

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

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Theology as a Discipline

My colleagues and I are sometimes confronted with the allegation that the study of theology is incompatible with academic freedom. For this reason I encouraged Professor Neil Ormerod of the Australian Catholic University to write the attached paper. It has been distributed to our 2,000 students and to peer institutions.

The study of theology has always taken place in the church. It is the intellectual expression of the quest for understanding by people of faith. It is not a discipline that has ever been detached from faith commitment or from engagement with contemporary thought. Theology has always valued independent thinking and the creation of new knowledge. This enterprise is not restricted to Christianity but is common to other faith traditions, such as Judaism where the influence of Graeco-Roman rhetoric and ethical speculation is present from earliest times.

Theology counts itself among the oldest academic enterprises. Theological study and reflection takes place within an unbroken, coherent body of knowledge with a substantial corpus of scholarship, and a tradition of reflection and discourse that extends back to the catechetical school of second century church in Alexandria. This enterprise was indebted to ethical, theological and scriptural debate conducted within the synagogue of the Second Temple era (ca 500 BC–AD 135) and the rabbinic academies of the same and successive eras. Christian theological and ethical enquiry was also informed by the philosophical schools of the classical and Hellenistic eras.

The early fathers of the church are clearly engaged in intellectual debate with their contemporaries. Medieval theologians built on the Greek, Roman and Jewish heritage, and, for a time, on Islamic scholarly enquiry. Scholarly endeavour flourished throughout the medieval period and were to be found in the earliest universities, such as Paris, Oxford and Cambridge—all founded by the church—and which were all devoted to the study of theology in the context of vigorous discourse among diverse schools of thought within the one intellectual and faith tradition. A high water mark in the tradition of theological reflection was reached with the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, a work integrating the biblical deposit, the interpretive tradition of the church from earliest times, and Aristotelian philosophy. The *Summa* serves as a potent model for theological reflection today in its commitment to bringing the received wisdom of the church into dialogue with the broadest possible currents of contemporary thought.

The invention of the printing press in the latter half of the fifteenth century led to a growing production of literature that both affirmed and challenged accepted theological points of view. The Reformation of the sixteenth century produced a vast literature designed to support the insights that movement generated. In partnership with the developing science of textual criticism, the Reformers gave new impetus to the ancient literary genre of the commentary on scripture.

The ethos of the current theology curriculum also owes much to the historical and textual insights of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, though a critique of the theoretical assumptions of those eras has also developed. Theology has been just as influenced by philosophical thought as other fields of scholarly endeavour. Thus, the influence of liberalism is present in nineteenth century Christian thought and biblical studies, existentialism in mid twentieth century studies of these disciplines, and “postmodernism” in late twentieth century studies. It is the very nature of theology as an interpretive and speculative discipline that gives rise to the vast scholarly literature with which the modern student and researcher must engage. This is agreed among all providers of theological education in Australia regardless of their confessional commitment and institutional history.

### Theology and the Churches

The broad intellectual tradition of the one church gave rise over time, and in response to historical conditions, to definable ecclesial communities. From the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries those communities began to establish their own colleges for the training and forming of their clergy and authorised pastoral workers more intentionally. The establishment of the Australian College of Theology in 1891 by the Anglican Church of Australia was part of this trend. Where those institutions have defined their ethos by means of confessional statements this should not be interpreted as attempts to limit freedom of expression and the scholarly enterprise but rather to establish their place in the unbroken heritage of theology as a discipline that arises out of a life commitment.

In Australia the best known of these ecclesial communities are the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist. None are recent constructs. Each retains much that is held in common with the others. Each maintains close links with the others through interchange of scholarship and shared discourse. These relationships are sometimes expressed institutionally through ecumenical consortia, such as the Australian College of Theology (ACTh), the Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD) (founded in 1910) and the Sydney College of Divinity (SCD) (founded in 1983), in which independent colleges have agreed to cooperate at the closest level in the enterprise of providing theological education. This is a factor in the Australian higher education landscape that has been overlooked. Both the ACTh and the SCD operate on a national basis. In their respective AUQA Audit Reports, both the ACTh and the MCD were commended for the quality of the ecumenical cooperation that is a defining mark of their provision of theological education.

In Australia the study of theology has been conducted within such colleges, and, until recent decades, not in the universities. But even where universities, like ACU and Charles Sturt, do provide courses in theology there is an public acknowledgement that such study arises from faith.

### Theology and Scholarship

The content of the curriculum now enshrined in mainstream theological colleges, such as the ACTh, covers the essentials of Church History, Theology and the Bible, usually accompanied by the teaching of biblical languages that undergird biblical study. To the major disciplines, homiletics and pastoral care have been added in more recent times. A thorough grounding in a diverse range of scholarship that has focused on these fields of study has always been regarded as an integral part of the discipline of theology and in the intentional academic preparation for candidates for Christian ministry.

On the shoulders of almost two millennia of scholarly enterprise the generation of new insights and knowledge continues apace in the twenty-first century. Increasingly, doctoral graduates are encouraged to publish their research, to contribute to scholarly journals, and to take their place in the company of scholars in arenas such as the international and North American annual conferences convened by the Society of Biblical Literature. All supervisors of research candidates are required not only to be research active themselves but also to be active as scholars. Many teachers possess doctoral qualifications from prestigious overseas institutions.

The libraries of theological colleges, especially those focussed on the delivery of research degrees, are all devoted to acquiring a balanced, representative proportion of this scholarship in primary source, monograph, journal, and, more recently, electronic format.

### Assessment

Theological education, regardless of the community of faith in which it takes place, is properly perceived as an ongoing dialogue between scholars (including teachers) and students. Students begin their study as dialogue partners. Indeed, being able both to defend one's theological point of view and also to report empathetically scholarly views with which one might not agree are essential aspects of theological reflection and education. Ideally students proceed to become researchers in their own right, contributing to the dialogue through their publications and proposing new theological insights. It is axiomatic that students of theology, many of whom are studying in order to commend the faith in full- or part-time ministry contexts, will seek to communicate in ways that are "words on target" to their communities and the wider public.

The grade descriptors of the ACTh require students to report empathetically on a range of views. Imbalance or failure to acknowledge points of view not in agreement with the student's own is discouraged. Our graduate attributes expect students to develop a broad understanding of the diversity of scholarly points of view.

For their part, assessors are required to grade assignments on the basis of the integrity of the argument regardless of whether or not the argument is one with which he or she agrees.

The ACTh conducts a bi-annual process by which external unit field moderators ensure that there is a parity of esteem among affiliated institutions and that grades are awarded in each unit that are consistent with our grade descriptors. Final semester results are not released until moderators' recommendations for the raising or lowering of grade bands have been effected. Moderators also comment on the quality of teaching and learning. The moderation process has been selected by AUQA to be entered in its Good Practice Database.

At research level, ACTh requires all examiners of major research projects and theses to be external to the candidate's college. No more than one examiner should be a member of the academic staff of an ACTh affiliate. For each doctoral thesis, at least one examiner is located in a prestigious overseas institution. By this means the College ensures that examination of theses and other major research projects is conducted with integrity.

A fair and open academic grievance policy operates across the ACTh.

## Protecting and Promoting Academic Freedom

Through the centuries theological discourse has never been restricted in its scope. I am confident that no student has ever been constrained in what he or she might pursue by way of research in the affiliated colleges of the ACTh. All topics across the full range of the curriculum—in the fields of history, theology, philosophical theology, Bible, pastoral theology—are available, even those that might press the boundaries and parameters of generally agreed and received opinion held in common across the various ecclesial communities.

Intellectual diversity and the contestability of ideas in the study of theology should not be protected or promoted by means of a charter of academic freedoms if by that is meant the imposition of a model of detached, scientific objectivity on the discipline. By its very nature, as noted above, theology has always been delivered by people out of a faith commitment. This is true regardless of whether theology is taught in ecclesial foundations or at universities. There are other ways of protecting academic freedom in the discipline that takes account of its ethos.

Most students studying theology are doing so in a non university context and are enrolled in courses that are accredited by State and Territory Accreditation Agencies (STAAs). I would therefore urge the Inquiry to recognise that STAAs, in their assessment of course accreditation submissions, registration applications by non self-accrediting institutions and applications for self-accrediting authority, explicitly require applicants to demonstrate that they satisfy the requirements of the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes (July 2006). These requirements stipulate that institutions have policies, procedures and practices in place which encourage academic integrity and free intellectual enquiry in teaching, research and scholarship. Furthermore there is an expectation that institutions have entered into arrangements with their higher education peers to benchmark quality assurance processes, academic policies, and commitment to academic freedom and fairness to students. It is through benchmarking among diverse partners in the theological education enterprise that institutions can provide assurances to regulators and to the public that theology as a discipline encourages academic freedom in a manner that is not only consistent with its historical ethos but also acknowledges each institution's preparedness to submit its policies, practices and procedures to the scrutiny of other ecclesial communities.

In addition, the Inquiry should recognise that the AUQA quality audit process will provide additional confirmation in the public arena that theological education providers are acting consistently with the requirements of the National Protocols.

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