology held a similar high position early in the development of universities in the United States of America. The Hollis Professorship of Divinity at Harvard College, endowed in 1721, was the first professorship in what would become the USA.⁶ When the shift began to include Studies in Religion in university courses in the later part of the twentieth century, in many cases the early departments were hardly distinguishable from the theological colleges or Schools of Divinity from which they evolved or with which they were associated. In some institutions, there was a further shift towards a much clearer non-confessional Studies in Religion program. At Harvard Divinity School, even though a considerable part of the program is still Christian, Studies in Religion is much more clearly represented.⁷ The evolution of Studies in Religion has not been so convincing in institutions with a strong pattern of incorporating Studies in Religion within theological programs, a situation which currently applies in many Roman Catholic tertiary institutions in the USA, as well as some conservative Protestant denominational colleges and universities. In these institutions staff most often comprise Christian clergy or practising lay believers, and religion is studied exclusively through some kind of theological focus.⁸

The introduction of departments of Studies in Religion in Australian universities did not follow the pattern of Europe and the USA. Early Australian universities were secular faculty-based institutions and did not include Schools of Theology, although some religion and theology was taught indirectly, generally as an aspect of study within history or sociology or similar disciplines. Theology was taught sometimes in religiously-based residential colleges affiliated with the university, for example at the Melbourne College of Divinity, founded in 1910 (Markwell, 2001). Apart from university-affiliated colleges, there were seminaries and theological colleges to cater for the education of ordained ministers from the various Christian denominations. A new trend began with the establishment of a Bachelor of Divinity, as a second degree at the University of Sydney from 1937, and as a second degree at University of Queensland from 1953, moving to a first

degree in the mid-1960s. On the University of Queensland campus, the degree was administered through the Department of English, with one full-time lecturer and several part-time lecturers. In 1975, the University of Queensland established a Department of Studies in Religion, phasing out the Divinity students over the next nine years.⁹ It is now the largest Department of Studies in Religion in Australia. Sydney University established Studies in Religion around the same time as the University of Queensland, but it was not until 1992/3 that the university combined the former Department of Religious Studies with the postgraduate offerings of the School of Divinity.¹⁰ For most of the second half of the twentieth century, the theological college in Australia continued to lie outside the university setting altogether, or was only loosely associated with it.

In the last ten years or so in the Australian tertiary sector, Colleges of Theology or Divinity have begun to form ties with universities for the purpose of offering undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. At the same time, the Australian Catholic University, founded in 1991, introduced a School of Religion and Philosophy, which was transformed in 1994 into a Sub-Faculty of Philosophy and Theology within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences with four campus-based Schools of Theology in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra.

At times the trend to form ties between universities and theological colleges has been interpreted cynically as little more than a move by the universities to increase their student numbers (Markwell, 2001). Admittedly, Studies in Religion in Australia is struggling to keep its place, most departments having endured a number of restructuring rounds during which they have had to fight for recognition and for visibility. As “targeting” becomes the new key word in the tertiary sector, both for postgraduate scholarships and for research grants, Studies in Religion must fight on all fronts for funding for both teaching and research. The promise of increased student numbers is now not enough to drive alliances with theological colleges, even if it once was. The example of growth in student numbers at the University of New England provides a salutary lesson. Since its inception in 1992 at the University of New England, Studies in Religion has grown each year, in 2002 alone with a 34% increase in undergraduate numbers to take the total of undergraduate students to 571. Even with such numbers, without a specific program to attract external fee-paying students or non-government funding of some kind, such numbers are deemed by a Faculty staffing formula to merit just one staff position. No matter how many HECS students a department has, a very bleak future looms if there is no outside funding from such ventures as courses for fee-paying students, consulting, or entrepreneurial activity of some kind.

To focus exclusively on the increase in numbers that may come to universities by alliances with theological colleges is to overlook the immense benefit to theological colleges of having links with the secular university system, in regard to both physical and human resources. For some theological colleges, having postgraduates work jointly between the college and a secular university adds credibility to a postgraduate degree. The increased awareness of university

programs by theological students is also presenting opportunities not previously considered. Within the last five years, there have been some applications for postgraduate study at the University of New England from students who might normally have looked elsewhere for a postgraduate program. Good students from the communities of the Seventh Day Adventists and the Assemblies of God have shown that they can succeed at academic critical work in theology at the University of New England while still remaining committed to their own traditions. Those who come to study at the University of New England do so knowing that they will be studying theology within the context of a Studies in Religion program and perspective. These students prize the qualification that proves their ability in the secular tertiary arena.

The opening up of possibilities for theology students can be seen in other areas. A School of Theology was established in 1991 at Griffith University, as the result of an agreement between the university and the Brisbane College of Theology (the agreement was renewed in 1997). The agreement initially covered the co-ordination of supervision of Research Higher Degree students. However, the School now also manages the theology section of the University combined degrees of a BA/BTheol, and a proposed B.Hum.Serv./BTheol, as well as a Master of Theology coursework degree. Without the breadth of programs offered by the university, the Brisbane College of Theology would never have been able to put forward the combined degrees.

One particularly pleasing result of the growing ties between universities and theological colleges is the recent trend towards joint applications of scholars from both locations for Australian Research Council grants. Benefits from such ventures flow both ways. The universities, as the traditional locus for such applications, can provide the needed credibility to the theological research venture, and the theological colleges can provide able scholars to help build research teams for the often small group of Studies in Religion scholars in the universities.

Just over five years ago I stated in my 1997 AASR Presidential address that “we must be careful of the development of university interest in theology as a possible new direction, even if only within postgraduate programs, and how we are perceived by others within and outside the academy as this happens” (Franzmann, 1997: 11). Circumstances have changed for former departments of Studies in Religion, so that they can no longer afford to emphasise their very distinctiveness from theological colleges and remain isolated from them. While the struggle for numbers might have been the initial interest in alliances with theological colleges, it is necessary to ask now who will be a reasonable partner in such an enterprise.

The Studies in Religion website for the University of Queensland gives a list of religion and theology courses of study in Australian universities. Interestingly the Studies in Religion courses are far outnumbered by theology and would be more so if the list were complete.¹¹ Browsing the web sites gives a fair indication of how the universities involved in theological studies perceive their function.

Griffith University's School of Theology emphasises the fostering of scholarship at an advanced level, providing postgraduate programs, research training, inquiry and publication. One of the last objectives is to develop programs that are partially a response to the spiritual, social and cultural needs of the community.¹²

Australian Catholic University sets its Bachelor of Theology program firmly within the Catholic theological tradition, although suggesting that it offers an ecumenical and inter-faith perspective especially on contemporary issues. It tries to "encounter imaginatively and compassionately the pluriformity of religious faiths in this country, and reflect critically on the fundamental dimensions of religion".¹³

Murdoch University's website states that theology is not Religious Studies, which it says seeks to do the same as it does, but more in overview in relation to the religions of the world. Like Religious Studies, theology has a rigorous commitment to open, critical study. Indeed theology welcomes Religious Studies as a neighbouring discipline.¹⁴

At Flinders University, a Bachelor of Theology is offered in association with the Adelaide College of Divinity (ACD). The aim of the program is to deepen the understanding and expression of Christian faith, by a specific "study of Christian traditions and thought". The web site is at pains to point out that the BTheol is not a course in Religious Studies, which looks at religion from the perspective of other disciplines such as history, philosophy, anthropology or psychology. Unfortunately there is no information about the perspectives from which one does theology, although the reader is assured that it is a very rigorous study.¹⁴

The websites make it clear that there is an extensive range of approaches to theology and religion, not all of which seem suited to a tertiary environment. In relation to the approach to the study of theology, what some universities may not have recognized is that theological colleges may be facing their own challenges that will have implications for any university partner. Among these challenges is a sharper polarization in some colleges between a new conservatism and a liberalism, both within the lecturing body and also within the student body, which creates a tension particularly in colleges in which traditional or conservative ecclesiastical perspectives are increasingly prescriptive. What Thursby noted of Roman Catholic institutions in the USA, for example, could equally apply to Roman Catholic institutions in Australia. In the global shift to a more conservative stance within "official" Catholicism, as Thursby writes: "the test of faith is prior to any test of research adequacy".¹⁶ The same is true of many conservative Protestant theological colleges in Australia. Some colleges focus almost exclusively on ordination requirements for a particular denomination and have a very traditional approach to the structuring of the study of theology into fixed disciplinary areas that do not sit

easily with the exploration of cross-disciplinary approaches.¹⁷ What kind of challenges within the theological colleges do universities want to be a part of? If theology came under fire at Paris because it was resistant to new ways of thinking and new scientific methods, coupled with too close an alliance with the Church, then there are certain theological colleges which exhibit much the same tendencies and with which it would be perilous for universities to be aligned.

I have already mentioned the new research alliances between some universities and theological colleges. Advancing mutual academic goals like high-level research between institutions is a worthwhile first step. If alliances are to last and to have good outcomes, then a "total package" approach may be the most beneficial for the enterprise. Teaching together is good, but without mutual research interests that integrate with that teaching, and a clear willingness to strive for excellence in academic research, then the alliance may not be worth the effort of forging it.

Other partnerships, apart from those with theological colleges, might prove beneficial for Studies in Religion in raising the profile of Studies in Religion and in keeping the community at large interested. Nowhere is the field more fallow at this moment than in the area of the secondary schools. In New South Wales, for example, there has been a rise in popularity for Studies in Religion as a HSC subject. 2,618 students first sat the HSC examination for unit 1 Studies in Religion in 1993; in 2001 there were 10,352. Two years ago, Studies in Religion was the tenth most popular subject for the HSC; last year it was the sixth most popular subject.¹⁸ It behoves the AASR to make something of this groundswell of interest, and to attempt to forge alliances between teachers and the university and make that mutually beneficial to both parties. Within the current AASR membership, there are people who might formerly have belonged only to the national Association for Religious Education (AARE). With the broadening of the base of membership for the AASR comes a new awareness of the need to consider the interests of members who are teachers in secondary schools, and to learn from their experience with Studies in Religion in that context.

One negative note must be sounded. In former times it was taken for granted that, when all else failed, at least other departments of Studies in Religion would offer support for those experiencing difficulties. The AASR and its conferences were always a way of strengthening the ties between individual departments and individual scholars. Regrettably this is no longer the case. The largest Australian university departments of Studies in Religion have very few staff now who belong to the AASR. With the decline of commitment from these formerly strong members, the support of colleagues is weakened. It seems shortsighted of such departments to forego this forum.

The title of this paper might be a little misleading. While I might suggest that theology has a place in a Studies in Religion program, there are clearly many who disagree with me and see the two areas of study as quite distinct. In that sense, as a distinct area of study, religion has never been "Queen of the Sciences". For a time,

towards the last quarter of last century, Studies in Religion may have seemed like an upstart newcomer with good prospects, but its fortunes have waned and it is perhaps in danger of being swamped by the rather more regally inclined theology. It is Studies in Religion that has its back to the wall in so many places, and must fight the growing dark empire of economic rationalism and entrepreneurial enterprises. Studies in Religion can only survive if it finds worthwhile alliances, but we must be careful where we consider such alliances. We must not form the ties at any cost, to the academic detriment of our programs.

Endnotes

¹ <http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/ev-theologie/vorsteng.html> (accessed 2/7/02).

² <http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/faculty/History.html> (accessed 2/7/02).

³ <http://www.sorbonne.fr/Serveur%20WEB/Arborescence/2-Historique/H07A.html> (accessed 2/7/02).

⁴ The name (Studies in Religion, Religious Studies) and structure (School, Department,...) of such areas of study vary. In this address, I will use "Department of Studies in Religion" to cover all the variations.

⁵ <http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/faculty/History.html> (accessed 2/7/02).

⁶ <http://www.bostontheological.org/timeline.htm> (accessed 2/7/02).

⁷ Harvard Divinity School advertises its program in three areas as Area I: Scripture and Interpretation; Area II: Christianity and Culture; Area III: Religions of the World; <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/history.html> (accessed 2/7/02).

⁸ For a good overview of the situation in the USA, see Gene Thursby's "U.S. Departments of Religion: A Brief Historical Sketch" at <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/rel/depts-hy.htm> (accessed 2/7/02).

⁹ My thanks to Dr. Ian Gillman for filling in the details of the history at the University of Queensland for me. The history of the development of Studies in Religion in Australian universities is not easy to piece together, and details are very sparse on university web pages.

¹⁰ <http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/religion/about/details.shtml#hist> (accessed 2/7/02).

¹¹ "Religious Studies and Theological Programs in Australia and New Zealand" at <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/rel/depts-au.htm> (accessed 2/7/02).

¹² <http://www.gu.edu.au/cgi-bin/frameit?http://www.gu.edu.au:80/school/thl/content5.html> (accessed 2/7/02).

¹³ <http://www.acu.edu.au/theology/> (accessed 2/7/02).

¹⁴ <http://wwwsoc.murdoch.edu.au/theology/info/whatistheology.htm> (accessed 2/7/02).

¹⁵ <http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/theology/courses/undergrad.php> (accessed 2/7/02).

¹⁶ For a good overview, see Gene Thursby's "U.S. Departments of Religion: A Brief Historical Sketch" at <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/rel/depts-hy.htm> (accessed 2/7/02).

¹⁷ My thanks to Dr. Elaine Wainwright of Griffith University for the ideas she offered in discussion about these points.

¹⁸ For these figures, see the Statistics Archive for the NSW Board of Studies at http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/bos_stats/index.html (accessed 2/7/02).

References

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http://www.trinity.unimelb.edu.au/publications/papers/TP_19a.pdf (2/7/02).