

GUEST EDITORIAL

RELIGIOUS STUDIES AT TERTIARY LEVEL

(A condensed version of this editorial was published in The Times of Papua New Guinea.)

No sooner was the decision taken, now a good quarter of a century ago, to found a university in what was then the Territory of Papua New Guinea, than the question of religious studies arose. Missions and churches were anxious to provide appropriate religious information and atmosphere to students, most of whom had a Christian background, from their villages and earlier schooling. It soon became clear that this idea would run into insuperable obstacles. Australia was paying the bill. Naturally, to Australian academics, was given the task of determining the main outlines of the project, and the strictly secular character of Australian universities excluded any “intrusion” of religion into academia. Lengthy discussions took place, and papers were submitted. The issue was so important that, perhaps for the first time, official representatives of different churches sat together to plan a common strategy, but to no avail. The University of Papua New Guinea never developed a centre for theology.

Fortunately, religion has not been absent from the university. Facilities are provided for chaplains, and, especially through the enthusiastic work of men like Carl Loeliger and Garry Trompf, valuable research took place in the field of religious movements. Numerous articles and other publications provide an incredible amount of information on what has happened, and is happening, in the area that was their main interest. If this work is not somehow continued Papua New Guinea will lose track of important aspects of its own history. The Melanesian Institute in Goroka also must get credit for its contribution to this research. But all of that does not answer the needs seen by the churches in the 1960s, and seen by many today.

It would not be difficult to make a case for a Faculty of Divinity. “University” comes from the medieval ideal of a *universitas studiorum*, a centre where all scholarly work finds a home, and is promoted; a place where research in all fields meets and interacts. If literature and history are

open to scholarly and objective study, why not religion? Nothing would seem to be less in accordance with the openness of the scholarly mind than *a priori* excluding from the universality of our interest something so important to many people. Major universities in Great Britain, the United States, or the European continent, would not dream of doing away with their faculties of theology. Now that Papua New Guinea no longer has to follow the Australian model, one could argue that the time has come for a genuine Faculty of Divinity.

However, from the proposition that it is appropriate for a university to have a Faculty of Divinity, it does not follow that the University of Papua New Guinea should now go in that direction. Papua New Guinea has limited resources and many needs. Already a substantial part of the money available for education goes into tertiary institutions, and the present government is even trying to reduce that part. We cannot do everything: it is a matter of weighing the costs of doing a thing here, and its importance for related areas of study, against the cost of sending students overseas. Apart from continuing research into religious movements and developments in Melanesia itself, what is there that can be done better here than elsewhere? Moreover, how big is the demand? How many students would, in fact, do graduate work here? The complaint has been made – and not without good grounds – that the churches are more enthusiastic in defending the need for religious studies than in sponsoring students for it. Until “market research” shows that sufficient students are going to come forward, it may be wiser to concentrate on what we can do well, and on what is more urgently needed.

In any case, would a graduate school of divinity answer our needs? First of all, what were, and what are, our needs? I would submit that the main need is for tertiary students to be able to gain, in religious matters, the level of insight and understanding they have in their own professional field. And this is a genuine need. Unfortunately, it is not rare to meet with sincerely religious, qualified people, of diploma and degree level, whose understanding of religion, their own and others’, is of about grade-four standard. And they are the first ones to regret it. Such people often express a desire to bring their religious knowledge up to the level of their professional competence. And this can only be done if opportunities are provided on the same scholarly level, and in the same environment.

In some ways, this is not a typically Papua New Guinean problem. The level of specialisation required in many disciplines today easily leads to forming groups of specialists, who find it difficult to communicate with people in other disciplines. They see the world from only one angle, have a language of their own, and can barely imagine that other fields of study, using other methods and criteria, can be worth listening to. As Ricoeur has put it, they are no longer each others' contemporaries. One only has to think of nuclear physics and genetic engineering. More and more people today are beginning to discern here a major threat to civilisation: a world broken up into water-tight compartments of non-communication. The very thing a "university of studies" was designed to avoid.

In a few countries, solutions are sought in inter-disciplinary collaboration, or through so-called "inter-faculties". Students in the positive sciences have to do a few units of their choice in fields such as religion, philosophy, or ethics. Students in these areas have to do units in the science faculties. Or, philosophy and religion, themselves, become an "inter-faculty".

A solution suited to Papua New Guinea conditions may lie in a sort of institute or foundation, independent of, but loosely linked to, the university, to provide regular series of lectures on contemporary bible knowledge, ecumenical theology, and the achievements of inter-church dialogues, ethics, non-Christian religions, etc. Such an institute could function with only a moderate endowment built up from contributions by the churches, a public subscription, and perhaps a grant of an ecumenical agency. It should be controlled by a board, on which, with spokesmen for the churches, the university is represented, to ensure scholarly professionalism, with students' representatives, so as to make programs responsive to their needs.

One could object that the chaplains can take care of this matter, but their role is primarily a different one. Unless a thing of this sort is properly institutionalised, it will depend on personalities, and their personal initiative. There is no assurance of continuity, no guarantee of quality.

At a later stage, if the institute proves viable, and of adequate standard, it could administer assessments. Eventually the university could

consider giving credits for courses successfully followed, as is done in the case of other institutes today.

In October, 1986, the Programme on Theological Education (PTE) of the World Council of Churches sponsored a high-level consultation in Geneva on theological education in the Pacific. While the consultation was mainly concerned with upgrading the Pacific Theological College in Suva, consultants expressed the need for a comprehensive vision of theological education in the entire area, i.e., including Melanesia. Another round of discussions on religious studies and theology is therefore probably imminent. I suggest that something like the institute mentioned above is worth considering as an alternative to campaigning in favour of a full graduate program that has little chance of success, and that promotes something, for which the need may be more symbolic than real.

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