God in the University
The church’s expectations and the university’s obligations

Tom Frame

The Christian church has certain expectations of theological education with respect to the conduct of its mission; the university has certain obligations to the Commonwealth Government in offering theological education in a liberal democratic society. I want to ask whether, when and where there might be conflicts between the church’s expectations and the university’s obligations in conduct of theological education.

The church’s expectations
The Charles Sturt University School of Theology consists of two partner institutions, both of which are denominational foundations – St Mark’s National Theological Centre (St Mark’s) being Anglican and United Theological College (UTC) being Uniting Church – although each

Professor Tom Frame is the Director of St Mark’s National Theological Centre and Professor of Theology at Charles Sturt University.
maintains an ecumenical ethos in their academic faculties and student bodies. For its part, the Anglican Church places great expectations on its learning institutions in terms of extending and enhancing Christian mission and ministry. As part of a wider remit, St Mark’s is expected to educate the church’s leadership, to support the continuing vocational formation of clergy, to advance the academic and practical study of theology, and to help the church maintain a healthy intellectual culture.

Many of my clerical colleagues think the church’s woes can be attributed to the flawed preparation of ordinands. They contend that it is either inadequate in its content or misguided in its emphasis. I believe that theological colleges, like Australian primary and second schools, are being asked to shoulder burdens that actually belong to the wider community. Theological colleges are, however, in the midst of an enormous shake-up with great change in the means and methods being employed in the equipping of clergy and lay people for church leadership. There are several things contributing to the turbulence. Obviously, declining participation in church life has financial implications but this has certainly not affected the number of ordinands which have achieved historically record levels. The principal change is in the kinds of ordination candidates that theological colleges are being asked to nurture and the church’s uncertainty about what it wants (or needs) from its leaders. There are consequences from the change for the provision and delivery of theology in the university setting.

In contrast to the 1960s, ordination candidates are now more mature and better educated. They are mostly married and women outnumber men. Quite a number of theological students become ordination candidates during rather than before their formal period of study. As the churches continue to be active in regional and rural Australia, the majority of ordinands study by distance education with occasional residential attendance. Ordination candidates rarely take the minimum time to complete their degree as many are engaged in part-time employment or attention to family responsibilities as they study.

Some sponsoring bodies do not require their candidates to have completed a bachelor’s degree. They are prepared to ordain these candidates after they have completed four core subjects. Others candidates enrol in theology courses with higher degrees in other disciplines to their credit. They conclude their formal theological education with either honours or masters qualifications. Notably, some ordinands are not necessarily
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committed to parish ministry or paid employment. The large number of part-time or honorary chaplains St Mark’s is asked to prepare for ordination is astounding. Conversely, the small number of prospective full-time stipendiary parish clergy we are studying at St Mark’s is worrying. These trends have influenced the kinds of courses and subjects that the university is asked to develop with more of a vocational emphasis than academic focus.

In contrast to programs offered elsewhere in the university, there are added complications associated with devising courses and developing curricula in theology. The churches are the founders of theological institutions like St Mark’s and UTC, and the principal employers of theology graduates. As communities of faith, the churches are founded on doctrinal statements; their mission is shaped by religious beliefs. The churches expect that these statements and beliefs will be incorporated into the courses and subjects comprising a degree in theology, and assume their ordinands, as prospective church leaders, will be encouraged to uphold these statements and to embrace these beliefs by lecturers and tutors sympathetic to the churches’ convictions and commitments.

The churches are also interested in the ordinands’ actions and attitudes. In the English university tradition, the study of theology has been conducted to the sound of church bells. Reflecting the unity of mind and spirit, there is a close connection between study and prayer. In wanting theological colleges to be clergy-training institutions, the churches with a direct interest in the CSU School of Theology sometimes forget that only ten per cent of students enrolling in CSU programs (a rough estimate because vocational aspirations are not recorded) are actively pursuing a ministerial vocation while some students have no denominational allegiance or religious adherence. The CSU School of Theology caters for a much larger clientele than that sponsored by the Anglican and Uniting churches. This means the school’s remit must be broad and its programs inclusive. The approach of St Mark’s and UTC to the diverse needs of this disparate student population in the context of preserving theology’s academic integrity is to make half of the BTh degree mandatory for all students, and to leave to sponsoring churches the task of identifying the major and minor subject sequences and electives that ordination candidates are required to complete for the award of the qualification within the university’s academic regulations.
To ensure a thorough grounding in the discipline of theology, the CSU Bachelor of Theology (BTh) places emphasis on systematic and pastoral theology, biblical languages and hermeneutics, Western philosophy and social ethics, religious history and interfaith dialogue, pastoral counselling and youth work. Electives include specialist subjects, such as THL 315 Anglican Foundations and THL 227 Uniting Church Studies, for those preparing for denominational employment. As CSU has chosen to promote itself as the ‘university of the professions’, the BTh program must contain some denominational content to ensure that ordination candidates are prepared for actual service in real workplaces. To avoid any conflict with the university’s obligation to preserve its religious neutrality, most of the Anglican denominational content is delivered in the vocational training that is offered separately through St Mark’s. It was devised and is delivered independent of the university. Anglican denominational content is conveyed through the St Mark’s Diploma of Anglican Orders (DAO) program. The DAO complements foundational theological studies undertaken within CSU. The DAO program stands apart from degree studies as part of a deliberate policy that not only distinguishes education from training but acknowledges the boundaries of academic freedom and ecclesial discipline.

With respect to academic freedom in the context of Australian religious pluralism, it is vital the churches involved in the provision of theological study within the university have a genuine commitment to ecumenism. This commitment is not easy to express or maintain because most Christian churches have a tribal streak and because no denomination is an inchoate mass. Religious sectarianism has been an enduring element of this nation’s history. Individual denominations consist of factions, parties and traditions, not unlike the academic community. Despite concerted attempts to preserve even-handedness, there are the unavoidable allegations and inevitable insinuations that faculty are theologically conservative, liberal or progressive. Sadly, suspicion rather than scholarship influences the decision of some students about where they will study. But the continuing struggles within and between churches over the content and conduct of theology must be prevented from distorting the curriculum.

In my observation, there is potential for tension between the churches’ expectations and the university’s culture in three areas. The first is the churches’ request for shorter or more compact study programs in
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Theology arising from the number of late vocations (whom they want to deploy quickly) and the move towards more restricted employment for clergy (reflecting greater professional specialisation). The second is an over-emphasis on the importance of postgraduate degree studies being entirely practical or predominantly vocationally orientated, thereby deprecating the importance of theoretical programs. The third is a preference for faculty research projects that are ‘relevant’ to the church’s mission and ministry rather than critical to the development of theology as an intellectual discipline. Unless acknowledged and managed, these tensions can become acute problems that have the potential to mutate theology as an academic pursuit and to damage the relationship that exists between the church and the university.

The university’s obligations

As a federally-funded institution, Charles Sturt University has certain obligations to the Commonwealth Government and the Australian people. These obligations include the delivery of educational programs that comply with the nation’s constitutional arrangements and which are consistent with its legal framework. The force and effect of section 116 of the Australian Constitution and federal human rights legislation is to prohibit the university from precluding any student on the grounds of religious belief or affiliation. The university cannot apply any faith test or impose any denominational prerequisite on enrolment in the courses and subjects it offers to the public. Despite the claims of militant secularists, section 116 does not preclude the study of theology within the university. Indeed, theology’s ‘traditional’ location is the university with most ancient universities hosting a theological faculty or a divinity school. In my view, theology deserves to be subjected to intellectual analysis and academic assessment because it has shaped Australian life and popular culture in profound ways. Inasmuch as religious belief continues to influence the actions and attitudes of many Australians, it should not be exempted from academic survey or the scrutiny of scholars.

Locating theology within the university obliges its practitioners to engage with the objections and criticisms of other disciplines, and to promote dialogue with those who are without religious belief, especially atheists and agnostics. But given that theology is usually refracted through the experience of communities of faith and noting that most theologians
have formal ecclesial ties, there is a justifiable concern that theology could descend into special pleading in the form of Gnostic obscurantism. This matter has been addressed in a creative manner by the Dutch.

In the Netherlands, the teaching of theology at state universities since the Law on Higher Education was enacted in 1876 takes the form of a *duplex ordo* – a two-fold theological program consisting of a ‘public’ and a ‘church’ component. Under this arrangement, the Dutch state appoints the professors of Old and New Testament, Philosophy and the History of Religions, and the History of Christianity. The Dutch Reformed Church appoints the professors of Dogmatics and Practical Theology. It appears on first inspection to be a sensible theoretical solution but the *duplex ordo* has proved difficult to maintain practically on several fronts. ‘Church Professors’ have not enjoyed the academic status of ‘State Professors’, the latter being freer to determine the syllabus taught and the research conducted, while the declining number of ordinands has meant a reduction in the overall number of ‘Church Professors’. There is also a view within the Dutch academy that theology is best studied at some distance from potentially proprietorial, interfering and censorious churches.

The CSU-St Mark’s-UTC model resembles the Dutch arrangement in some respects. Those who teach CSU subjects must be acceptable to the university as academic associates; those who deliver the St Mark’s Diploma of Anglican Orders must be acceptable to the church as vocational trainers. A shorthand way of describing this approach would be to say that public theology is offered by the university; confessional practice is delivered by the church. They are, however, co-located in their conduct and in continuing conversation with one another. This interaction is a good thing. It helps to retain a practical edge to theology and to ensure that practice is true to theory.

To preserve its community standing, the university must be able to trust the participating churches to esteem the critical study of theology and to respect the academy’s intellectual integrity. The university should not be used by any church faction to secure its ascendancy within the religious community. This means the university is entitled to insist on its partners being open to debate and affirming of diversity. The university is also justified in requiring a commitment to conversation between the partners forming the School of Theology; to continuing dialogue with other religious communities, such as Muslims and Buddhists; and to rigorous
interaction with other academic disciplines such as psychology and sociology, biology and botany. As a consequence of these requirements, some ecclesial bodies would be permanently prevented from taking their place in the university. This would include groups who see the evangelisation of all students as their first priority and those who felt the university's regulations might oblige them to compromise their core beliefs or defining customs. For instance, some denominations would contend that allowing students unfettered intellectual freedom and unlimited individual liberty would be contrary to church order and discipline. These groups will prefer to support denominational seminaries or private universities.

For some Christians, adherence to ‘confessional’ theology cannot avoid creating a tension between loyalty to the faith community and commitment to academic freedom. The English theologian John Milbank puts the matter this way:

Should theology owe its prime allegiance to the academic community or to the church? Should it function primarily as a ‘public discourse’ answering to the critical norms and liberal values of free society in the West or should it articulate the faith of the church seeking understanding according to a logic indissociable from this faith?

In my view, and constraints of space prevents me from developing this matter further, theology owes its prime allegiance to neither. The university must insist on independent theological research and unfettered critical inquiry. The university must coincidentally reject any attempt to constrict the work of academics or to censure the writing of scholars. If theologians with denominational affiliations are to work creatively and conscientiously within the university, the churches must extend certain liberties to these of their representatives and refrain from denouncing divergent or dissenting opinions. The university must insist on the prerogative of all faculty members to teach and supervise students in accordance with the customs and conventions of all disciplines in the university. The church is entitled to point out when and where its stated views are misrepresented or maligned while denominational representatives should not be obliged by the university to be actively disloyal to their own faith community and its distinct teachings. Of course, theological faculty with denominational affiliations should be prudent and responsible in their conduct, acknowledging that
they are often addressing intellectual and ecclesial communities at the same time.

For theology to be a genuinely intellectual pursuit, its scholarly findings and academic outcomes need to be made available to all. Its practitioners should not be bound closely to confessional value judgements or forced to concentrate on subjects and inquiries that ecclesial communities regard as important to them irrespective of their broader social and spiritual value. The fear is, of course, that theologians might restrict themselves to descriptive projects and refuse to engage in more critical or speculative activities. But in developing a partnership with the university, the churches must realise they have relinquished their control of theology and entrusted the discipline to an entity that, in one sense, cannot necessarily be relied upon to protect or to preserve it in some pristine or prescribed form. In my view, this is how it should be if theology is to avoid the allegation that it is essentially a cluster of private truths relating to personal beliefs rather than public truths relating to community well-being.

Within the context of CSU to date, the church’s expectations and the university’s obligations have been reconciled in a manner that has been acceptable to both parties. It has been, I would contend, a mutually advantageous relationship that has enriched the church and enhanced the university.