

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO ACADEMIC FREEDOM

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The question of academic freedom in schools and higher education is contentious and its implications and applications will vary from discipline to discipline. Any attempt to develop a charter of academic freedoms will need to take into account discipline-specific features present in the range of disciplines taught in school and higher education settings. The issue of academic freedom in a theological context has been highlighted by a recent Carrick Institute (now the Australian Learning and Teaching Council) project, “Uncovering Theology”, initiated by the Committee of Deans of Theological Consortia and University Schools. The Committee is a peak body of theological providers in Australia and New Zealand, and has representatives from all the major theological consortia in Australia and New Zealand and from those universities and colleges which contain schools of theology.²

One outcome of that project has been a paper, “Academic Freedom in a Theological Context” which I authored and has been published by the Australian College of Theology as an occasional paper. In that paper, which I provide along with this present submission, I note how the issue of academic freedom unfolds within a theological context. Theology has a long and honoured place within higher education. Many of the world’s oldest and most respected universities were founded for the purpose of teaching theology – universities such as Bologna, Paris, Leuven, Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and Princeton – and many continue to the present in providing theological programs. The tradition of academic freedom promoted in such institutions was not seen as incompatible with the faith commitment of theologians. However, to people operating from an increasingly secular horizon, such faith commitment would be viewed as anathema to academic freedom. I explore this issue in more detail in my paper.

In Australia theological education is largely provided by Church-based theological colleges with accreditation from state accrediting agencies, though there are some universities which offer theological awards in conjunction with theological colleges or in their own right – Australian Catholic University, University of Notre Dame Australia, Charles Sturt University, Flinders University, Murdoch University and, more recently, Newcastle University. Among the private approved Higher Education Providers (HEPs) there are over 6,000 EFTSL enrolled in

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² The Australian membership of the Committee consists of representatives from Table A, Table B and from non-self-accrediting colleges: Adelaide College of Divinity (linked with Flinders University); Australian Catholic University; Australian College of Theology; Avondale College; Brisbane College of Theology; Charles Sturt University (incorporating St Mark’s National Theological College and the United Theological College); Melbourne College of Divinity; Perth College of Divinity (linked with Murdoch University); Sydney College of Divinity. The New Zealand representatives are the theological schools at Otago and Auckland Universities.

theological programs. As HEPs all these colleges are committed to academic freedom as spelt out in the national protocols for higher education. The criteria, required of all higher educational institutions, include: “a clearly articulated higher education purpose that includes a commitment to and support for free intellectual inquiry in the institution’s academic endeavours.”³

The terms of reference of the Senate inquiry clearly express a concern for “ideological, political and cultural prejudice”, the need “to reflect a plurality of views, be accurate, fair, balanced and in context” and the “intellectual diversity and contestability of ideas”. While these are fine ideals, when applied to the theological sector with prevailing secular assumptions, they will create problems.

Put bluntly one person’s core faith commitment may be another person’s “ideological, political and cultural prejudice”. Many theological colleges have a public faith statement or operate within a particular ecclesial tradition which involves substantial faith commitments which, to those outside that tradition or outside any tradition, are viewed as erroneous or even meaningless. Yet these commitments are constitutive of their faith identity and of central concern in the teaching of theology. I would suggest that the theological sector would express grave concerns about a charter of academic freedoms that would undermine the right of theological educators to operate within a specific faith commitment.

Similar concerns could be raised about notions of “intellectual diversity and contestability of ideas”. In many complex areas of life and certainly in most theological areas, there is significant intellectual diversity and contestability. But again, one person’s appeal to “diversity and contestability” is another person’s “intellectual and moral relativism”. We live in an era where just about all claims are “contestable”. We encounter considerable doubt and suspicion of a wide variety of intellectual and moral claims, often in the name of post-modern relativism. Yet often such contention is little more than ignorance masked as sophistication. Mere contention is not of itself a claim to intellectual merit.

Again, similar concerns could be raised about the needs for courses “to reflect a plurality of views, be accurate, fair, balanced and in context”. Would, for example, a charter of academic freedoms require a Christian theological college to present Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and Jewish faith positions in the name of pluralism and balance? Certainly, many theological courses will have units on interreligious matters and one would expect the presentation of other faith positions to be accurate and fair. But if every course was expected to present the full plurality of interreligious views on every faith issue held by Christians, it would swamp the curriculum. Even within Christianity, would one require a Pentecostal college to include detailed material on Greek Orthodoxy, and *vice versa*? Academic freedom does not require such false attempts at “balance”.

As I noted in my first paragraph the notion of academic freedom varies from discipline to discipline. I would argue that much of the common notion of academic freedom is derived from a model which originated in the physical sciences. It is based on a concept of objectivity as detachment. There are many disciplines, which often are by their very nature diverse and

³ See the website: http://www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/resources/NationalProtocolsOct2007_Complete.pdf for the full document.

contestable, where it may be argued that objectivity is more a matter of committed engagement. Theology is certainly one such discipline. As the eminent theologian and bishop of the early Church, St Augustine of Hippo, would say, “Unless you believe, you will not understand”. It would be surprising if academics, who have committed their lives to the pursuit of truth and meaning in such matters, did not have strong opinions and did not seek to convey these to their students.

From this one might conclude that key issues raised by the terms of reference, such as “ideological, political and cultural prejudice”, “plurality of views, be accurate, faith, balanced and in context” and “intellectual diversity and contestability of idea” are themselves highly contestable and indeed problematic, particularly when applied to a theological context. Theological education has a long and distinguished place within higher education, and is making a significant contribution to diversity in the Australian higher education context. The sector would suffer significantly if the current inquiry were to make recommendations which undermined the ability of theological education providers to operate in a way which was consistent with their basic faith commitments.

I would therefore urge considerable caution in the adoption of any concept of a charter of academic freedoms which would impose constraints on the ability of theological education providers to operate in a way congruent with their faith commitments.