

Moves Towards the Reestablishment of a Department of Theology at the University of Papua New Guinea

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The following paper was presented by Sr Noela Leamy, as a report of her work as Coordinator of Religious Studies for the Melanesian Council of Churches. After giving the paper, Sister Noela made a successful visit to Europe to obtain funds for the setting up of a Department of Theology at the University of Papua New Guinea. However, at that point, she was promoted by her Order to other work. At the time of writing, her successor as coordinator had not been appointed.

As an appendix to her paper, Sr Noela added a paper by R. Wesley Hartley on "Recent Ecumenical Developments in Theological Education", which dealt with theological education in Australia. This paper described the advantages to be obtained by closer contact between colleges of theological education of various denominations, and secular universities. The contacts led both, to ecumenical cooperation, and dialogue with disciplines other than theology. Shared experience brings a vision of higher standards, and access to a much wider range of skills and resources. The three models discussed in the paper are: (a) "an external examining body, which has associated with it approved teaching institutions": colleges from several denominations can be accredited for the certificates of one examining body; (b) "a university offers degrees in theology, and a college of divinity provides some of the teaching for the courses leading to the degree": one such college, the Adelaide College of Divinity, related to the Flinders University of South Australia, claims to offer "the study of theology, with the advantages of a university context, an ecumenical perspective, and a basis in the tradition and community of theological colleges"; (c) "where colleges of divinity confer their own degrees (without relation to a university), and teaching is carried out jointly or separately (or by a combination of these) by the member colleges".

None of these models is precisely the same as that proposed for the Department of Theology at the University of Papua New Guinea, but they do provide precedents for ecumenical cooperation, and for cooperation between religious and secular institutions. In Papua New Guinea, both the university and the theological colleges would be put on their mettle if they had to explain themselves to each other. The situation in Papua New Guinea has been influenced, in the past, by the Australian insistence on a separation of secular and church education. However, there now seems to be more cooperation between the two wings of education in Australia, and Papua New Guinea could follow this lead, which would bring it more into line with other parts of the world.

There have been a number of attempts, in the past, to have units in religious studies taught at the University main campus. There has been considerable opposition from within the staff, and the proposal, in 1983, was made at a time when finance was a real problem. Opposition to the introduction of religious studies was not absent in Goroka, either, but it came from expatriate staff, and the success of the venture at Goroka is the result of strongly-positive attitudes towards the subject by national members of staff, who were willing, and able, to articulate the right of students to have such an opportunity. It is to be expected that such opposition would be found, but it could be expected now that there will be sufficient support for the introduction of units in religious studies with a number of faculties.

The major objective, initially, is to provide the opportunity for persons studying at the tertiary level to have access to a more-rounded education. The Matane Report, on which the new Philosophy of Education is based, stresses integral human development, and the integration of spiritual and social development. Therefore, significant efforts are being made to ensure some forms of integration. Social development and spiritual development, which are equally as important as academic, emotional, physical, and psychological development, have become a focus of much debate, and material for teaching

ethics and morals are being produced for the schools by the Curriculum Division of the National Department of Education. The Churches Education Council is in touch with these developments, but church officials, within their own regions, need to be watchful of materials that are coming out.

It is a matter of concern that, in the national high schools, and in our tertiary institutions, outside of the Church Agency Community Teachers' Colleges, it is difficult to see how integral human development can be achieved, when opportunity for religious studies at a serious level is not offered within the normal course of the student's development. The Higher Education Act of 1983, under Section 4, entitled Objects Of Higher Education states as its first object:

The integral human development of the person.

It further states, under Section 4 Subsection (2), that, in achieving the objects and purposes, "education will be based on both noble traditions and Christian principles".

Like all law, this one is based on the Mother Law or Constitution of the country, which makes this very statement in its Preamble.

Section 4 Subsection (3) of the Higher Education Act reads:

Nothing in this Act restricts, or authorises, the making of regulations restricting the giving of religious and doctrinal instruction in declared institutions, but no declared institution is entitled to exclude a student solely on the ground of religious or doctrinal affiliation.

The foundation in Law is firm . . . the possibility for the introduction of religious studies is clear. However, until there was a statement from the Department of Education, through a carefully-worded and detailed Ministerial Statement and Secretarial Instruction, there was constant difficulty in maintaining a Christian presence in these institutions.

Previously, there were no national voices to speak for this right. Today, there are those voices, and they have been, and will continue to be, heard. The climate, both at the level of the Curriculum Division, and at the level of the National Department of Education, is very good.

Initial negotiations, in regard to the introduction of religious studies on the main campus of the University, will be directed towards obtaining answers to the following five questions:

1. Under which department will the religious studies options be offered?
2. Which units could be introduced initially to achieve the first objective of providing a more-integrated development of individuals undertaking a broad range of subjects? It is envisaged that students studying medicine, law, and communication arts, could well be interested in the ethics of their professional subject. Social-work personnel could be greatly advantaged by a study of levels of moral development, and of faith development. Church history, scripture, Christology, and comparative religions are all subjects that could be introduced initially.
3. Which faculties will accept units in religious studies, as part of their normal diploma or bachelor's courses? If students of medicine wish to do a unit in ethics, it is important that the faculty accepts the unit as a viable option for its students. In arts and education, it would need to be clearly stated how many subjects a student could opt to take in religious studies. In education, there could be discussion about the possibility of having religious studies as one of the student's major teaching areas: this would seem to be totally in line with the focus of the new philosophy of education, based on the Matane Report. All this would take time and effort to clarify, and to reach agreement. So many faculties could be involved, as it is no longer viable to consider that students would take these units, over and above their other course work. In the

present climate of Natschol payments being tied to achievement, an optional extra is no longer a true option. The answer to this question will not easily be obtained. The refusal of faculties to place this matter on their agenda could block the formulation of an answer.

4. What is the possibility of the lecturer holding a position, funded by the University, either immediately, or even later, when the financial problems of establishing the department have been overcome? Do the churches see this as a desirable option? What rights would the churches have in the appointment of a University-paid lecturer?

5. What would be the expectations of the University in relation to input of finance from the churches, for the purpose of extending the library and teaching-aid resources for this department?

Writing the course

Once there are answers to the questions posed here, it would be advantageous to visit Religious Studies Departments in more than one University in Australia, and to endeavour to identify a consultant, who would work with personnel of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools, in actually writing up the courses agreed upon. For the course at Goroka Teachers' College, a workshop was held, for the purpose of writing the course, and the work was completed within ten days of the vacation period, by individuals, who had considerable experience in the country, and expertise in specific areas.

Acceptance of the Course

The course would have to be submitted to the scrutiny of the University Council. With the course at Goroka, this took considerable time and perseverance. Ultimately, individual faculties/departments would have to be involved in decisions about accepting religious studies as a viable option for their students, and about the unit accreditation within the points system operating.

It would not be realistic to project a possible time for the introduction of units in religious studies on the main campus of the University. At this stage, with no finance at all yet, and not even the first approach to the University, it is entirely premature to be speaking about the possibility of introducing religious studies at the Main Campus. What we have now is a person, who is called upon to investigate the possibilities, and to pursue options.

The objectives, as I understand them, are clear: firstly, the introduction of units, for the purpose of offering a more-rounded education to students enrolled in all faculties; secondly, the possibility of a Department of Religious Studies; and, finally, the hope that, ultimately, students would be able to pursue studies for a master's level degree.

The position of Coordinator of Religious Studies was established as from May 1 of this year. I have been asked to take that position, because of the experience gained in working with the project at Goroka Teachers' College. Other people have walked before me down this road at UPNG – and, in fact, I was part of the group working in 1982-1983. These people were more highly qualified than I am, and have not been successful, so I cannot promise to succeed, where others have failed. However, I do have a great belief that there is a time for everything, and I see both the need for this kind of course at University level, and the justice of making it available for those who want to have such understanding. I also experience a confidence, that is related to the goodwill experienced in recent times, regarding the teaching of religious studies, and the concern that is being expressed about the need for teaching ethics and morals.

There is a need for more than ethics and morals teaching. To be secure, an individual needs to have internalised a set of beliefs and values. None of us, at whatever level of teaching or ministry we work, can give faith to another, however dearly we might wish to do so. God alone is the giver of that gift, though we recognise that He uses human instruments in mediating this gift. Our task in education is to teach – to teach in a way that

enables individuals to seek and find the truth. As Christians, we believe that grace builds on nature, and there is evidence that a solid foundation of religious education, which is both doctrinally based, and deals with ethical and moral questions related to basic human rights, is one essential element in developing a Christian society. It will not easily succeed without the witness of Christian living, especially in significant others, but it is one aspect of integral human development that has been missing from the formal education system at the tertiary level, until now, and it is the task of the churches to address this need.

Recent Developments in Relation to the Attitude of the Funding Agencies

In February of this year, Revd Gernot Fugmann visited Papua New Guinea, and I had the opportunity of discussing this project with him. There are other requests coming to the funding agencies for assistance in mounting courses in religious studies – for example, from Divine Word Institute. At this time, Divine Word Institute is seriously considering the possibility of introducing a Bachelor's Degree in Religious Studies/Theology. The attitude of Revd Fugmann is that, in a country of this size, at this point in its development, it is a luxury to consider duplicating resources of such a nature, and that there needs to be a decision, from within the country, as to where the degree course could be offered.

This raises the whole question of theology accreditation, and challenges all concerned to consider possibilities that would meet the needs of those presently involved in teaching theology, religious studies, and catechetics. It, therefore, seems opportune to look at the possibility of having a centralised accrediting body, which could enable students from the teachers' colleges, seminaries, and Divine Word Institute, as well as those who do units in the Religious Studies Correspondence Course offered by the Commissions of Bishops and Religious at Goroka, to have their courses accredited, as part of their later university study. I understand that already there is one possibility of doing this for the students from the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools, but, for others, this is not so.

This opens up the whole area of establishing comparability of standards, of monitoring these standards, and of providing for accreditation. However, since MATS is an established body, which is already recognised, it could be possible to consider the history of development that has occurred in Australia – and other examples, as they become known – to see if it is viable to have such a system here, without too much duplication. The important thing, it seems to me, is to enable many more people, over a much wider area, to have access to the possibility of theological and catechetical study, of personal spiritual development, and of preparation for ministries and professions, at a significant level, that would be appropriate in a country, which publicly espouses a Christian ethic.