The Place of Religion and Theology in the National Research System

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There has been little recent examination of the place of religion and theology in our Universities and the National Research System, despite religion being part of many complex and important public policy questions. This paper considers some statistics on grants, publications and staff numbers in religion and theology in Australia, against the background of its history. It is argued that the national research system has failed to keep up with changes in the Australian theology sector. Some suggestions on how to fix the problem are offered as a basis for discussion.

The Changing Place of Religion and Theology

The image of the theology student as an earnest young man preparing himself for a life of ordained ministry in his church denomination is in need of revision. Of the roughly 14,000 theology students in Australia only about 20% are now studying for ordination. Most students are female, older, and part time. Many theology undergraduates have previously completed a degree or a professional qualification. A larger proportion than almost any other discipline are postgraduate research students.

Changes have also been dramatic among theological faculty - the number in religious orders is now tiny, and the proportion ordained continues to fall. Most theological college faculty are less conservative, religiously and politically, than the churches which support them.

These trends are documented in Charles Sherlock’s 2010 book Uncovering Theology which came out of a project funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council to map the theological sector. The project itself is a sign of the changing place of theology in the higher education system. Further background information can be found in the publications of the
National Church Life Survey which has been conducted at the same time as the Australian census every five years since 1991. Through the census and National Church Life Survey we have better data on religious trends and attitudes in Australia than any other country in the world.

There are strong forces pushing theology into the university system. Financial pressures within the churches are making it increasingly difficult for church dioceses to maintain a standalone theological college to prepare their candidates for ordained ministry, pushing them to amalgamate or link up with universities. An example is the recent collapse of the Brisbane College of Theology and the linking up of its constituent colleges with different universities. Another is the Anglican diocese of Newcastle which closed its Morpeth theological college and used the money to endow a chair in theology at the University of Newcastle. With government higher education funding based on student numbers, universities also have strong financial incentives to absorb theological colleges. Absorbing them doesn't require the theological college to physically move, or much change their staffing or operations. In many cases the church has continued to pay the teaching staff while the University collects the government funding that goes with the undergraduate theology student load, the considerable number of postgraduate research students, and large publication output of theological colleges. An example is St Marks National Theological Centre in Canberra, an Anglican college which is now affiliated with Charles Sturt University. Accreditation and regulatory bodies like TEQSA will increase the pressure for theological colleges to moving to the University system in the years to come.

**Historical Perspective**

If theology is now moving into the University system, what caused the original separation of theological education and research from the rest of the Australian system? Such a separation is unusual internationally, not just in Europe where the ancient universities grew from theological faculties but in other Anglophone settler societies like the US, Canada and South Africa.

Again popular images are in need of correction. The University of Sydney and the University of Melbourne founded in the 1850s exclude theology from the curriculum, and even bar clergymen from holding academic positions. Churches were given land to set up a residential college for students of the universities. These colleges imposed religious tests for admission but they were prohibited for entry to the university. It is easy for contemporary observers to imagine the founders of our oldest universities being a bunch of 19th century Christopher
Hitchinses or Richard Dawkinses (abbreviated to Ditchkins by Terry Eagleton), keeping the dangerous nonsense of religion well away from the impressionable youth of the colony. Such an image unfortunately does not fit the historical evidence as the work of Bruce Kaye, John Gascoigne and others have shown. Most of the founders were religious people, and religious motives important in their work founding the universities. At the time though the British higher education system was wracked with conflict over the place of Catholics, nonconformists and others who could not subscribe to the Anglican articles of religion. In Australia the exclusion of the churches was not a rejection of the truth claims or the social utility of religion it was not antireligious sentiment, but a desire to keep the ugly sectarian side of religion and clerical squabbles out of the Australia’s new universities. The founders wanted to run a University not referee a rolling fight between the Anglican hierarchy, the Catholics, powerful Presbyterians and others in the colony.

The churches set up separate institutions for theological training, including the predominantly Anglican Australian College of Theology in 1891, and Melbourne College of Divinity set up with its own Act of Parliament in 1910. Theological training was organized and funded by the churches largely separate from the University system.

Perhaps the first move beyond the separation was the 1964 Martin report into the Australian higher education system. The report recognised religion as having a place in our higher education system and the foundation of new universities and generous funding of universities stimulated teaching and research in religion. Newer universities didn’t exclude theology, sometimes because it would not have occurred to anyone that theology might be part of their course offerings. Macquarie University in Sydney is an interesting case, building up an internationally regarded research group in early Christian studies. Australian Catholic University which grew out of a collection of Catholic nursing and teaching colleges, is a public university which has been developing a strong Faculty of Theology in recent years. It was the newer universities –Charles Sturt, Flinders, Murdoch - that have adopted church theological colleges in recent years.

**Has our National Research System Kept up with the Changes?**

One of the strange features of the system is that the majority of theologians are not allowed to apply for Australian Research Council grants, despite many of them being scholars of international standing. Only scholars at eligible institutions – Australian universities and a selection of medical research, agricultural and maritime institutions can apply. Of the
theological institutions outside the university system only Melbourne College of Divinity (since 2002) has been eligible to apply, though it became a specialised university in 2011. I cannot see why theological colleges are not eligible institutions with a fair shot at Australian Research Council grants and government funding for their research students. Any arguments about lack of capacity to support research should surely be dealt with under the existing research environment selection criteria for this in all ARC schemes.

As well as eligibility there is the issue of grants awarded to the subset of theologians eligible to apply. I have conducted an analysis of all Australian Research Council grants since 2002 in the relevant subject code. Until 2008 this code was RFCD 4402 Religion and Religious Traditions, including 440204 Christian Theology. In 2008 it became FOR 2204 Religion and Religious Studies, including 220401 Christian Studies (incl biblical studies and church history), 220402 Comparative Religious Studies, 220405 Religion and Society, and 220499 Religion and Religious Studies not elsewhere classified.

Since 2002 there have been 38 Australian Research Council Discovery grants with the primary code 4402/2204, 2 Linkage grants, 1 Future Fellowship, and no Federation Fellowship/ Laureate Fellowships. Of the approximately 16,000 grants awarded this represents 0.2% of project grants. If we consider grants with any religion code there have been 94 Discovery grants, 8 Linkage grants, 4 Future Fellowships, and no Federation Fellowship/ Laureate Fellowships. This is 0.5% of grants. The value of grants in 4402/2204 tends to be small. Of the total Australian Research Council funding over this period of approximately $6.6 billion those with 4402/2204 as the primary code received $8,142,374 which is about 0.1% of the total.

If we focus on projects that would be recognized as mainstream theological research there are only two over the period, representing about 0.01% of grants and even less of funding.

Are 0.2% of grants and 0.1% of funding in 2204/4402, and 0.01% of grants and funding in theology large or small numbers? These numbers can be benchmarked against staff numbers and publication numbers in religion and theology.

*Uncovering Theology* estimated that in 2007 there were 712 full-time equivalent theology academics in Australia, of which 209 work at institutions eligible to apply for ARC grants. This number of staff was based on government data, itself based on returns from the institutions. Using the Universities Australia data on overall staff numbers this represents 0.9% and 0.3% of the academic workforce.
As part of the Excellence in Research (ERA) exercise conducted by the Australian Research Council, academics were asked to nominate their primary field of research. Code 2204 was nominated in 2010 by 181 and in 2012 by 187 full-time equivalent academics in Australian Universities. This is roughly the number of eligible theologians estimated by *Uncovering Theology*, allowing for the fact that some theologians would nominate other fields such as history of languages as their main field, and that religious studies academics in the universities who are not theologians would be counted in the ERA figure.

On any of these measures the number and value of grants to religions and theology are well below what we would expect based on staff numbers.

Turning to publications as per ERA, researchers in code 2204 generated in 2010 $132 = 2.7\%$ of national output of book, $553 = 1.6\%$ of book chapters, $742 = 0.4\%$ of refereed journal papers. It 2012 the book figures rose to $169 = 3.2\%$ and $665$ chapter = $0.7\%$ and the journal papers figure fell slightly to $858 = 0.3\%$. These figures were generated by the approximately one third of religion and theology and academics who work in universities and eligible to apply for ARC funding. The number and value of grants awarded to religion and theology are way out of line with publications, even without multiplying them by three to take account of the ineligible theologians.

These benchmarking comparisons suggest that the ARC has not kept up with the recent changes in the theology sector.

**Suggestions for Fixing the Problem**

Some suggestions as a basis for discussion are:

- The Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education could consider how the National Research Priorities (especially the new Enhancing Society, Culture and Communities priority) might better reflect neglected religious issues. Input from researchers with relevant expertise would assist this.

- The Australian Research Council could actively recruit Humanities and Creative Arts panel members with expertise in theology, along with the other skills and experience necessary. Anecdotal evidence suggests the level of understanding of religion and theology on Australian Research Council panels is not high, probably because the separation of theology from the
university system has meant that even experienced researchers and administrators tend to have little contact with this area. Efforts could also be made by the Australian Research Council to deepen and widen the assessor pool in religion and theology, especially drawing on international experts in the field.

- The Australian Research Council needs to consider the appropriateness of the codes for religion and theology research. Currently religious studies, which takes an outsider perspective on religious traditions, and theology (in the Christian tradition – not quite the same in other traditions) which explores the structure and texts of religious traditions from an insider perspective. Similar distinctions between insider an outside perspectives exist in many areas of scholarship, such as anthropology, gender studies, and are perfectly legitimate though involving different methods. At the moment the codes lump together the methodologically distinct enterprises of religious studies and theology, leading to confusion and inappropriate evaluations. Religious studies and theology need to be separately identified within the 2204 codes and more suitably described in a way that does justice to major religious traditions.

- Targeted training for research offices of theological colleges and their researchers in Australian Research Council processes. This would increase awareness of the Australian Research Council and the quality and appropriateness of applications.

- Capacity building grants from the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education to enable theological institutions to develop their research offices, links with research universities, and networks of domestic and international researchers in religion and theology able to facilitate partnerships and grant applications. This could be something similar to the recent Collaborative Research Networks, program but with wider eligibility and rules appropriate to the aim of developing national research capacity in theology.

- Australian Research Council could consider an initiative specifically designed to connect religion and theology researchers up with those in other disciplines working on issues of national importance. A model for this is the highly successful Religion and Society Program run jointly by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. See www.religionandsociety.org.uk/ The inaugural Director of the program, an expatriate Australian biblical scholar Professor Philip Esler of University of St Andrews, could be asked for advice on designing a similar program for Australia.
Almost all of these suggestions require input from researchers in religion and theology for implementation, as such expertise does not currently exist in the ARC or DIISTE. No professional body which currently exists has the capacity to provide this input. The Australian Association for the Study of Religion (AASR see www.aasr.org.au) has a limited membership and almost no theologians (unlike the corresponding major overseas organisation the American Academy of Religion www.aarweb.org). The Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools (ANZATS see www.anzats.edu.au) is an association of theological colleges mostly outside the University system. Its members have been institutions not individuals (though recent constitutional changes allow individual membership – with little takeup so far), and its focus is collaboration on teaching and administration rather than research. The Council of Deans of Theology is not a suitable body because it only includes the institutions (consortia of colleges or universities) offering undergraduate degrees in theology. The background of the Deans and the fact that they represent their intuitions means it is not necessarily the best placed to provide advice to the ARC or DIISTE about research matters. Many of Australia’s top researchers in religion and theology are not at institutions with undergraduate programs in theology and their voice is lost if the Council of Deans is taken to be the relevant body for advice. None of these bodies harnesses the expertise of the many distinguished Australian theological researchers at overseas universities because of the particular history of our system. The Australian Academy of Humanities has a section on “Philosophy, Religion and the History of Ideas” but theologians are unrepresented and the Academy has not shown a capacity or willingness to address these issues.

In view of the need and the lack of a suitable existing body, I believe it is worth exploring the formation of a new learned Academy of Religion and Theology to advise ARC and DIISTE, and to develop Australian research in this specialised sector. A strong potential body of fellows would be available, drawing on local and expatriate researchers. There would be some overlap with the Academy of Humanities (perhaps half a dozen fellows), as there currently is between the Academy of Humanities and Academy of the Social Sciences. Cost of such an Academy would be modest. It would perhaps involve a part time Director and an administrator, and office space may be able to be found with one of the Canberra based universities. A full academic and business case for such an Academy could be prepared.
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