

Launch of *Uncovering Theology – The Depth, Reach and Utility of Australian Theological Education*

The Report of an ALTC Discipline-Based Initiative Project

Australian Lutheran College, 7 July 2009

I am deeply honoured to have been invited to launch the report of the *Uncovering Theology* project, which pleasingly has been published by ATF Press. This is a most commendable outcome of the project funded under the Discipline-Based Initiatives Scheme of the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (now the Australian Learning and Teaching Council).

There are four reasons why I feel so honoured to be involved in today's launch:

- firstly, I am one of those who sees theology as a critical discipline for the higher education sector and who seeks to promote, in Charles' words, theology having "its rightful place in higher education",¹ which is enriched when theology is in the academic discourse;
- secondly, I share this projects' commitment to excellence in teaching and learning;
- thirdly, for me the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) has been a critical development in enhancing the higher education sector's teaching and learning. I strongly welcomed its establishment and have been pleased to be involved in a number of its activities – it seems to me that this project has achieved just the sort of outcomes for which the ALTC strives; and
- fourthly, I am delighted that the report has been published and that the publisher in the ATF Press. For a number of years I was associated with the Australasian Theological Forum Limited, which has done so much to promote theological discourse in Australia and, in particular, theological publication.

This launch is an historic occasion, as it marks the placing before our nation of a publication detailing the full richness, depth, reach and utility of the theological endeavours conducted within Australia by so many people in so many places for the benefit of the wider Australian and international communities. These endeavours, as the report concludes, "forward the academic, formational and spiritual well-being of the people of God and in this **distinctive** way contribute to the wider communities".²

¹ Charles Sherlock (2009) *Uncovering Theology*, Adelaide: ATF Press, p. 193.

² Charles Sherlock (2009) *Uncovering Theology*, p. 218.

In the successful application to the then Carrick Institute for funding to conduct the project, the panel of applicants led by Mark Harding and Neil Ormerod as co-chairs, indicated that the project would engage with international issues and globalisation, one of the goals of the Carrick Institute's program. As the application stated, this would be achieved:

*through undertaking the proposed scoping exercise in theology as a discipline which engages with a broad range of issues both international and germane to globalisation, such as inter-religious dialogue, ... ecology, ... refugee policies, migration, use of resources, human rights, medical and health ethics, violence and war, poverty and wealth, cultural studies, the place of faith in society.*³

The report has accomplished this and several other project goals in an admirable manner.

The reader is led through *Uncovering Theology* gaining a rich understanding of the discipline in the Australian context. One moves from an historical overview of theological education in Australia, through a survey, in the true sense of inspecting something in detail,⁴ of Australian theological education today within a very changed societal context.

Then follow detailed examinations of coursework awards in the theological disciplines, quality assurance within theological institutions, their practice of teaching, specific aspects of teaching and learning in the theological disciplines, and research and research training in this field.

The final three chapters set out, respectively, the relationships between theological institutions and their sponsoring churches, relationships between theological colleges and each of governments, the wider higher education sector and the wider community, and aspects of cooperation and collaboration within a theological landscape marked by diversity.

I am not a theologian but rather a scientist and university administrator who is deeply interested in, and strongly committed to, the development of Australian theology and theological education. As I keenly read the chapters of *Uncovering Theology* I was struck by **three themes** that seemed to gleam throughout its pages.

The first of these is the spirit of "recognition and respect for the traditions of member churches in an atmosphere of mutuality and ecumenical cooperation".⁵ Such theological ecumenism is

³ Committee of Deans of Theological Consortia or University Departments (2007) *Uncovering Theology: The Depth, Reach and Utility of Theological Education: An Application to the Carrick Institute for Funding under the Carrick Institute Discipline-Based Initiatives Scheme*, Section 7.

⁴ As in the lucid treatment of the topic by Catherine Marsh, the word "survey" has a long tradition in English and developed from being "the fact of viewing or inspecting something in detail, as in a land survey"; Catherine Marsh (1982) *The Survey Method*, London: George Allen & Unwin.

⁵ Melbourne College of Divinity (2009) *Annual Report 2008*, p. 11.

linked to spiritual ecumenism, the very heart of ecumenism.⁶ Our capacity for dialogue is rooted in our nature and dignity as persons, as we are creatures “God wills to find himself in the gift of himself” to us. Such dialogue, cooperation and collaboration become “an exchange of gifts”,⁷ and this publication provides rich detail of this exchange between institutions from different traditions.

The second theme is that of faith, faith in Jesus Christ as the answer to the question that is every human life.⁸ In a 2004 essay titled “Struggling to Believe”, Neil Brown wrote that “far from being easy, reflective faith is often more a tumultuous sea than a calm lake”.⁹ He quotes the following words spoken by the character Ishmael in the novel *Moby Dick*:

*There is no steady un-retracing progress in this life: we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause:- through infancy’s unconscious spell, boyhood’s thoughtless faith, adolescence’ doubt ... then skepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood’s pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again: and are infants, boys and men and Ifs eternally. Where lies the final harbour, where we unmoor no more?*¹⁰

Whether our view is that the grace of faith is solely God’s work or that the grace of faith includes within itself truly cooperative activity on the part of human intellect and will, the act of faith does involve an intellectual assent to revealed truth.¹¹ What is most telling throughout *Uncovering Theology* is the view that faith involves thoughtful, intelligent assent, rather than mere idiosyncratic feelings, as faith is characterised by many today. One hoped-for outcome of the publication of the report by ATF Press is the continuing widening of the theological enterprise’s engagement with Australian higher education more broadly, including the opening of philosophical activity to the insights derived from faith and revelation.¹²

⁶ Walter Kasper (2004) “The Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue” in *That They May All be One: The Call to Unity Today*, London: Burns and Oates, p. 44; quoted in Peter Cross (2007) “John Paul II and Ecumenism” in Robert Gascoigne (ed.) *John Paul II: Legacy and Witness*, Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, p. 122.

⁷ John Paul II (1995) *Ut Unum Sint: On Commitment to Ecumenism*, n .28; quoted in Peter Cross (2007) “John Paul II and Ecumenism” in Robert Gascoigne (ed.) *John Paul II – Legacy and Witness*, pp. 122-123.

⁸ George Weigel (2005) “A Man who Believed that Jesus Christ is the Answer”, *Zenit*, 3 April; accessed on 1 July 2009 at <http://www.zenit.org/english>.

⁹ Neil Brown (2004) “Struggling to Believe” in R Lennan (ed) *The Possibility of Belief*, Strathfield: NSW, St Pauls Publications, p. 24.

¹⁰ Herman Melville (1993) *Moby Dick*. Ware: Wordsworth Classics, p. 404, quoted in Neil Brown (2004) “Struggling to Believe” in R Lennan (ed.) *The Possibility of Belief*, p. 24

¹¹ Gerald Gleeson (2004) “A Response to the Papers of John McDermott and Kevin Hart” in Anthony Fisher OP and Hayden Ramsay (eds) *Faith and Reason*, Adelaide: ATF Press, p. 270.

¹² *Ibid.*

The third theme is that of service. Gordon Stirling in his monograph *The Churches of Christ* has the following to say:

*Jesus made the ministry principle very clear when He said that ministry is self-sacrificial service He exemplified all forms of ministry with a towel and a basin. The Cross was the epitome of ministry when He called on those who would minister with Him to take up their own crosses in selfless service.*¹³

Uncovering Theology expresses this principle powerfully as follows:

*Theology graduates in professional ministries serve local communities across the nation, seeking to discern, respond to and demonstrate the love of God shown in the depths and heights of human existence. The many graduates not employed by the churches or church agencies find their theological learning shapes and informs their Christian world-view, equipping them for their work, political engagement and social relationships ... By its own nature, theological education ... entails ongoing reflection on the nature and meaning of community identity and service.*¹⁴

Let me conclude.

Australian theological education is long-established. It is an “academically robust and distinctive dimension of higher education”,¹⁵ making a significant and unique contribution to the Australian sector. However, there is a further dimension to theological education and as the report concludes so powerfully, Australian theological institutions:

*... continue to set their priorities by seeking to discern and follow the purposes of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, not only for the sake of the churches, but for humankind in all its diversities, and the whole created cosmos.*¹⁶

I offer my sincere congratulations to all involved, especially Charles Sherlock. I now take great pleasure in declaring *Uncovering Theology* officially launched.

Gabrielle L McMullen FRACI
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¹³ Gordon Stirling (1999) *The Churches of Christ*, North Essendon, Victoria: Vital Publications, pp. 21-22.

¹⁴ Charles Sherlock (2009) *Uncovering Theology*. pp. 196-197.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*