

Specific Worldviews in Tertiary Education: a way forward

Trevor Cairney & Greg Clarke

Pluralism and specific religious belief

Greg Clarke

In a recent article in *The Australian* newspaper's Higher Education supplement, Professor Elspeth Probyn of the Department of Gender Studies at the University of Sydney discussed the place of religious values on contemporary university campuses. She wrote:

Becoming an ethical person in our world does not have to mean jettisoning religious values. It does, however, require hard work on the part of teachers and students to think seriously about how one combines different value systems. And that means—thankfully—that no one gets to have sole ownership of God on their side.¹

In this paper, we want to first acknowledge and affirm Professor Probyn's attitude of acceptance. We encourage the notion of critical accountability that is inherent in her words to both educators and students. Teachers must enable their students to critique, to interrogate, even perhaps to deconstruct the religious and ethical values they study. They

ought also to develop higher level critical skills which enable the criticism of methodologies and paradigms and worldviews.

However, we wish to push the argument one step further to suggest that by allowing no one to have God solely on their side, and by suggesting that the task of teachers and students is to *combine* value systems, we run the risk of doing violence to most religious traditions as they would construct their own discourses.

Very few religious or spiritual traditions would see that a syncretistic approach to spirituality and values does justice to their own beliefs, creeds, religious praxis or institutions. Certainly some religious systems are based on such a synthetic or comparative approach—for instance, the Ba’hai faith, New Age forms of Wicca, and some contemporary formulations of Buddhism—but many would view syncretism as anathema.

Therefore, we wish to suggest something like the opposite of Professor Probyn’s claim. It would be preferable in the secular university in a pluralist society for *everyone* to have God on their side, and even to claim sole ownership of that God. Under this notion of pluralism, each worldview, ideology or religion can be heard, and is then open for critique on its own terms.

This suggestion requires some explanation.

In his recent work, the revered or reviled pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty, has been suggesting that there is a kind of religious enquiry which suits our age: he calls it “a religion of democracy” or “romantic polytheism”.² In romantic polytheism, the religious instinct of human beings is preserved (rather than denied or despised, as it was in Rorty’s earlier writing), but any reference to capital-t Truth, or to God or even gods is surrendered, and effort is directed solely towards human communities in their social contexts. A theist, according to Rorty, could still be a “pragmatist-as-romantic-polytheist”, but he or she will have to be willing to...

...get along without personal immortality, providential interventions, the efficacy of sacraments, the Virgin Birth, the Risen Christ, the Covenant of Abraham, the authority of the Koran, and a lot of other things which many theists are loath to do without.³

Many theists are not willing to “get with the program”. So how can their views be heard? Increasingly, they are not being heard within secular universities.

University of Notre Dame historian, George Marsden, in his major study of the religious heritages of American universities, concludes by lamenting the consequences of pluralism for religious views within the academy. “Pluralism remains a basis for imposing uniformity,” Marsden claims. Counter-intuitively, Marsden sees that the move of American universities away from their specific (and often constitutional) religious bases has led not to diversity, but to uniformity and a bias towards naturalistic worldviews: “Throughout the era since the rise of American universities, pressure has come from many directions for institutions to conform to the homogenized national ideal”.⁴

It would seem that Rorty’s suggestion, too, would work against its attested goal of polytheism and further contribute to homogeneity, if anything resembling transcendental or metaphysical values and ideas must be excluded. George Marsden, in an earlier work called *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* posits that an ‘overcorrection’ against the earlier Christian biases of American universities has been taking place:

Today there is no realistic prospect for the reestablishment of the dominance of Christianity in America’s leading universities. Yet the biases against speaking about Christian perspectives persist. In effect, in place of a Protestant establishment we now have a virtual establishment of nonbelief. University culture is not necessarily hostile to religion; but the norm for people to be fully accepted in academic culture is to act as though their religious beliefs had nothing to do with education. Scholars are expected to analyze subjects such as the nature of reality, beauty, truth, morality, the just society, the individual, and the community, as though deeply held religious beliefs has no relevance to such topics...Theories that are

based on the supposition that there is no God are therefore much more likely to flourish in academia than are theories based on the contrary assumption...

Our society has corrected an old problem [established Christianity in secular education] and in doing so created a new one. Today nonreligious viewpoints hold the advantage in academia so that something very much like 'secular humanism' is informally established as much as Christianity was in the nineteenth century. The religious right does not help by suggesting, in effect, that we go back to a Christian establishment. That is not the only alternative and it is not a desirable one. Rather, we should recognize that we are dealing with an over-correction and look for a way to restore a better balance among both religious and nonreligious voices.⁵

Marsden wrote seven years ago; perhaps some ground has been made since then, and perhaps there is more openness on some campuses to the participation of religious perspectives. Perhaps the experiences of academics from different religious traditions vary greatly on this question. Nevertheless, arguably, an overcorrection against religion in tertiary education is in process in Australia as well.

So how might it be possible to restore a better balance among religious and other voices?

An earlier project of New College, the Institute for Values Research (founded by Rev Dr Bruce Kaye), contributed to this debate some ten years ago, in a number of publications and symposia. In one paper, "Religion and the University: Oblivion or Participation?", Stanley Croker, former Deputy-Registrar at UNSW, acknowledged that none of UNSW's religious organisations played any role in the university's primary functions of teaching and research. He called this a paradox, since "for some, no doubt a

minority, religion remains a vital force”.⁶ Among Croker’s suggestions for a way forward in resolving this paradox, was the suggestion that theology be established as an academic discipline where it currently is not. This suggestion has gained a little ground over the past decade, with the establishment of a few theological schools and centres on or near main campuses. A second suggestion was that religious organizations be removed from any place in campus life—a suggestion considered to be “a counsel of despair” and quickly vaporized for fear of unrest. It is the whisperings of a third option in Croker’s paper that we wish to amplify here.

Croker suggests an option of “engagement” as the best way forward for religious organisations: “The option of engagement will require open, disciplined and imaginative effort to develop strategies to build acceptance for them”.⁷

By the end of this paper, we hope that such a way forward will have been offered, built on recognising the value of specific worldview perspectives presented within already established university disciplines, in order to embrace a truer form of pluralism where everyone is allowed to claim that “God is on their side”.

Part of the push towards enabling specific worldviews and perspectives in the mainstream of university academic life comes from the recognition among particular academics that their faith, values and doctrines do in fact affect their work. Some might call this new recognition a move away from objectivity in scholarship; but others see it as a development in the understanding of knowledge as a construct, along the lines spelled out by Lyotard and others.⁸ Yet others see it as a reprise of the ancient debates about the relationship between faith and reason. In America, in particular, Christian academics in the mainstream universities have sought to bring to the surface the ways in which their faith informs their work. For example, the Erasmus Institute at the University of Notre Dame supports mainstream research and teaching drawn from the intellectual traditions of the Abrahamic faiths. The Templeton Foundation famously offered \$US10000 grants to hundreds of academics to teach courses of their own design in science and religion.

There is something of a renaissance in the connection between faith and learning, and we are encouraging UNSW to be part of it. Trevor Cairney will now offer an instance of such a ‘specific worldview approach’ in his own discipline of education.

Faith and scholarship: my personal reappraisal

Trevor Cairney

In the twentieth century we have witnessed the gradual removal of studies of religion from the core of inquiry to the periphery, and then eventually to separate religious institutions. A basic premise of CASE is that matters of Christian faith can inform scholarship, and should shape the engagement of Christian intellectuals with their world. Bodies like New College that are located on university campuses and that exist to serve the institution, have an added responsibility to at least remind members of university communities that faith has a significant relationship to what we think we know and how we apply this knowledge to life.

How is this to be done? Firstly, with great caution and respect for the views of others. Because universities are not places that see themselves as places of moral training any more, some are suspicious of those who talk of faith, particularly Christian faith. Perhaps most would see that the separation of the church from university life has been a good thing, freeing academics and their students to explore knowledge unencumbered by religious beliefs. In the case of institutions like New College we are invited guests at the university and are bound by rules and policies that enshrine respect for and plurality of beliefs, not to mention numerous implicit cultural values that see strident truth claims from individuals and institutions as undesirable. Of course, another major cultural icon of the modern university is that of intellectual freedom and the right to express any view. At times Christians have felt that this central value has had a footnote that says “except if you are a Christian”.

When we consider the teachings of the Bible that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not something to be ashamed of (Romans 1:16), and that we should “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15), it would seem that Christian scholars and teachers have a number of responsibilities in the academic arena. Alvin Plantinga, a philosopher from the University of Notre Dame, suggests two. First, Christians must be committed to “consciousness raising, what he calls “Christian cultural criticism”.⁹ We need to suggest that there are other ways of viewing the world. Second, we should engage in scholarship in ways that

are appropriate from a Christian or more broadly theistic point of view. We need to consider how our faith affects the very things we study. As George Marsden points out, most Christian academics have separated their academic and Christian worlds, seeing their primary role as a Christian academic to be simply that of being the best academic that they can be.¹⁰ In fact, their faith makes a distinctive contribution to the university as a whole.

To this Yale's Gregory Ganssle adds a third concern, that of the well being of the institution itself. He argues that it isn't just individual Christian scholarship that is important; we need to be concerned for the institution and our mission to it. Being a Christian scholar should include thinking about the institution of the University redemptively. Ultimately we seek to benefit the lives of colleagues and students, as we establish the relevance of the gospel to the contemporary world.¹¹

In my academic work as a researcher interested in how people learn language, I have been challenged in recent years to reconsider much of what I wrote. When I revisit my publications from the 1980s and early 1990s I recognise that my work was only implicitly influenced by my Christian faith. This has led to a healthy reconsideration of my writing and how I see the social purposes of language and literacy. It has also led me to consider more critically the ideologies of many writers whose work I have accepted in the past. For example, in recent times, I have been exploring the impact of multimedia and new forms of digital literacy on how children learn. In doing so, I have questioned the work of a number of colleagues whose work has been making claims about the role that language plays as an agent of social oppression and the potential that new 'multiliteracies' might play in overcoming what they see as the injustices brought by the written word and significant cultural texts such as the Bible.¹²

Their thinking is based on a number of key premises:

- * That we live in a world of increasing complexity characterized by integrated meaning-making systems, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioural and so on.

- * Meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal.

- * That our world is marked simultaneously by increasing local diversity and increasing global connectedness – while we have English dominating much of what we do in the world (tourism, trade, computers etc), we have multiple Englishes emerging (marked by accent, national origin, subcultural style and professional or technical

communities) – English requires us to cross (increasingly) linguistic boundaries. That effective citizenship requires us to use multiple languages around the world.

* That we experience in this world changing working, public and personal lives.

* That no longer do the old pedagogies of formal, standard, written national language have the utility they once possessed.

Their work is underpinned by their belief that the removal of literacy as a dominating, colonising and dis-empowering tool of the wealthy and powerful is possible and desirable, and that there are alternatives that will be more equitable and empowering.

If nothing else, the views of the NLG will be a major challenge to those who see a central place for the written text in learning and who see a vital role for literature in virtually all cultures. It was Harding (1972) who suggested that:

...reading, like daydreaming and gossiping is a means to offer or be offered symbolic representations of life. These in turn allow us to reflect on the consequences and possibilities of the experiences. Just as I am affected by human tragedy in my world, I am also affected by the tragedy of characters in books. So too with joy, amusement, fear, love, curiosity, love and sadness. By reflecting on these and other experiences we come to a greater understanding of our world and ourselves. As well, we share an experience of text that can act both as mortar to build rich personal and textual histories, and bridges between our lives and the lives of others.

What would be lost if there was to be a reduced role for the written text?

Of course there are many other questions that this redefining of literacy raises.

For example, is it true that the old pedagogies of formal, standard, written national language have less utility than they once possessed? Should concerns with standard spelling, grammar, vocabulary be replaced with concerns for the design of the gestural,

the visual, the spatial etc. And if the answer for many in this room is yes, then who decides that this should occur in schools and on what basis?

As a Christian, I can also anticipate other implications from such a view of literacy and would want to sound some warnings. First, where does such a theoretical view lead us in terms of the importance of ‘authoritarian’ religious texts like the Bible? Second, how does one judge the worth of a written text anyway, or dismiss it as a tool of oppression? Third, could this new multimodal world based on concepts of design rather than textual composition and comprehension lead us towards new forms of empowerment and disempowerment, or even new ways of arriving at the same destinations as in the past?

It has been exciting (indeed liberating) to continue to engage as a researcher in reading, analysing, critiquing and responding to the work of others, while at the same time considering how my world view, centred on the gospel of Christ, makes a difference to the arguments that I feel compelled to raise.

As a Christian, writers like Marsden, Plantinga and Ganssle have challenged me to consider how I use my scholarship in the university context. Plantinga suggests that we work and engage in an arena in which a conflict is being played out between a “theistic perspective, on the one hand, and perennial naturalism and creative anti-realism (along with the relativism and anti-commitment it spawns) on the other.” As a Christian academic I see the need to interrogate aspects of contemporary scholarship that are at odds with a Christian world view. As a participant in the university and in academic communities, I do not approach this task dogmatically, but as one who has a right and obligation to express ideas which reflect who I am and what I believe. My faith is not neutral; it does shape how I see the world.

A modest proposal

Greg Clarke

This paper is not background for an argument to establish a School of Religious Studies at the University of New South Wales. It is, rather, background for rethinking the importance and validity of offering religious perspectives within the mainstream of secular university education: Christian perspectives on social work, on the history of English literature, on metaphysics and ethics, on law. There may be an argument for a Christian perspective within concrete technology that we haven't yet thought of, but it is probably true that not all areas of scholarship and research benefit to the same degree from religious perspectives.

UNSW is well-positioned to be a leader in establishing an appropriate place for religious worldviews within the normal teaching and research activities of the mainstream university. It has no denominational or sectarian heritage which might skew its educational endeavours. There are no church-state issues here. Furthermore, it has invited members of religious communities into university life, in the form of church-owned and run Colleges—New College, Shalom College, Warrane College and Creston College. They are already an acceptable—indeed, an encouraged—part of UNSW.

In his as-yet unpublished doctoral dissertation on denominational colleges in Australian universities, Ian Walker suggests that the initial fear of the universities that the Colleges would sectarianise the secular university has proven unfounded. In fact, the reverse seems to have occurred: in many places, the university has secularised the colleges.¹³

However, this paper has argued that in order for the university to be genuinely pluralistic, religious perspectives need to be part of the teaching and research programs of its various schools, faculties and centres.

There is an easy and obvious way to facilitate this activity at UNSW. In 1994, the University Council approved a General Education program, which all students in single-degree courses must undertake. Among the 10 objectives of the Program is this one:

“To empower students to systematically challenge received traditions of knowledge, beliefs and values.”¹⁴

Leaving aside the split infinitive, we argue that unless religious traditions are enabled to participate at the level of teaching and research, such critical skills are being learned outside of a context of genuine dialogue and interaction. They are, instead, being taught *from a received view itself*, that is, the viewpoint of naturalism, which Marsden raised as an enemy of genuine pluralism in the contemporary university. If properly accredited General Education courses could be offered, taught from specified and named religious perspectives, we believe this would be an important step in the direction of genuine plurality.

UNSW has an opportunity, perhaps springing from its religiously affiliated Colleges (the universities’s “very difficult experiment”¹⁵) and their academic staff, to provide a genuinely pluralistic educational experience which finds space for appropriate teaching and scholarship from specific religious or worldview perspectives. We urge the university to take it up.

¹ Elspeth Probyn, “For God’s sake, no one owns him”, The Australian ‘Higher Education’ supplement, 14 April 2004, p.36.

² Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism” in M. Dickstein (ed), *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (Duke University Press. Durham, NC,1998). See also Jason Boffetti, “How Richard Rorty Found Religion”, *First Things*, 123, May 2004,pp. 24-30. Retrieved 17 June from <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0405/articles/boffetti.html>.

³ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin, London, 1999, p. 156.

⁴ Geroge Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*, Oxford Uni Press, New York, 1994, p.436.

⁵ George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997, pp.23-24.

⁶ Stanley W. Croker, *Religion and the University: Oblivion or Participation?* Working Paper #9, New College Institute for Values Research, UNSW, p.8.

⁷ Croker, p.21.

⁸ See Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984.

⁹ Plantinga, A. (2003). "On Christian scholarship". Retrieved from <http://www.id.ucsb.edu/fscf/library/plantinga/OCS.html>

¹⁰ Marsden, *Soul*, p. 430.

¹¹ Ganssle, G. (2003). "A Doxastic Community Approach to Christian Scholarship". Retrieved from <http://www.leaderu.com/aip/docs/ganssle.html>

¹² As part of a visiting professorship at the University of British Columbia in July this year I presented a public lecture titled "Digital literacy: The myths, realities, threats and possibilities". Link to <http://www.lerc.educ.ubc.ca/lerc/resources/tcairney.wmv>

¹³ Ian Walker, "Church, college and campus: the sacred and the secular in the foundation of denominational colleges in Australian universities, with particular reference to certain colleges in universities established in the period 1945 to 1975", Unpublished PhD thesis, UNSW, 2002, p.i., See also pp.454-459.

¹⁴ 2003 Calendar, summary volume. UNSW, p.148.

¹⁵ John Woolley, Principal Professor in the University of Sydney, in 1859, describing the attempt to combine secular learning with denominational colleges at the University of Sydney. Cited in Ian Walker, "Church, College and Campus", p.1.