

# Theological Education for the Future Church and the Future World

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## Introduction

Machiavelli said:

*It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success ... than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the laws in their favour; and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it. (Malone 1981: xv).*

A new order of things is challenging theological education. In a world in which technology has replaced nature as our fate, promised us life but given us pollution and the alienation of consumerism, it is more important than ever that the Church should enter into the politics of our existence and proclaim the hope and love of the God who came to bring us life and bring it more abundantly. Within the theological world, there is evidence that the dominance of scientific positivism is breaking down, and with that breakdown, our modes of theological education, interpretation and practice from the recent past are less and less pertinent. This is the heralding of the end of certitude, and as Habermas has proposed, a move *inside* modernity. The neat fit of *certitude and domination*, in other words of magisterial symbolization and political hegemony, and their alliance for economic and political purposes, and the justification of this alliance through Christian theology is now very much in retreat. But the retreat has taken a long time to proceed and a solid residue of its former character still exists. This residue is out of sync with the world and denies or rejects or refuses to join the cultural change. In fact, in my view, it is caught in a time warp of Cartesian ideology where all thinking is grounded in objectivity, pursuing pure reason which denies the body and the earth, and holds rigidly to the masculinity of thought and power.

Much the same thing has happened in the secular world. There is a soft voice calling us to reject much of what is happening to us. The call for a shift from an anthropocentric, materialistic, short-term, high-impact, rapid growth outlook to one that embraces long-term thinking and involves stewardship has been motivated by a concern for future generations. It has also been pointed out that there are immediate benefits for the shift, not the least being the enhancing of our capacity to care (Slaughter, 1996, 70). But the shift raises at least three questions:

- Can the future be studied before it has happened?
- What social values will dominate our lives in the near future?
- What practical applications do theological studies have when addressing the identified imperatives of the future?

The answers lie within the field of a theology that is practically powerful. Powerful theology is more than an intellectual exercise. It is a theology that serves the Church and responds to the needs of a changing world. It is a theology that has unpacked the realities of today's world

and reconciles the world to God. There will be resistance to change towards powerful theology and not all change can be assumed to be good. But change accompanied by a well-informed community is more likely to achieve the goal of renewing the whole world which is the persistent call of God. McMahon makes the point that:

*Unless we move from a theology based on rewards and punishments towards a theology of life and death, crucifixion and resurrection, we will be unprepared for the entry into the new world of universal community. (McMahon 1991: 131)*

### **Views of our future**

The world is rapidly heading down the corporatist, managerialist path after a brief flirtation with Habermasian critical thinking, postmodern exposure of the weaknesses of the search for objective truth, Foucauldian struggles to understand our historical limits, and feminist analyses of power relationships. Despite the virility of all of these discourses, an age of grand management is coming upon us and appears to be impervious to these debates. It has been brooding for a long time. Dominant in this development is the growth of the global economy, orchestrated by international commerce. Such development has created a society that has become increasingly hostile to our well-being. Increasingly, modern western cultures are failing to do what cultures are designed to do: to give our lives meaning - a sense of identity, belonging and purpose, both socially and spiritually - and to provide a sound framework of values to guide what we do.

The sinister grand management of our lives is, however, and perhaps thankfully, accompanied by a western postcolonial sense of guilt. The guilt is being fed by the growth in knowledge about our cultural and ethnic arrogance and ignorance of the past, abuse of the environment, and an inability to sustain employment and standards of living. Significantly, we are constantly reminded that we are the last generation that can save the world. Suzuki reminds us also that the western world must make the first changes, because we consume the most (Ferrier et al, 1991, 124).

Sometimes seen from a myopic Christian view of the end times, this plea to save the world can be ignored because of a desire to hasten the end times. On the other hand if we have not shown our capability of stewardship of the earth, how can we hope to live in community at the end time. It is a dystopian view of the future which depresses and compromises the message of hope given through Christ and re-emphasised by Peter.

*... By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3).*

Despite the call of the epistle writer, there is plenty of support for a dystopian view. The advance of science, technology and the media and with them the world-wide process of secularisation has placed faith in God under greater threat than ever before. As Bosch (1993, 3) declares: "why turn to religion if we ourselves have the ways and means of dealing with the exigencies of modern life?" The West is slowly but steadily being dechristianised. Fifteen years ago, in Europe and North America, an average of 53,000 people were permanently leaving the Christian church from one Sunday to the next (Barrett, 1982, 7). The world can no longer be divided into Christian and non-Christian territories separated by oceans. We now live in a religiously pluralist world, in which Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and adherents of many other traditional religions mix daily. This has forced Christians to re-examine their stereotypical views about those other faiths and about society generally. It has also brought the Christians under critical focus by less affluent groups. Western theology is suspect in many parts of the world (Bosch, 1993, 4). It is often regarded as irrelevant, speculative, and the product of ivory

tower institutions. In many parts of the world there has been an active development of regional or cultural theologies to displace the colonial theologies of the past.

### **Australia's colonial theology**

Meanwhile in Australia, the reasons for not making the links between the Australian experience of life and theological scholarship are twofold. The first is our deep affection and commitment to a European brand of the faith, and the second is the hitherto lack of speculative futures-oriented theological discussion. Where has theology been in the great cultural debates, the economic planning, and any number of ethical, moral and political issues that affect the lives of Australians? Shaw (1988, 15) has traced this neglect to the way in which the Christian faith was presented to the early communities of convicts and gold diggers. Within these two great formative experiences the conservative minds were scornful of attempts to make links between religion and Australian life. Christianity was conceived as a conditioning experience which kept us within the European mindset.

Theological education in Australia also has not greatly developed what Fiorenza (1988, 89) identifies as the essential characteristics for a changing world:

- (i) being self reforming of itself and of theological enquiry
- (ii) informed by the church's identity and mission, and
- (iii) placing a theological vision of ministry or a professional conception of ministry at the centre of its task.

### **The new mission frontier**

We need now to acknowledge in the western world that the theological frontier has shifted from the mission field to the local congregation (Mead 1994, 56) and God is calling the church into a secularised world where its mission and its life must once again be defined. Theological education for an increasing number of lay people and a return to professional theological education, which addresses social change, by practising clergy will be the vehicles for responding to this secularisation process. The theological education industry is on the edge of a great new role in society. As facilitators within this industry, theological librarians will have the option to be important gatekeepers for dramatic and worthwhile changes.

As economic rationalism and the effects of the international economy begin to filter through society, more importance will be placed on money than ethics and morality. Theological education has not escaped and will not escape the iron grasp of this powerful discourse. As knowledge increasingly becomes recognised as a product to trade in, it will become more difficult to offer courses unless they offer immediate economic return to the clients. The earliest victims of these developments are already the arts and humanities which have been close allies of theology.

Theological education has two reasons for surviving in this climate. It has to have an opportunity to grow outside the seminary and theological college as it has begun to do to meet the emerging demands of new audiences, and, for its own credibility, to provide a response to the changing social fabric which is threatening the continuation of mainstream Christianity and the natural shift of the mission field to the congregation.

This mission field offers 'learning points' which are cyclical and almost predictable. There are very specific moments in the life of congregations and communities when people feel a challenge to change and to act. They are unique and sometimes do not last long. But they are educative moments. Others occur relatively unexpectedly and are often critical to the life of the community. They are moments that can, to a certain extent, be foreshadowed by an awareness of future trends and with the use of futures tools. Can we respond to these moments theologically and practically using futures tools?

## **Futures Study**

Our relationship to the future is an *active* one. One useful definition of 'the future' is that it is 'a principle of present action'. People individually and collectively exert their will and purpose on it and attempt to shape it according to their perceptions, needs, beliefs and values. Futures study, research and practical action all require a grounding in a sound knowledge of the past and the present. Such knowledge is subject to critical assessment in the process of generating ideas, purposes, goals and visions for the future.

The study of futures is both intellectually stimulating and empowering. It allows people to make new connections and to see things in a new light. It draws on the innate capacity of the human brain/mind to engage in *foresight*, or futures thinking. Until recently this capacity has been largely undeveloped. However, it is greatly enhanced by *future concepts, tools and methods*. The former permit a futures discourse to develop and the latter increase the analytic power of futures studies. The result is that 'the future' ceases to be an 'empty space', and many hitherto unclear issues and concerns spring into focus. As people develop informed foresight about the 21<sup>st</sup> century world, they will experience many shifts of value, focus and attitude. They will discover that most fears, negative attitudes and dystopian images of the future rest on misperceptions that can be put to more constructive uses. In learning how present actions will shape future consequences, individuals and groups gain access to new sources of understanding and action. This has great potential for congregations which recognise that they are the mission frontier and want to be active participants in shaping their community's future.

### **General competencies developed in Futures Study are:**

- knowledge
- critical thinking
- creative thinking
- researching and managing information
- communication
- working co-operatively
- cultural understandings

### **Specific skills and processes developed include:**

- developing and evaluating alternatives and choices
- exploring futures literature
- clarifying values
- considering the needs of future generations
- exploring the implications of different metaphors for time, choice and change
- linking past, present and future
- using specific indicators to assess global and local well-being (or 'health')
- using and critiquing futures imaging processes
- understanding and using social innovation processes
- understanding and using the foresight principle
- understanding and critiquing trends, scenarios and forecasts
- mastering simple futures tools eg futures wheels, timelines, cross-impact
- using simple environmental scanning processes
- exploring the loop of futures scanning
- making and using futures files
- investigating the knowledge base of Futures Studies
- developing agendas for the 21st century.

### **Applying futures concepts and tools in congregations**

Working experimentally is the key to making some of the changes we need to make for the future church. Contemporary pedagogy also emphasises the experimental nature of teaching and learning. It acknowledges the great variety of circumstances that exist in the context of the learning experience and the need to trial a variety of approaches to learning problems.

Not the least of the learning problems for all of us is the way in which the changing context of our faith requires new perspectives on the messages of the bible.

*It is now clear to many of us ... that we are in a quite new interpretative situation that constitutes something of an emergency. That emergency in interpretation is the result of a radical shift of categories of culture, for which interpreters of faith in the West have not been well prepared. It is inevitable that our categories of interpretation are deeply influenced by and largely informed by the modes of culture in which they are practised, as in every generation. (Brueggemann 1993: 1)*

The bible in all its problematic characteristics is the 'live' word of God. The role of the bible is therefore crucial in the enterprise of developing the counter culture to commodity consumerism which pervades western world views. It is also the key to responding to the needs of the new mission frontier of the congregation.

### **A theological education that addresses the big questions**

With great imagination and commitment, a new theological education paradigm, armed with a willingness to use the biblical text appropriately can operate inside and outside colleges. It can help church communities align themselves to the new mission field and respond to the dystopian view of the future through a strong commitment to conceptual empowerment and provision of tools and skills which address the needs of ordinary Christians in ordinary communities and congregations.

A new dynamism is emerging in the Church, but often not accompanied by the sort of theological education that would bring about a new consciousness for addressing the big questions that have become social imperatives. Theological education has to demonstrate that it can move out of the institutions and be a tool for congregations as they re-invent themselves to address these imperatives. At the same time as this restructuring of life in the congregations is going on, the development of new resources for the restructuring will become an urgent need.

Futures studies developed in the present century precisely to facilitate this process. It gathers material from nearly all fields of knowledge into a coherent relationship, permitting us to ask the big questions - the kind of questions that are often ignored or glossed over - and to derive sensible answers: Where do we want to go? What do we want to achieve? What problems need to be solved if we are to attain a truly sustainable society? One clear example of how the neglect of these questions has been disastrous is with the human devastation of our environment, but many of the questions are social, political, economic and philosophical as well. The Ehrlichs (1988) have argued that it is not simply numbers that are, *per se*, the measure of over-population; instead it is the impact of people on ecosystems and non-renewable resources. Importantly, it is the impact of people from developed countries such as Australia, on the world's resources which is truly frightening. A baby born in Australia uses more than a hundred times the world's resources than a baby born in Bangladesh (Borrell 1990, 4).

### **Importance to the community**

Citizens of tomorrow need to be prepared for a world which will be significantly different from the world of the 1990s: a world characterised by severe environmental problems, rapid technological change, globalism and expanding information networks. The Church would not be doing its duty to individuals or society if it did not look ahead with every means at its disposal and then continually adjust its work in the light of new knowledge.

Beyond all of that, a futures oriented theological education clearly serves as a preparation for the kind of active ministry that will be much in demand as humankind approaches the great transition of the early 21st century. This is the time when the deeply embedded, but unsustainable, growth trajectory of the industrial era will either exceed global limits or be guided into a different historical phase by wise collective decisions and actions. But politicians and policy-makers cannot work miracles, nor can they work alone. The miracles will happen as the congregations become active in the process.

### **Institutions working with congregations**

Seminaries and theological colleges come under criticism as much as universities and technical colleges when graduates ask 'Why didn't they prepare me for this?' Loren Mead (1994) asserts that this is caused by the existence of two cultures - the institutional one and the congregational one - different ways of thinking and working, different reward systems and values, even different languages. Using a Foucauldian concept of pushing our thinking to and beyond the traditional margins of what is acceptable, he has observed that the series of boundaries of life that one actually crosses have an unusual potential for growth in emotional and spiritual strength. These are part of the 'learning moments' of individual and congregational life. They are moments of potentially extraordinary growth and learning. At the individual level they are the definers of change. For the congregation they are the entry point into the world. The boundary between the congregation and the world outside has become more important than it has been for 1600 years. Every lay Christian worshipper crosses that boundary at least twice a week.

The concept of the boundary gives us a framework for developing some of the lay education we need for the church of the future. It also provides the point of reference for futures focussed theological education for lay and ordained ministries. It gives us the points at which to apply futures tools and concepts.

### **Changing roles**

I believe the role of pastor or priest will change dramatically in the next few years. There will be a steady shift from theological expert to pastoral technician, someone who doesn't define the limits of what can be achieved but instead responds to the needs of the congregation by calling on and capitalising on the local talent. He or she will be constantly challenged about the quality of the church's mission, and how to make it relevant.

Just as the role of mainstream educators is going through a significant shift from transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of thinking, the role of theological educators and librarians will also change dramatically in the next few years. There will be a steady shift from curriculum facilitator to knowledge technician, someone who doesn't define the limits of what can be learnt but instead responds to the demands of the learner and of systems to satisfy the market or the need. This market will be influenced greatly by values that are managed by the various media, including influential academics and writers. This is already raising ethical questions about *quality of learning*, and theological educators will be challenged to link quality to *relevance* where relevance will be heavily overlaid with the need to respond to local as well as global imperatives.

### **Accessing the resources**

For theological librarians this is of profound significance. If we acknowledge the shift of the Church's mission to the new frontier of the congregation, theological resources, which are scarce and expensive commodities, will have to follow. At the same time the economic base of the churches is the parishes, although greater initiative for centralised investment is apparent. New ways of making easy access to these resources will need to be found. The resources will also need to be appropriate to the new audiences with an increasing emphasis on practical lay ministry, community ministries, and linked to secular concerns.

We know that technology will both aid and hinder the process. Churches are beginning to catch up with the knowledge networks, such as the Internet and CD-ROM. For many congregations there is much greater diversity of technical talent than has been acknowledged in the past. There is also a growing awareness of the link between 'activism' in the community and the 'vitality' of a congregation (Kaldor et al 1997: 110).

On the other hand there is yet to emerge a general attitude that change can be good, can be managed, and that lay ministry involves a significant proportion of the congregation. There is also no uniform approach to ministry that works in all situations. But a 'vision' is critical to an effective congregation (Kaldor et al 1997, 141). The skills of developing a vision, relating to the uniqueness of a community, grounding it in biblical truth, discerning appropriate changes and new directions requires more than the single-mindedness of a good pastor. It calls for the collective intelligence and commitment of a team of thinkers and practitioners in the congregation. 'Trickle down theological education' will not achieve this. The theology that the pastor brings from the seminary will be insufficient to address the demand for more caring ministries, the uncertainties and changes that a congregation passes through, and an appropriate response to the other institutions that exist alongside the church in most communities.

As Christianity is increasingly accused of being largely responsible for the wanton exploitation of the earth, for the abuse of human rights, and for supporting colonial domination over conquered races, it is challenged today to 'look afresh for a vision of creation and re-creation that will affirm God as the source and sole measure of time and space and the sole author of life and hope, to whom we are accountable for our stewardship' (Limouris 1990, ix).

*While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.* Acts 17:30-31 (NRSV)

The questions about the shape of the future range across many dimensions. The theological dimension cannot reside in the fixity, intransigence and commitment to the past or some unchanging model of divinity and angry rejection of the world in which we live (Brady 1991, 146). Jesus' church lives in faith, hope and love for God who is always ahead of us. This is the creative and liberating force our society needs because it offers a way out of political, psychological and spiritual dependency on structures unable to meet the needs of our future.

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When this enhanced capacity to engage with 'the future' is implemented in specific areas (such as education, strategic planning, proactive management, wealth-creation and governance), Futures Study contributes substantially to social and economic well-being. People who examine Futures in a purposeful way and gain access to the concepts, tools and methods of Futures Studies will have their world-view transformed. As they develop informed foresight about the 21st century world, they will experience many shifts of value, focus and attitude. They will discover that most fears, negative attitudes and *dystopian images* of the future rest on misperceptions that can be put to more constructive uses. In learning how present actions will shape future consequences, congregations can gain access to new sources of understanding and action appropriate to their needs.

Opportunities to invent and re-invent, imagine and re-imagine, the present and the future, form part of this creative process. Here a partly-empirical knowledge base of trends, changes and issues (drawn from scholars and research communities around the world - and increasingly accessed via the Internet or offered through open and flexible theological learning programs), will provide a number of rich starting points. The important point which needs to be restated here is that this knowledge base will be dependent on combinations of theology and many other disciplines. *Alternative strategies and courses of action* can then be discussed and debated. *Consequences* can be considered and present action to shape a desirable, viable future may be decided and acted upon.

### **Conclusion**

The future is not a great mystery. Simple trend analysis can provide fairly accurate predictions of behavioural, attitudinal, social and economic changes that are likely to occur in the next few decades. The future church will configure itself around already self evident or emerging characteristics and values. A study of these characteristics and values using futures tools embedded in a framework of theological decision-making would increase the likelihood of a church that has relevance to future generations.

Since the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, change, transformation and discontinuity have occurred in many domains and fields. So it has become increasingly necessary to discern how a range of different paths lead to different futures, in order that we may select those that accord with our preferences and needs. A policy of drift is no policy at all - too much can go wrong and the risks are now quite profound. They are unnecessary and foolish and ignore the call to be good stewards of the earth.

Theologically informed Futures Studies will help demonstrate that individuals can make a difference. They can develop a *range of alternative visions*, identify *long term trends and issues*, discuss, debate and *communicate justifiable options*, and, instead of feeling victimised by change, constructively *participate in the change process*. Thus Futures Studies provides part of the grounding for life in a fast-moving post-industrial era and the congregation becomes the critical seat of learning and action.

The shifting paradigm of the Christian mission cannot be dealt with by floating prophets or academics who don't commit themselves to congregational and community contexts. Neither can they be addressed through 'trickle-down theology' that is not responsive to local circumstances and issues. The tensions that exist in congregational life between the pastoral and the political need to be treated holistically. Tina Beattie (1997: 3), a mother of four children, completing doctoral studies in theology at Bristol University, has recorded her conviction that the pastoral and the political aspects of the faith must be kept together (1997:3). She says:

*We are not called to the same task in the Church. We are all called to what St Anselm described as 'faith seeking understanding' - a life of discipleship and commitment to our neighbours that is replenished at the wells of our faith, including the theological and social teachings of the Church. Only through this process of nurturing our campaigns with theological understanding, can we avoid becoming 'clashing cymbals' in our approach to social issues.*



The key to the success of this enterprise is a theological education that is contextual, futures oriented and boldly addressing the imperatives of our times. Will we be worthy of the call to equip the whole people of God for the future?

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