

The Annual University Christian Service

Macquarie University

May 4, 2011

'Christ and the Academy: Doing education Christianly'

Dr Bryan Cowling
Executive Director
Anglican Education Commission

It is a pleasure and an honour to be invited to address you this afternoon at this important service in the life of Robert Menzies College and Macquarie University. I have a long-standing interest in Universities in Australia and for the involvement of Christian students, academics and researchers in them: past and present.

At the risk of offending some of you I want to begin my remarks this afternoon by posing this question:

If Jesus had been born in Sydney, Australia in the late 20th century, would he have attended University, perhaps even this University?

And perhaps a second question:

Is commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ somewhat incongruous with serious study, debate and research in the contemporary University?

The Contemporary University

In this country, the experience for most of us has been with what I will call public universities, that is, those set up primarily by governments with a charter to teach, research, increase the quantum and quality of our knowledge and where appropriate to foster the application of that knowledge within society. Others will have had experience with universities established by private individuals, corporations or religious bodies. It is worth remembering that the earliest Universities established in Britain, Europe and the United States, had a

distinctively Christian parentage, and in many cases their primary function was vocational: to teach theology to the clergy and to teach philosophy and law for the jurists and bureaucrats of their day.

I'm with Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton when they claim that Universities play a very significant role in contemporary society. *The University is at the very heart of our culture. The ideas developed in the academy are fleshed out in society.* (p.164) I am sure we can all identify with that statement, whether it is in the field of economics, psychology, science, engineering, politics, education, law, medicine, and the list goes on.

This is not the occasion for us to sing the praises of the academy, although I do believe that Australians generally, and Christian Australians in particular, should be more vocal in their affirmation of the importance of the academy and those who work and study within it.

Universities are Imperfect

True, contemporary Universities, like every other institution (the Church included) have their shortcomings and their double-standards. Universities were once the seedbeds of discontent, the nerve-centres for revolution, the citadels of free speech, the playgrounds for all sorts of social experimentation, the nursery for critical thinking and public debating. Lectures were rich with eloquent oracy. Exams were great exercises for stretching students' minds and instilling a certain level of discipline! Some of these characteristics have survived into the twenty-first century.

But contemporary universities have also become highly specialised often resulting in a silo mentality within and between faculties thereby accelerating a

fragmentation of knowledge. To this may be added the growing emphasis on gaining credentials and a preoccupation with the coverage of content at the expense of intellectual discourse; and the privileging of secular humanism over other worldviews in the construction, delivery and assessment of academic programs.

The recent reports of inappropriate student behaviour at the Australian Defence Academy have brought into question the relationship between the academy (literally this time) and everyday life. At the ADA, as occurred at the Harvard Business School a few years ago, questions were asked how it could be that graduates (or undergraduates) could act so unethically in business or in their personal social behavior when they had studied and passed exams in ethics at the academy. The supposition in both situations is that the academy has a social responsibility for the morality of its graduates.

Ernest Boyer, head of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching asked two questions which search our societal soul:

Education for what purpose? Competence to what end? At a time in life when values should be shaped and personal priorities sharply probed, what a tragedy it would be if the most deeply felt issues, the most haunting questions, the most creative moments were pushed to the fringes of our institutional life. What a monumental mistake it would be if students, during the undergraduate years, remained trapped within the organizational grooves and narrow routines to which the academic world sometimes seems excessively devoted. (p. 283)

None of these features, not least the marginalizing of Christian faith within the academy is reason for Christians to avoid active participation within it.

The Need for Active and Constructive Engagement

In fact, I want to argue that these trends are all the more reason why Christians must be actively, purposefully and constructively engaged at every level and in every area of our modern Universities. The same might be said for each and every person who works, administers, teaches, researches and studies in a University, but I think it is of particular importance for those who profess to be Christians.

Boyer's question: *education for what purpose?* prompts us to ask whether it is sufficient for Universities to produce people who are technically competent but do not know the whys and wherefores of those competencies. Marketable skills are fine but they need to be complemented by students' commitment to preparation for a calling (not just a career), and what Neil Postman calls '*the acquisition of a sense of coherence in their studies, a sense of purpose in life, meaning and interconnectedness in what they learn.*' (p. 86).

I remember well being challenged as an undergraduate in the early 1960s to think purposefully and Christianly by a book *The Christian Mind* (1963) written by a British novelist, theologian and academic by the name of Harry Blamires: He wrote:

There is no longer a Christian mind. There is still, of course a Christian ethic, a Christian practice and a Christian spirituality. As a moral being, the modern Christian subscribes to a code other than that of the non-Christian. As a member of the church, he understands obligations and observations ignored by the non-Christian. As a spiritual being, in prayer and meditation, he strives to cultivate a dimension of life unexplored by the non-Christian. But as a thinking being, the modern Christian has succumbed to secularization. (p. 3)

His book did not denigrate or ridicule the secular mind, nor am I wishing to do so today. But I share his view that Christians need to understand the difference between an authentic Christian mind and a secular mind:

To think secularly is to think within a framework bounded by the limits of our life here on earth; it is to keep one's calculations rooted in this-worldly criteria. To think Christianly is to accept all things with the mind, as related directly or indirectly to man's eternal destiny as a redeemed and chosen child of God. (p.44)

To do education Christianly in the University, according to Arthur Holmes (1977) is

to think worldviewishly. This means locating each field of inquiry within a Christian understanding of life as a whole, and that we interpret what we know in that larger context. The key ingredients of such a worldview will include the biblical conceptions of nature, of man, and of history, in relation to the God we know in Christ.

Holmes goes on to say that

to think Christianly is to bring these concepts into our thinking about everything else. It is here that the Christian rests his confidence that rational and scientific inquiry can bring good results, that the technology we develop can either bless us or curse us, according to the wisdom and morality with which we use it.

To think Christianly we must locate our arts and sciences, humanities, educational, social and other tasks, within this Christian view of nature.

The modern University is not neutral territory. It is a home to hundreds, if not thousands of articulated and lived worldviews. Each of them competes for attention and supremacy. It is good that there should be rigorous scrutiny and debate about these views.

A worldview derived from the Bible is not (and should not be) immune from scrutiny. When I talk about a Christian worldview, I am not talking about a simplistic formula (there are plenty of them around) nor a set of nifty intellectual questions to apply to other people's ideas, but I am talking about a lived way of seeing the world, a lens through which we perceive reality. Gerard Kelly in a recent book called *Stretch* (2005) says *that our worldview, like our faith, needs to be woven into the very codes of our existence, buried so deep in our DNA that no external force can snuff it out.* (p.19)

Unfortunately, not very much is said within our churches about '*the Christian mind*' or '*having a biblically shaped worldview.*' Nor is there much emphasis on them within our schools, though this is changing. So from whence will today's Christian undergraduates be challenged and supported to think, study, research, speak and write using a Christian mind? Do not hear me incorrectly. I am not referring here to speaking and writing about Christian subjects, theology and practices: I am talking about thinking Christianly about any and every issue that arises in the course of one's life within the University. An enormous responsibility rests upon the Christian academics within our universities to not only model thinking and teaching Christianly but to encourage and support Christian students to do the same.

In a later book Harry Blamires joins the chorus of other Christian academic writers such as Professor Mark Noll and Carl Trueman in urging all of us who are using our Christian minds to engage as public intellectuals in the public marketplace. We thank God for the work of the Centre for Public Christianity and the Centre for Apologetic Scholarship and Education in this city and the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity. But let's not abdicate our responsibility to play a more visible role as Christian public intellectuals.

Four years ago, the Synod adopted a Diocesan Education Policy. Embedded within it was a list of nineteen characteristics of a Christian approach to education. It did not pretend to be comprehensive or the last word on the subject. But some of the characteristics, I suggest, are pertinent to the academy.

A Christian approach to education:

is deeply informed by a biblical theology and worldview

recognizes that God is the source of all knowledge and purpose and has created the world to be enjoyed and explored.

encourages study in an atmosphere of inquiry

acknowledges a necessary openness to correction in the light of our human capacity for confusion and error.

I imagine most of you will resonate with these points and the other ones that I have not quoted.

Review

Thus far, I have suggested that doing education Christianly within the University involves being actively, purposefully and constructively engaged at all levels of the University; it means cultivating and using a Christian mind in every facet of your study, teaching, research and administration; it means adopting and living by an internalised biblical worldview; it includes adopting a Christian approach to teaching and learning.

There are three further suggestions I want to offer you. Whilst I don't claim that all of them are uniquely Christian, I would suggest that their absence might be testimony to the absence of authentic Christian faith.

The first has to do with having an acoustic faith, that is a faith grounded in both active listening to God's Word and active listening to the diverse and changing

culture of the twenty first century University. John Stott famously describes this as 'double-listening.' An important outcome of this in the University is Christians, recognizing that God is the source of all truth, striving to integrate their beliefs about God, his world, his purposes and themselves with their learning within the disciplines (also created by God) they are studying. God has wired us to seek pattern, order, form and significance in what we learn. To be human is to seek coherence and correspondence in the disparate elements of existence. To be human is to want to make sense out of things.

The quest for coherence is challenging but not easy. Though there is an increasing literature being produced overseas, very little has been written or practised effectively in Australia. It is an area in which Christians in academia could provide a lead.

The second follows quite naturally from the first. As a student, as a teacher, as a scholar, no matter how much we read, how much we search, no matter what great discoveries we make, no matter how many problems we solve, we will only ever know a small fraction of what there is to know. If we are honest, we will find ourselves saying: the more I know, the more I do not know. A hallmark of the Christian scholar, the Christian academic and the Christian student, must surely be epistemic humility. Universities don't give awards for epistemic humility, but in God's eyes, it is highly valued.

And third, when all is said and done, the academy is a community, sometimes physical, nowadays increasingly virtual, and the glue that keeps communities together is love. Christians are making an enormous contribution to the contemporary university, but the greatest of these contributions will be through their manifestation of Christ's love to their fellow students and colleagues. Decades ago Francis Schaeffer declared *'that love and the unity to which it attests, is the mark Christ gave Christians to wear before the world. Only with this mark*

will the world know that Christians are indeed Christians and that Jesus was sent by the Father. (1970) There is a multiplicity of ways in which that love can be demonstrated, not least through deep understanding and empathy.

Conclusion

Would Jesus attend the academy in 2011? Through the daily lives and scholarship of those who follow him, he is already here. May each of us do our learning and teaching Christianly and so bring meaning to our community and honour and glory to God our father.

References:

- Blamires H *The Christian Mind*, SPCK, London, 1963
- Blamires H *The Post Christian Mind*, Servant Books, Michigan, 1999
- Boyer E *College, The Undergraduate Experience in America*, Harper and Row, New York, 1987
- Garber S *The Fabric of Faithfulness*, IVP, Downers Grove, 1996.
- Harris R A *The Integration of Faith and Learning*, Cascade, Eugene, 2004
- Henry D V, Agee B R (Eds)

 Faithful Learning and the Christian Scholarly Vocation, Wm B Erdmans, Grand Rapids, 2003
- Holmes A *All Truth is God's Truth*, Wm B Erdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977
- Hughes R T *The Vocation of a Christian Scholar*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005.
- Kelly G *Stretch, lessons in faith from the life of Daniel*, Spring Harvest Publishing, Barcs, 2005.
- Postman N *Technopoly, The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Knopf, New York, 1992
- Schaeffer F *The Mark of the Christian*, IVP Books, 1970.
- Walsh BJ and Middleton R

 The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview, IVP, Downers Grove, 1984