

Theological Education into the 21st century

by Merrill Kitchen

The 20th century has been a significant era in human history. The boundaries of deep space were penetrated, atoms were visualised, described and manipulated, previously devastating infectious diseases were controlled, cyberspace overcame distance, international treaties were made and global trade became the norm. But it has also been described as a time of unparalleled violence with more than a hundred million people dying in violent sectarian conflict. Anthropologists tell us that human groups forging their social identities have always defined themselves over and against one another, but in the 21st century we are able to observe this process without leaving our own homes as world conflicts are transmitted immediately to our television sets and computers. Increasing globalisation means that, while national boundaries may have become more tribalised, the label 'Christian' is more likely to describe a political stance than a faith confession. At the same time, the current dominant human ideology of Materialism is penetrating otherwise rigid boundaries in the interest of international trade. Furthermore, multiculturalism is now being experienced by every major society as 120 million global migrants move around the earth in search of a better life, causing unrest amongst indigenous peoples and challenging the emerging doctrines of peace and reconciliation.

The reality is that we live in a post-Christendom age. The umbrella of Christian faith that once provided a shelter of meaning for societies like ours, those colonised by Europe over the past four centuries, has blown inside out. We are living in society that values individualism and private choices with few shared assumptions. Consequently the religious choices will be individualistic, largely unaffected by family tradition and less prone to cultural captivity. The contemporary language of religion is becoming more freely descriptive and less clichéd, while its ethical teachings are more situational than predictable. The religious supermarket is clearly evident and people searching for meaning are given many shelves from which to pick and choose.

So how do we train Christian leaders appropriately in such a world? Indeed how are we to understand 'church' or contextually proclaim the Good News of God's love and grace to all humanity? This is the global challenge to theological educators who want to be relevant and faithful today.

Australian Society as Context for Theological Education

Australia is probably the most secular of all democracies and there is no dominant religious stance unless it is to be 'anti-religion'.¹ It is no longer a predominantly rural society. In 1900 half of the Australian population of 3.79 million lived in rural areas with towns of less than 3000 people and 90% of males aged 15-19 were employed with just over 30% of 14-15 year olds going to school. Today 80% of our population of 18.97 million live in cities in which a little over half of the males aged 15-19 are in employment.

Australia is an increasingly fragmented society. The marriage rate is falling and in the last decade there has been a 20% increase in the divorce rate. Australian society is ethnically diverse with more than a third of marriages being between people of differing cultural backgrounds. Households are smaller and their occupants are increasingly older with more than 25% of the population expected to have passed their 65th birthday by 2050. The concept of 'family' is being redefined. Almost a quarter of 35-44 year olds live in single households and approximately 20% of children live with a single parent. There is a decrease in teenage pregnancies, an increase in youth suicide and up to 40% of young people say they use illegal drugs, mainly marijuana.

At the same time Australia is an increasingly more educated society, although women are becoming more highly educated than men. While almost 100% of 14-15 year old males are at secondary school today, only 68.5% will complete year 12, compared to 84.2% of females. Victoria currently has the largest percentage of students with a Bachelor's degree or higher. The majority of teachers in primary and secondary schools are women (78% and 54.1% respectively) but two-thirds of academic staff in tertiary institutions are men. Religion and Society' is the fastest growing Year 12

¹ For example see Ian Breward, *Australia – "The most godless place under heaven"?* (Melbourne: Beacon Hill Books, 1988).

subject² and an increasingly significant number of units being offered in mainstream universities are incorporating the word 'spirituality' into their academic descriptions.³

The Changing Context of Australian Christian Community

Traditionally, the majority of Churches in Australia were planted in rural areas and served the predominantly rural population. Many of them stand empty and isolated. Urban churches traditionally reflected a common ethos of European inheritance, stability, 19th century holiness and commitment to the colonial Establishment. In 1901 almost 100% of the Australian population described themselves as Christian. Today 80% of our population tick the 'Christian' box on the national census form.⁴ In spite of this relatively high percentage, few ever step inside a church building, and 'while we do have religious leaders who speak with the authority of their rank . . . their ability to influence the national debate, let alone set the national agenda is, at best, modest and usually marginal.'⁵

Christian labels

Catholics have by far the most attenders at church services (875,000 each week). Protestants on the other hand are seeing a shift from conservative passive reflection to conservative active expression. Pentecostalism (with 183,000 attenders each week) has the largest attendance figures amongst Protestants and most of these attenders are 'switchers' from other Protestant denominations.⁶ In comparison to the Catholic values of poverty, chastity and obedience Pentecostalism proclaims 'tangible and tantalising rewards' – the promise of 'the good life on Earth, and of course, the bonus of eternal life.'⁷ Both Catholics and Pentecostals are strongly supported by schooling programs that undergird their social structures.

Individualism

Over the last century there has been a shift from collectivism to individualism in both the world and the church. Even the dominant collective allegiance, the local football team, is less valued in contemporary Australian society. Youth allegiance is more likely to swing towards the 'winners' rather than staying unswervingly loyal to the 'losers'. For collectivist communities the football oval, the pub and the church were the hub of the wider social life in which the community was embedded. They were places of human contact where people's stories were shared and ritualised. Individualism, on the other hand, makes that kind of a central meeting place irrelevant. There is no single collective story to celebrate, rather many stories can be shared in many different pubs and clubs or located in cyberspace at a time of personal convenience. The individualist speaks about 'personal decision', 'private faith' and 'many sources' whereas collectivists speak about 'the faith community', 'societal transformation' and 'prophetic stance.'

Responses to the Changing Context of Church in Australia

The Bishop of Durham once described the Evangelical wing of the church as "an army of illiterates, generalised by octogenarians, inclined to the view that they are excused culture, scholarship and intellectual exercise on religious grounds." This kind of parody still exists in the minds of some. The Evangelical Alliance distributed this statement last month:

The Church in all its expressions- Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox, evangelical and non-evangelicals, Arminians and Calvinists, Charismatic and non-Charismatics - has

² From World Vision's *Grid. A Christian Leadership Letter* Issue 1, 2000 and *Australian Social Trends 2000* published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and reported as 'The way we are', in *The Age*, Melbourne July 5, 2000.

³ From World Vision's *Grid. A Christian Leadership Letter* Issue 1, 2000 and *Australian Social Trends 2000* published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and reported as 'The way we are', in *The Age*, Melbourne July 5, 2000.

At the turn of the century our median age was 22.6, with a high infant mortality rate and high migration rates from the young and fit of Europe (less than 1% of the population were from Asia). Over 505 of the population was under 25 years of age. Today our median age is 34.9, with just 35% being under 25. We are living longer, have a low birth rate and a low infant mortality rate. Today one in 17 Australians were born in Asia⁴ 'The way we are', *The Age*, Melbourne July 5, 2000

⁵ Walsh, 'The great leap of faith', 10.

⁶ *National Church Life Survey*, 1996.

⁷ Diana Bagnall, 'The new believers' *The Bulletin* April 27, 2000, p. 27.

one core value. It is neither to tell our culture what they want to hear or to rejoice in telling them that they are wrong. Our task is not to struggle against decline. It is not to survive the 21st century. It is to serve and shape it. It is to help our culture make sense of its own instinct for God. It is to make disciples.

Christian agencies throughout the world are attempting to respond in a wholistic relevant way to the missional challenges of this post-Christian, post-denominational age. Some wholistic general trajectories that are emerging include the following:⁸

- Action will be more convincing than doctrine, but fundamentalism will continue to rise as doctrine provides secure boundaries for the anxious.
- Human rights and the overcoming of poverty will be the great moral aims of societies. There will be a strong emphasis on debt relief, food and clean water for everyone, education for all children with a subsequent end to child exploitation.
- Concern for a sustainable planet that will continue to offer hope for those being choked by environmental exploitation.
- In global politics the Religious Right will have increasingly less influence and the Secular Left will be less hostile to religion and spirituality. Labor still won't be able to truly articulate values questions and Conservatives still won't really care about the poor. Greed will continue to be a virtue that feeds an economically rational base.
- Increasing diversity will demand global responses to increasing violence, racism, gender divisions and co-operation between previously alienated Christian sub-groups. In this environment peace initiatives / conflict resolution/ reconciliation skills will be valued most highly.
- At the same time increasing globalisation will lead to a rise in nationalism and a demand that specific cultures be preserved.
- Greater freedom to believe will be demanded with Bible Study outside of church walls being more evident resulting in the development of healthy relationships. At the same time internet pornography will become increasingly popular undermining many other relationships

Theological education - Facilitating Relevant Learning and Leadership?

How can a denominationally based theological college most appropriately serve the church, the Christian community and the world today? How can it facilitate relevant learning and leadership?

- It will adopt an action-reflection model of learning that is confident and creative, allowing exploration, questioning and experience to occur in a professionally moderated environment. It will work alongside the Spirit of God to bring Light into darkness, seek Truth and engender Love with concern for mutuality and interdependence.
- It will have a global focus in terms of recognising the Calling God who is globally yet intimately present, working to bring wholeness and reconciliation to every creature in every culture and every place.
- It will have the capacity to exercise judgment and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice. It will respond to injustice and hurt in our midst both globally and locally. This will mean including potential leaders who would not normally gain admittance to tertiary studies elsewhere; offering supportive education to bridge learning gaps; empowering people who have been consistently disempowered in the past; designing a curriculum that is contextually relevant etc.
- It will have a local focus recognising the partnership it has with the State Conferences, local churches and accrediting bodies to which it is accountable.
- In the spirit of the ancient Baptismal Confession, it will be non-discriminatory in terms of race, status and gender.
- It will be staffed by people whose lifestyles and behaviours that are socially credible, environmentally conscious, culturally sensitive and spiritually transparent.
- It will actively converse, co-operate and collaborate with Christian educators from other traditions in a spirit of reconciliation and grace.
- It will value freedom but resist ideological capture where that ideology represents a kingdom other than that of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus Christ. Furthermore it will take a

⁸ See Jim Wallis, '45 predictions for the new millennium: *Sojourners* 29.1 (2000): 7-8.

considered and prophetic stance when freedom is restricted by political power and/or when deviant ideologies are being actively promoted.

The challenge is before us now. The future church is depending on this generation to take risks, to embrace innovative methods of communication and to critique the old ways of being that can no longer offer hope. We have a rich inheritance of faith that is grounded in traditions that nourish and give birth to God centred, relevant new ways of being Christian. It is an inheritance of reconciling love, of global grace, of creation's mutuality and interdependence and it is immeasurably rich. If we take it seriously theological education may be able to lead the way to the conversion of the whole of God's world. The possibility is enough to excite us to begin the task again!