Making Space for Theological Research in the New Environment of Australian Higher Education

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The paper examines 2 recent Australian government issues papers on higher education and research policy, indicating areas both of concern and opportunity for Australian higher education providers in theology and their research efforts. The paper then offers suggestions as to how providers of theological education might position themselves as research institutions in the emerging higher education environment in Australia, and how educational policymakers might regard research in the theological sector of Australian higher education.

This paper is directed, within the new research environment in Australia, to 2 groups of readers: those concerned with the administration of theological institutions, and those whose responsibility it is to draft policy with regard to research funding. To the theological institutions I want to say: (1) become more familiar with the emerging higher education culture, especially as it affects research, and pay attention to ensuring your institution’s own quality assurance controls; (2) avoid being sidelined in the new environment, seek strategic partnerships with other institutions with a similar vision and mission to your own; and (3) attempt to state clearly the role and value of your own discipline in the Australia of the 21st Century. To the policymakers I say: recognise the value of research done, often in small private but not-for-profit institutions, in the theological and biblical disciplines. Recognise it as genuine research. Listen to the particular needs of these institutions, which may be quite different from larger institutions with more attention-grabbing research profiles.

To Theological Institutions: The new research environment is here to stay

The brave new world of Australian higher education policy in the new century’s first decade is set out in two recent discussion papers issued by the federal government’s Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST, 2005a, 2005b). Building University Diversity: future approval and accreditation processes for higher education maps the globalised environment in which higher education now finds itself, and suggests a way in which Australian higher education providers might position themselves in this environment. It is a discussion paper, but with the government now holding a firm
majority in both houses of federal parliament, it is hard to avoid seeing it as a policy
document. As well as positioning Australian higher education in the “changed global
environment” (DEST, 2005a, p. 29), the discussion paper sets down a problem area
for theologians: How do we make space for our research interests and priorities in the
new world of Australian higher education?

In this paper, DEST distinguishes three sorts of higher education providers in
Australia: universities, overseas higher education providers that operate in Australia
(and “operate” is defined), and non-self-accrediting higher education providers
(DEST, 2005a, 2.5–2.8). Theology is done in the newer self-accrediting universities
(first group)—the older universities in Australia (founded after the University of
Sydney and before Monash University) being barred from teaching “divinity”—or in
denominational theological colleges accredited every five years by state education
departments (third group). Some theological institutions, such as the Melbourne
College of Divinity (the second oldest in the country and a major contributor to
theological research), fit none of the categories and are all but dismissed as “historic
anomalies” (DEST, 2005a, 4.41).

The paper goes on to distinguish between public not-for-profit institutions and
private for-profit institutions. Most theological colleges are private but not-for-
profit—so again, where does theology fit? The establishment of new private
universities is seen as progress, and therefore good. It is noted that “corporate
universities”—a term unsettlingly reminiscent of Umberto Eco’s department of
oxymorons (Eco, 1988, pp. 74–75)—“have not yet developed in Australia”
(DEST, 2005a, 3.23). Even more unsettling is the summary of debate about the
teaching–research nexus. The advocates of research-based teaching are respectfully
quoted, but then undercut by a reference to Humboldt as, supposedly, the originator
of this idea. While it is true that universities modelled on Humboldt’s understanding
of higher education typically institutionalise a preference for research over under-
graduate teaching, this is in no way the same thing as the research-based teaching
advocated by Kogan and others (DEST, 2005a, 4.15, 4.16).

The paper proposes three sorts of activity undertaken by higher education
providers and their staff: teaching, scholarship, and research. If any two of these are
present (DEST, 2005a, 4.27), then the institution has the sufficient conditions to be
a genuine higher education provider. Though several different definitions of
“scholarship” are given (DEST, 2005a, 4.22, 4.24), just how it may be differentiated
from research is never fully spelt out. What is clear is that a divide has been
established here between two sorts of higher education provider in Australia: a group
of elite research institutions and a class of teaching institutions—the latter being
classified as genuine higher education providers none the less because they are also
places of scholarship. In paragraph 4.23, it is apparently scholarship that places
“teachers in universities on par with researchers” (DEST, 2005, p. 23). But this also,
despite the assertion of parity, drives a wedge between scholarship and teaching on
the one hand and research on the other. One suspects the definition of scholarship—
it could mean as little as “keeping up with your reading”—is being kept deliberately
rubbery so it can be wheeled in and out at will by accreditation panels. There is
certainly no acknowledgement here of any recent exploration, for example that by
Boyer (1990), of the nature of scholarship. Some Australian institutions are now
interpreting “scholarship” to refer to the academic qualifications of teaching staff.
Part of the problem here may be simply linguistic. In English, research, like science,
covers a more limited range of significances than in some other European languages
(recherche/Forschung; science/Wissenschaft). The resulting tendency to subordinate
non-scientific to scientific academic activities has led some theologians to want to
insist on the scientific character of their discipline. Lonergan (1972) provided an
influential exposition of the research element in theology, and more recently,
Murphy (1990) has sought to apply Imre Lakatos’ notion of the “research project” to
the same discipline. In the current climate, where scholarship appears at risk of
subordination to research, there is a need to assert the research quality of theological
(and humanities generally) research.

The future of theological research in Australia may be less of a problem where
theological teaching and research are carried on within established universities. But
where theology is already marginalised in either non-self-accrediting institutions like
the majority of theological colleges or in specialised self-accrediting institutions such
as the Melbourne College of Divinity, DEST poses the potentially serious threat that
such institutions may be reduced to a teaching-only status. (DEST, 2005a) The
space for theological research in such institutions is made, however, by the provision
that the research activity of an institution is defined in part by whether that
institution is accredited to award research degrees (DEST, 2005a, 3.7). The paper
proposes, wisely in my opinion, that there be a minimum of three fields of study (of
the 12 broad fields defined in the Australian Standard Classification of Education)
present for a higher education provider to be a university (DEST, 2005a, 4.30). But
equally wisely this is complemented by the provision that a higher education provider
may specialise (DEST, 2005a, 4.31), and indeed may be self-accrediting, though
without the title “university”. It is in such specialised institutions, providing teaching
at both undergraduate and graduate levels and research, that theology may find a
space for itself in this new environment. The discussion paper’s optimistic
predictions of North American style patronage of such institutions, however, seem
unlikely to materialise in the Australian context. And such a development may not
even be desirable. Theology is a public activity, and should be publicly funded as
well as publicly accountable. But the paper does ensure that theological research may
be carried out—as a public educational activity, publicly accountable—in specialist
institutions within the national framework.

While it provides rather less gripping reading matter than Building University
Diversity, the second of the recent departmental issues papers provides a greater
number of solid, thoughtful questions and recommendations. Research Quality
Framework: Assessing the quality and impact of research in Australia looks again at the
possible “future changes in the formal nexus between teaching and research”
(DEST, 2005b, p. 15). For reasons given above, I would see this as a potential threat
to theological research. It is worth noting that any mention of scholarship has disappeared entirely in this document. It is possible, however, to identify here a number of possible suggestions favourable to theological research, as well as recommendations highlighting areas where improvement is needed in the way theological research is currently conducted.

Diversity and sustainability are two of the four key principles guiding the Australian government’s higher education reforms, with the need for diversity in particular being mentioned at various points in this document (DEST, 2005b, p. 12, 13, 16, 17). There is recognition that any one size fits all approach is unlikely to be appropriate to the complexity of disciplines and research areas. This is a hopeful sign for theology as a minority discipline in Australian higher education.

The recognition of varying timeframes for the conclusion of research, and varying lengths of time for research projects to have a definitive impact (DEST, 2005b, p. 14) may also be to theology’s advantage. It should not become an excuse for laxity in higher degree completions, but it does acknowledge that some forms of research take longer than others to have a flow-on effect to the wider community or even the communities to which they are principally directed. Few theological monographs have immediate impact on local churches. Linked to this is the recognition that there are non-economic as well as economic impacts of some varieties of research (DEST, 2005b, p. 15, 23). It goes without saying that theology is not normally seen as providing impressive economic impacts.

Specific missions of institutions might preclude applying a common set of measures across all institutions (DEST, 2005b, p. 18). On the face of it, this provision would allow the research output of theological higher education providers to be assessed against a set of measures agreed to be appropriate to them. This would also seem to be the point of the comment that the measures should be appropriate to the discipline: “The metrics should be able to be adjusted according to the particular shape of disciplines” (DEST, 2005b, p. 20). However, some higher education providers are to be designated as “less research intensive” (DEST, 2005b, p. 17) than others. Assuming that theological teaching at its best is informed by the research activities of the teachers this provision has to be seen as constituting a threat to theological research.

There is a proposal that articles published, or research cited, in the popular press may count as research data (DEST, 2005b, p. 21). Depending on the definition of popular press, this could favour the counting of a great deal of popular and semi-popular theology in church and secular papers. Its danger is that it could also give free range to any self-published journals in pop-spirituality, so some agreed evaluation criteria would need to be applied. I begin to suggest some criteria below by suggesting a way of looking at theological research that distinguishes it from popular religious writing.

“Researchers at different stages of their careers” (DEST, 2005b, p. 27) may be assessed differently. Many students undertaking degree-level work (including research higher degrees) in theology tend to be older than researchers in other
areas. Where the document speaks of “researchers returning after periods of leave” (DEST, 2005b, p. 27), this would seem to assume that the person has been a researcher earlier in their career, but this could have been in a different discipline area—especially if we are to take the encouragement to cross-disciplinary research seriously (DEST, 2005b, p. 26).

Who among the staff of a higher education provider should be assessed: all eligible staff or only such as are designated? (DEST, 2005b, p. 27). While flexibility here would allow for the part-time lecturers that many theological colleges depend on to deliver their courses, it also allows for teaching-only staff with no research responsibilities. This could in turn tend to drive a wedge between teaching and research. Greater cooperation between theological institutions will be an important means of maintaining ongoing viability in the emerging higher education environment.

All of the above offer some encouraging signs for theological research in the emerging policy environment in Australian higher education. Some of the signs need, however, to be treated with caution, and above all, theological providers will need to take steps to clarify for themselves the areas of threat and opportunity and to position themselves accordingly. There are also some clear indications of areas in need of improvement in the way we conduct, and even think of, theological research.

Alongside diversity and sustainability as governing principles in the current round of educational reforms come two others: quality and equity. These are less obvious in some areas of theological research. Quality can be improved by applying the quality assurance measures most higher education providers have developed over recent years. As for equity, higher education providers will need to look at their own entrance requirements and ensure they comply with accepted standards. Smaller theological colleges have over recent years been encouraged to dispense with tests such as statements of personal faith to determine who may enrol in courses.

Impacts and benefits of public investment in research (DEST, 2005b, p. 10) will need to be shown. This is more difficult—what are the impacts and benefits of theological research, except to the researcher him- or herself? Maybe this is a question research students in theology, and writers of theological articles and books, need to ask themselves and to articulate publicly within their work. While it is good that the paper recognises the possibilities of non-economic as well as economic impacts of some varieties of research (DEST, 2005b, p. 15, 23), it is still possible—especially in the case of some cross-disciplinary theological research—to link such research with the designated national research priorities. Where possible this should be done. This in turn is connected with the emphasis on strategic planning of research (DEST, 2005b, p. 29). Researchers can be assessed on their planning and collaboration as well as on previous research performance. Theological research has often tended to be individualistic (the scholar working alone in a library or study) and backward-looking (what book or article has the scholar produced), rather than a collaborative team effort that looks forward to the strategic needs of the discipline or institutions. Theological schools need to note the 1999 reform that encourages “higher education providers to adopt a strategic approach to the setting of goals and
management of their research and research training activities” (DEST, 2005b, p. 29, 39), and inform prospective students and collaborative research partners as to how a particular higher education provider has chosen to direct research and research training activities. These will surely be criteria for the evaluation of all research, including theology, in the future.

Encouragement of early career researchers (DEST, 2005b, p. 27) is worth noting. Theological schools are not noted for employing early career researchers, and could give greater attention to this. Theological colleges and consortia already tend to have impressive but often informal international and cross-disciplinary links based on personal friendships. These need to be fostered and formalised through student exchanges. International benchmarking (DEST, 2005b, p. 45) is in principle good for theological teaching and research in Australia, but care needs to be taken that partnerships fostered are with accredited and respected overseas institutions.

Quality and accountability (or transparency) (DEST, 2005b, pp. 45–46) are encouraged in both discussion papers. The greatest opportunity offered in these papers is for specialist institutions accredited for serious research as well as teaching. Like all education in these market-driven times, theology has to be practical, it has to impart skills, and it has to be accountable to the various stakeholders who finance it. Theological teachers need to take account of the interests of their own graduates, their current students, of employers of their graduates and of those whom they hope will employ their current students—and the wider community. Serious research will also inevitably include matters that are inherently not quantifiable. Theological higher education providers need to rise to the challenge to claim unapologetically the value of what they already do well, and to improve in the areas in which they do less well. The two discussion papers are invaluable guides to the territory, the new environment, we have now entered.

To Policymakers: Theological research is here to stay

None of what has been said here about the place of theology in the current higher education environment need be out of step with the provisions of a liberal education (MacIntyre, 2001, p. 31), nor—more importantly—with the specific and peculiar calling of theology to speak the things pertaining to that concept-breaking reality that Judeo-Christian-Islamic civilisations know under some form of the name of God. That specific and peculiar vocation of theology is discussed within the theological discipline itself, and is not the theme of the current paper. This paper will also restrict theology to its Christian significance. For the benefit of policymakers, it is important to say something of the theological discipline itself before attempting to outline what might constitute academic theological research.

Theology might best be described as a business in the way indigenous Australians have taught us to use the term—in the sense of knowledge, or wisdom, that is accessed only through initiation. And into which the initiate grows throughout a
lifetime. Theology is a discipline, an *askesis*, with its own rules and technical terminology and its own common methodological understandings that have to be learnt and adhered to. Not all—not even all who publicly adhere to religious belief—feel the need to undertake this discipline. But it is in principle open to all, even those who feel no need to adhere to religious belief. That is to say, theology is not a secret activity, not a *disciplina arcana*. Like education itself, it is a public activity. It is open and answerable to the wider community. Australian providers of theological education are, as part of their accreditation processes, rightly expected to eschew the application of any religious test to their students.

Despite this—and here I will briefly venture into the intra-theological debate—theology is not in my opinion simply a cognitive activity. At the risk of contradicting what I have just said about theology being a public activity, I have always preferred the older definition of theology, from Evagrius of Pontus (346–399 CE), to the newer and better known definition “faith seeking understanding” from Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109 CE). According to Evagrius ‘If you are a theologian, you pray truly, and if you pray truly, you are a theologian’ (Louth, p. 4). What attracts me to this definition is that Evagrius speaks about the person who does theology rather than an abstract notion of theology, and so avoids Anselm’s tendency to intellectualise the task of theology. Anselm’s definition historically marks the beginning of the dissociation of sensibility noted by Andrew Louth (Louth, p. 16). In institutional and political terms, it appears at a point in western history when theory and practice were beginning to diverge. Theology is not simply or primarily a matter of understanding, some sort of cognitive effort, but a *holistic* enterprise involving the totality of the person. It is not something separate from spirituality, but integrally bound into it. Theology is of course not alone in having this integrative and holistic character. It starts with communal experiences of God, and from there attempts to address the real everyday questions that people actually ask, both inside and outside of communities of faith. Theological research starts with enquiry.

And theology has the potential to touch every part of one’s being. The non-cognitive elements of being human have recently started to receive greater attention in the management literature.

In leadership development processes, taking the step to uncover one’s ideal self is so important. But many such programs are based on the assumption that the individual simply wants to maximise his performance at work. They skip that vital exploration and neglect to link individual’s learning goals with their dreams and aspirations for the future. (Goleman et al., 2002, pp. 118–119)

The ideal self is examined and developed not in skills training (with its typical direction to performance enhancement), but in what theology would call spiritual direction, aimed at holistic personal growth. This distinction is comparable to the distinction between instrumental (performance-defined) and communicative (learning-defined) conceptions of educational quality (Barnett, 1992, p. 7), the latter being
linked with what contemporary management theorists are increasingly referring to as “emotional intelligence”.

Small wonder that improvement plans crafted around learning—rather than performance outcomes—have been found most effective. … The best kind of learning agenda helps you focus on what you want to become—your own ideal—rather than someone else’s ideal of what you should be. It should lead to setting meaningful standards of performance, rather than taking on an arbitrary, normative standard for success that may or may not fit with personal goals. When crafting specific, manageable learning goals, it works best to tie them in to goals that motivate you and ignite your full range of talents. (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 141)

None of this should be taken to suggest that every theological teacher or researcher possesses either emotional intelligence or the ability to “ignite” their students’ full range of talents. Theological education is not a necessary condition for its emergence. But theological education, and more especially theological research, is an activity that may—other conditions being favourable—allow its emergence. The Melbourne Age on Friday March 25, 2005, Good Friday, carried—not surprisingly—several “religious” stories. One was by the social researcher Hugh Mackay, who observed:

Many Australians have distanced themselves from the institutional church, while still being keenly interested in the development of their own spirituality. Indeed, in the present climate of mistrust of institutions, many people who yearn for a more meaningful and fulfilling life would regard the church as an unlikely place to go for guidance. (McKay, 2005, p. 23)

There is a renewed interest abroad in matters of religious faith, in spirituality, though this does not necessarily find institutional expression in church attendance. This makes religion a very current theme—and religion not simply in the old comparative sense of an anthropological study of someone else’s beliefs, nor in the more political science sense of a consideration of institutions and their social roles, but in a way that goes beyond the modernist divide between subject and object and seeks to see the world in a new way. Theological education acknowledges from the outset that phenomena, including religious phenomena, can only be understood from within a community. Where the older religious studies programmes attempted a certain objective distance from their subject matter, theology quite consciously operates in the tension between such communal belonging and the fundamental openness to public critique I have spoken of above.

Many Australians who would never think of going to church do think of studying Christian theology as part of their personal spiritual quest. By personal I do not mean individualistic: it necessarily takes place within a scholarly community that avoids both “undue outside pressure” and also “excesses of irresponsible individualism” (Reeves, 1988, p. 47). That is to say, it is quite intentionally directed to building up that common social possession known variously as “cultural capital” (Barnett, 1992,
pp. 20–21) or “social capital” (Cox, 1995, passim). If this is a helpful pointer towards the nature of theological education, it is even more useful as a description of theological research. In the same Good Friday edition of The Age, there is an interview with a young research scientist turned theological student, and a then Anglican priest. “Most modernists consider faith and reason opposites,” she says reflecting on her own transition, ‘though postmodernists can accommodate both quite easily.’ And even more pertinently, commenting on the difference between scientific research—of the sort mentioned at the start of this article—and the theological search: “What I miss in science is that chase, the puzzle. Putting this bit here and that bit there. But there is still a puzzle; it’s a different puzzle, with different-shaped pieces” (Zwartz, 2005, p. 19).

While theological education may be—but by no means necessarily is—directed to the acquisition of certain vocational skills for ministry, the primary purpose of theological research is almost without exception directed to the personal growth of the researcher. It is a matter of learning in which the curriculum is entirely set by the learner. People do theological research because they want to participate in something bigger than themselves and thus grow, not simply in understanding, but deeper into something to which they feel drawn in an undeniable sense of affective commitment. There is still of course a place for scholarship, and this is the making of books, to which there is no end: the translations, the critical editions, the commentaries, the thematic re-presentations of old debates in new language, and the arduous attempts to draw out ethical consequences of all these activities. The line of demarcation between such scholarship and research is not easy to identify. Biblical research could be described as the thematic and textual analysis of texts held to be sacred within a given religious tradition; theological research as the systematic and philosophical enquiry into doctrine accepted as normative by a given religious community. Indeed, these activities can coherently be described in terms of research analogous to any other field of research. But real research in theology is, above all, search, into the deepest desires of the soul, and enquiry as to our relation to the mysterious Other who grasps us and will not let us go. Search may lead to results but the results are less concrete in some disciplines than others. Even in the hard physical sciences, results are not always immediately recognised by the experts in the field. In theology, the results of enquiry, undertaken communally, will tend to clarify the questions people ask, above all the questions of the researcher him- or herself, against the background of the Christian thought-world. It is this that distinguishes academic theological research from publishing in popular religion or spirituality. And whether we acknowledge it or not, this worldview continues to frame our encounter in western cultures with our physical and metaphysical environs.

My plea to policymakers is to view theological education and research as legitimate public academic activities. Serious theological research needs to be adequately funded, and theological providers of higher education need to be taken seriously as real contributors to the nation’s social capital. Private, not-for-profit institutions need to be recognised as such, rather than being allowed to fall between the two
more obvious stools of public not-for-profit and private for-profit. The secular nature of Australian culture means that American-style private patronage of such institutions is unlikely to emerge here, and this reality needs to be honestly acknowledged.

Conclusion

The separation of teaching (albeit scholarship-based) and research is not a purely Australian phenomenon, and in the new environment globally it seems to be inevitable:

I suspect that the future will bring about a widening gap between certain privileged centres of research and post-doctoral training and those colleges and universities devoted more explicitly to teaching. This may indeed prove unavoidable; but both enterprises will be losers. (Steiner, 1997, p. 42)

George Steiner’s suggestion here is that this current phase may pass. But in the meantime the danger is that theological research could be reduced, in Lakatos’ terms, to a merely “degenerative” status, that is one of shoring up an existing theoretical framework. This paper has attempted an appeal both to providers of theological education at the tertiary level and to policymakers. I have urged the theological institutions to take the time to become acquainted with the emerging higher education culture, especially as it affects research, to pay attention to ensuring their institution’s own quality assurance controls, to seek strategic partnerships with other institutions with similar visions and missions to their own, and to attempt to state clearly the role and value of the theological disciplines in the contemporary Australian research environment. I have urged policymakers, for whom theology may well appear, if at all, merely as a somewhat anachronistic exception in the general taxonomy of academic disciplines, to recognise the value of research done in the theological and biblical disciplines and the importance of the institutions in which such research is carried out.

References


