The 2017 Barry Marshall Lecture **© Peter Sherlock**
Wednesday 9 August 2017
Trinity College Theological School, University of Divinity, Melbourne

WHY AUSTRALIA NEEDS THEOLOGY

Professor Peter Sherlock
Vice-Chancellor, University of Divinity
vc@divinity.edu.au

6500 words (45 / 50 minutes)

1. Introduction

Last year I had the privilege of spending two days in England's northern capital city - York. I was visiting on study leave, to participate in a conference on the English Reformation and to do some fieldwork on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century church monuments.

Two things struck me about this visit. First was the opening session of the conference. The organisers said the usual words of welcome, acknowledging those of us who had travelled overseas to get there, and spoke about the purpose of the gathering. But, unlike many theology conferences I now attend, there was no liturgy, no ritual, no prayer. More strikingly, there was no acknowledgement of country or its elders. As an Australian, I have become used to this, and it seemed quite strange to go to a conference where there was little attention to our location in time, place and imagination. But then, England has no Dreamtime.

The second thing that struck me - not literally - was in a visit to one of York's many churches, All Saints Pavement. This splendid medieval church contains a well-preserved pulpit dated 1634. The most striking feature of this grand object is its inscription. The text of Proverbs 29 winds around the soundboard and box, culminating in the famous phrase, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

What a challenge, what a reprimand for the preacher who stands in that pulpit, her words forever heard through the visual tagline: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

Well, by now you are probably thinking, what on earth do the ecclesiastical furnishings of York and the culture of British conferences have to do with the topic of this lecture, "Why Australia Needs Theology".

So let me assist you with two clues before we continue.

It is my conviction that to speak of Australia necessitates recognition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, especially their elders past, present and future, as the traditional owners of these lands. To speak of Australia necessitates recognition of the unresolved injustice by which the Commonwealth of Australia and its States and Territories were established. To speak of Australia necessitates a commitment to reconciliation if this nation is to realise its fullest hopes and dreams. Australia may be, in Donald Horne's famous phrase, a "lucky country", but the wealth and prosperity we appear to enjoy by the accident of being in the right place at the right time continues to come at a high price to the first peoples of this ancient land.

To speak of theology is to ask ultimate questions. Some of these are the classic questions of philosophy: who are we? why are we here? how do we know? Other questions call us to consider the biggest picture of all. Is there a God? If there is, how can we know God's will? What do we believe? What is our moral vision? What are the values we actually demonstrate in our behaviour?

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

In this lecture I want to bring these two domains - Australia, and theology - together. I do so in the spirit of my introduction: Australia is located in time, place and imagination; while theology gives us the questions, the tools, the methods, to explore this specific context.

To talk of Australia and theology in the one lecture may seem like a simple, naive or even misguided exercise. Yet it is a significant one, and, perhaps shockingly, one that has rarely been attempted.

I am going to speak solely from the perspective of Christian theology, primarily because this is the area I know, and because the challenges for Christian theology in a post-Christendom world have ramifications of a significance and complexity that merit their own lecture.

2. What's the problem? the bad news for Christianity

So let's begin with defining the context for thinking about Australia and theology.

First, some bad news. Christianity in Australia is completely discredited.

The dominant perception in the square of public debate is that Christians are abusers, hypocrites, and bigots. In this outlook, Christians apply theology in the form of doctrinal constraints to punish others, while Christians themselves fail to live up to their own preaching, inflicting physical, mental, spiritual and emotional harm on vulnerable children and adults. They -

we - impose our own ethics on agnostic and athiest citizens through lobbying government to inhibit change or protect ourselves, while we run privatised services in health, education and welfare as a back-door means of proselytising non-believers.

I'm not arguing that all of these perceptions are true, but we have to acknowledge that these perceptions exist, and that all of them have at least some basis in fact.

The impact of these perceptions and the behaviours which underlie them is most powerfully demonstrated in the recent release of last year's census results.

The 2016 Australian Census has revealed that in just half a century the number of Australians identifying themselves as Christian has dropped from 88% to 51% of the population. This has been accompanied by an even more dramatic drop in church attendance: in 1960 some 41% of the population attended church at least once a month, whereas in 2016 that number was only 16%. In the 1980s attention focussed on the fact that Roman Catholic Christians had displaced Anglicans as the most numerous religious category on the census. As expected in 2016 this has changed again, with the most numerous category now being "no religion" at 30% of Australians. Thus, as Gary Bouma has pointed out,

> Not only has the proportion of Christians declined, it has become much less British Protestant. Australia's religious life has changed beyond recognition from the 1950s and 1960s, when British Protestants comprised two-thirds of the population.[1]

Some Christian commentators have highlighted the fact that, notwithstanding three generations of declining church attendance and the apparent end of Christendom, one half of the Australian population continues to identify as Christian on the census. Others have drawn attention to the clarity the new census figures provide for the churches as the number of "nominal" Christians comes into closer alignment with "committed" believers.

Nevertheless the point remains that Australia's theological outlook and religious behaviours have profoundly changed in the past fifty years. This is not merely a matter of private beliefs about God, but represents a fundamental shift in the values and assumptions of Australians, including institutions and organisations from business to government. Some, such as the Australian Christian Lobby, claim this has opened the door to the public persecution of Christians in Australia on account of their faith. I disagree; while I think the tone of public debate

[1] https://theconversation.com/census-2016-shows-australias-changing-religious-profile-with-more-nones-than-catholics-79837

has deteriorated in recent years, and we have an unfortunate tendency to stereotype and to attack the person not the issue, I think this now applies to everyone - it's just that Christians aren't used to it.

What disturbs me rather more is the restriction of theology in this climate to apologetics alone, in the sense of justifying theology's truth claims and proposing them to others as the only or best solution. Don't get me wrong; I am a Christian because I believe in God the Father who created us, and because I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour and because I believe the Holy Spirit speaks to us and through us today with all that flows from that.

What concerns me is the de-facto circumscription of theology within the walls of the church on the one hand, and the attempt to pretend that Christian apologetics is not an argument about the merits of Christianity on the other. I am thinking here, for example, of the debacles over religious education in state schools, where time and again the presentation of one Christian perspective to students was justified by the value of religious education for all, when in fact the stated or unstated motivations of volunteer participants was very often the intention to imbibe children with one version of God's love. And all the while, a significant number of private schools operating in the church's name were charging high fees for educational attainments that frequently relied on the exclusion of poorly performing students and running comprehensive professionally taught programs of interfaith religious education. The hypocrisy is breathtaking.

3. What's the problem? the bad news for Australia

As if all this weren't challenging enough for people of faith, there is the wider dilemma of Australia's problems. At a national level, our elected politicians seem unable to act collectively to address challenges facing our society, from energy, health, education, to the rapidly changing nature of technology, employment and the environment. Expert reports are repeatedly ignored, and expertise is constantly redeployed. And while finding a way through moral and political debates about marriage equality or assisted dying is difficult enough, the challenge of reconciliation, whether by treaties with the First Nations, reform of the Australian constitution, or the equalisation of living standards for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, this challenge of reconciliation seems wholly insurmountable.

So-called conservatives decry the collapse of shared values while advocating freedom from government restriction on the acquisition of wealth or the preservation of our enviroment and the management of our climate. So-called progressives want to promote the full inclusion of all people

but then launch personal attacks on their opponents that undermine the very nature of the inclusion they purport to support.

Our public dialogue and debate, both nationally and globally, is lacking in the key elements of sound judgment and mutual compassion. Instead we descend into culture wars. For the past twenty years, self-appointed advocates of free speech have therefore attacked "political correctness", as based on ideology rather than evidence, excluding the voices of those who genuinely hold a different view. But there is something deeper than this occuring now. As the Guardian's Australian editor, Katharine Murphy, recently put it in an article on the 45th President of the United States, we know he

> *has honed utter lack of empathy into a political weapon. We know we often now exist in our own filter bubbles, segregated personal and online communities where we mostly hear only ideas that we already share. We know political debate has become polarised, binary and couched so often in angry metaphors of war.*[2]

But compare this bleak outlook to the remarks made by the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, this very morning at the ACU interfaith breakfast in Canberra - remarks echoed by other political leaders almost to the word:

> *It is such a human thing to share food, to share company, to take that opportunity to sustain each other, and in doing so, to help each other, to understand each other, to demonstrate in a very practical and tangible way, love.*
>
> *After all, that is when we are closest to God, when we love. When we open our heart and think not of ourselves, but of others.*

What is it that prevents this sort of values statement translating into political action? This vision is, I hope, compelling, even for those who do not believe in God or do not care whether there is a God: the power of setting love for others over our own need; the need to understand the stranger, the neighbour, those with whom we disagree.

What we lack today - if ever we really had such a thing - is a shared narrative, a shared vision. Despite all the rhetoric about Australian values, what ultimately is the principle which underpins Australian society?

---

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/jul/29/amid-the-whole-dual-citizenship-saga-its-the-gloating-that-should-shock

I have some sympathy for view that the loss of a shared Christian ethic has been damaging for our society in removing such a principle. But then, I must acknowledge there's not a lot of evidence that the generations who knew the parable of the Good Samaritan actually behaved any better than we or our children do. To put it another way, I'm not convinced that thinking of others before ourselves, or crossing boundaries to help a stranger, was ever "the Australian way". More's the pity.

So, what is the principle which underpins Australia? Is it mateship and the fair go? Is it equality for all? Is it love for others? Is it the ANZAC tragedy of travelling overseas to fight someone else's battle? Is it having the means to buy your own home? Is it the sovereignty of the crown over the land? Is it the attempted dispossession and eradication of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations and the continuing lack of a treaty or settlement?

I find myself largely in agreement with the New South Wales Baptist writer Scott Higgins, who recently suggested:

> *now that our community is distancing itself from Christianity we can finally be rid of the notion that the consumerist bastard child of British imperialism ever represented the Christ of the Gospels and rediscover what it means to say we are followers of Jesus.*

4. Why Australia Needs Theology: Critical Appraisal

Twenty or perhaps even ten years ago I would not have thought it necessary or even right to deliver a lecture entitled "Why Australia Needs Theology". Such a proposition smacks all too readily of the sort of Christian self-righteousness that excludes the non-believer, or disguises the attempt to win souls for Christ under the veneer of social contribution. But in light of the current situation of Australia and of Christianity in Australia, I believe critical and compassionate theology, conducted honestly and openly, is essential for the wellbeing of our national future.

I also believe a new type of conversation between theology and the wider world is now possible, in a new age when strange alliances can occur. If you have ever been on a Melbourne march to protest Australian policy on offshore detention of refugees, you have probably observed, like me, that the participants seem to divide evenly into the religious groups and the Greens members, with a handful in both camps - the God-botherers and the athiests, united by compassion.

Theology, I argue, provides the tools to help us question, understand, and shape the guiding values for Australian society - the vision that gives life to the people. How does theology do this?

First and foremost, good theology provides critical apparatus to examine values, beliefs and behaviours. This includes rigorous self-examination, and the willingness to acknowledge error and failure.

Why do I emphasise the critical nature of theology, when we have just been talking about the power of faith to inspire love and service?

Like many of you, I have been mesmerised by the television drama series based on Margaret Atwood's classic text *The Handmaid's Tale*. Many viewers have been profoundly shaken by Atwood's dystopian vision of a society that unashamedly and deliberately exploits women's bodies for the sole purpose of reproduction. We know that women are subjected to such violence in the dark corners of our society, but the approach of the Sons of Jacob, the leaders of Gilead, is so shocking precisely because it is the law of the land.

For me, however, the nightmarish quality of *The Handmaid's Tale* stems from its misuse of Christian theology. The scriptures are misquoted, or quoted out of context. False texts are invented and circulated to justify rape and slavery. In one of the most telling scenes, the bible itself is locked away in a box, retrieved only by the household patriarch who alone has the power over which passages are heard and how they are edited. This dystopia is the result of the violent disfiguring of Christianity, using the power of religion to explain and motivate violence and oppression and twisting truth into evil.

Atwood's book reveals that it's the Baptists who are conducting guerilla warfare in resistance to this pseudo-Christian theocracy, and it's the Quakers who are running an underground rescue mission to get enslaved women out of the nation to safe haven. (As an Anglican I'd like to think the Episcopalians were the first with their backs up against the Wall but somehow I doubt it.) This then is a model of what critical theology might achieve: action for justice at the cost of one's own safety and life, including overthrow of a corrupt and evil regime.

So theology needs to play a role in holding up the values of a society and testing them. In Australia's case, this might be analysing what those values actually are, based on our actions; or it might be testing the principle of "love of others" against our economic, immigration and social policies.

The example of recent theological work on climate change and the environment shows the unexpected outcomes of using theology to test our values and behaviours. What does it mean to think about the earth in the context of the creation narratives of Genesis, and the related ideas of the gift of free will and the human responsibility of stewardship? What does it mean to challenge climate-change deniers who think there is an infinite set of resources to be exploited for individual gain for all eternity, with the concept that only God is eternal? What does it mean to contrast the harm we inflict on our planet and on each other in our wasteful habits with the boundless love and mercy of the compassionate Christian God?

5. Why Australia Needs Theology: Different Practices

Christian theology also includes learning and practising spiritual disciplines. These range from the classic trio of poverty, chastity and obedience through to the systematic reading of scripture, daily prayer, and fasting. Such behaviours provide another form in which theology can help reshape our communal life. Let me illustrate this with two examples.

First, the most common complaint about contemporary Australian lifestyle centres around a constellation of issues I would describe as "busyness". This includes the lack of work / life balance, the endless media cycle of instant news, the multiple technologies that invade our thoughts and bodies by day and by night, the increasing absence of any experience of simply thinking, reading, pondering. Theology contains a rich store of values and practices that can challenge this culture of busyness. One such practice is contemplation, central to Christian tradition. Hear for example this extract from Rowan Williams' address as Archbishop of Canterbury to the 2012 Synod of Bishops in Rome:

> contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.

Williams' point here potentially connects with all people. Yes contemplation in this vision arises from Christian history and practice. But it also refracts the twenty-first century interest of many

Australians of other faiths or of no religion in practices such as meditation, yoga, mindfulness, even the recent fad for colouring books, that create time and space outside of the rush of daily life. What might a theological approach to our working lives propose in this respect, that could improve the quality of life as well as the depth of our productivity?

Second, there are specific spiritual disciplines that have proved transformative for individuals and societies for hundreds of years. One of the most compelling examples is the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. Designed five centuries ago and used ever since as an integral part of the spiritual formation and training of Jesuits, over the last twenty or thirty years the Spiritual Exercises have been unlocked as a tool for discernment that lay Christians can use. In a complex, busy world full of competing priorities and so often lacking in vision, the Exercises provide a series of practical steps that guide one's feet onto the right path, and create the resilience needed to pursue a goal. The application of such wisdom to individuals and organisations can change the way we think about ourselves and our futures, and the way we go about our business together.

Theology then can be so much more than a series of prescribed beliefs and behaviours to keep believers on the straight and narrow; conceived in the manner I propose, it offers practical methods for helping all people live the good life.

6. The Theological Education Story

So where does theological education fit into all of this? How could it contribute to a theology that met Australia's needs?

Since 1788, the majority of immigrant Australians have held that Australia does not need theology. At the foundation of the colonial universities, there was outright hostility to the inclusion of theology in the curriculum. This was due to a range of factors, including Catholic and Protestant sectarianism, Enlightenment scepticism about the study of religious doctrine, and the shift in the contemporary British university system away from higher education as conducted with the frame of theology to a focus on a range of secular educational and professional outcomes. The exclusionists won, and the absence of theology in Australia's first universities was compensated by the establishment of denominational residential colleges where religion could be privately practised by staff and students away from the main business of university lecture halls.

Here in Victoria, the outcome of those debates was the decision to exclude theology - described as "divinity" - from the University of Melbourne. Some churches got on with making

private provision, including the Roman Catholic church through a series of seminaries, and the Anglican Church through the Australian College of Theology, constituted to award diplomas by the Anglican General Synod in 1891.

This situation was relatively uncontested until the first decade of the twentieth century when, in the newly federated Commonwealth of Australia, the churches began to agitate for the provision of Australian theology degrees to train Australian clergy. A group of Protestant churches banded together under the auspices of the Victorian Council of Churches campaigned regularly for the lifting of the prohibition of theology at Melbourne. This campaign paralleled the movement to institute the teaching of scripture in state schools; although universities were neither "free" nor "compulsory" like Victorian schools, they were most certainly "secular". After a decade of lobbying, and a final year of furious debate, an agreement was struck in 1910 across the churches, the University of Melbourne, and the Victorian government to establish a separate body with degree-granting authority only in the area of divinity. The Melbourne College of Divinity or MCD - now the University of Divinity - was born.

In these debates three matters were notable, which have come to characterise, in some cases even haunt, theological education in Australia ever since. First was the general hostility by both Christians and non-Christians to University-based theological education on the grounds that it would introduce sectarian division into the objective world of the academy. Second was the argument that Australian clergy needed Australian degrees. This argument was interesting because the prerequisite for a Bachelor of Divinity at the MCD was a Bachelor of Arts, and as it would soon turn out, the bulk of candidates for the ministry in the Protestant churches were not University graduates, so they completed a diploma instead, an award which did not require the parliamentary authority for which the MCD was created. Third was the proposal that the churches would cooperate in the provision of theological education. Initially Protestant alone, this cooperation became all the more remarkable in 1972 when the Roman Catholic church joined the MCD.

But one of the most interesting notes in these debates was the idea that theology was a comprehensive form of classical education in the liberal arts. A theology curriculum provided a form of resistance to education that led only to one profession. This view was forcefully expressed by the Anglican priest J. Stephen Hart in a letter to the Argus in 1909:

> There are no sound arguments against degrees in divinity from the University standpoint ... There is one great argument in their favour. Culture is waning at our University. It is becoming more and more a superior technical school, and a training-ground for the professions. We want to foster philosophy as well as science, culture as well as arts. We want a nation that thinks deeply, and that possesses moral and spiritual ideals as well as mere industrial and scientific efficiency. Divinity degrees stand for culture.

After the 1910 debates, institutions such as the MCD continued to knock on the door of the public universities to seek admission and integration every few years. Sometimes this was successful; Sydney University agreed to establish a Bachelor of Divinity in the 1930s, but using the MCD model the teaching and examining for this was largely extra-mural. By the 1950s and 1960s the anxieties over theology had died down and the colonial prohibitions were no longer inserted into University Acts, and at the suggestion of the 1964 Martin Report universities began to consider actually offering non-sectarian theology degrees.

Ironically, by the present century the level of anxiety or even plain interest in theology at public universities dropped so low that no-one noticed when in 2008 and 2009 the Victorian Parliament unintentionally copied and pasted the prohibition on the awarding of divinity degrees in the University of Melbourne Act into the new University Acts created for Victoria's other seven public universities. As none of them had ever actually created a divinity degree, there were no consequences to this change and it is now the case that in Victoria a university degree in theology can only be awarded by the University of Divinity or Australian Catholic University.

In contrast to the attitude of the wider higher education sector, theologians and church leaders have remained somewhat vexed about the place of theology in the universities. There was significant cheering in the 1980s and 1990s when theology departments were created at a handful of universities including Flinders, Murdoch and Charles Sturt, though in all these cases academic staff were provided wholly or in part by church-funded theological colleges. Triumph seemed to arrive in the twenty-first centre with the establishment of an independent theology faculty at the University of Newcastle but, once the Anglican start-up funding ran out a few years later, this closed. Realistically we are now in a situation where theology in Australia is either taught in religious universities, in public university departments through church-funded staff or theological colleges, or in private non-university higher education providers. Theology therefore remains on

the margins of the contemporary university sector though I think it is increasingly being joined there by a wide range of humanities disciplines from philosophy to history to literature to music.

Theological education today is small and disparate, and it has not grown in numbers, in contrast the extraordinary growth seen over the last twenty years in the wider university sector in Australia. The miracle of Australian theological education is institutional survival; there were roughly 70 colleges and seminaries 50 years ago, and there is still a similar number remain today although their accreditation arrangements are vastly different. Despite the unanticipated influx of lay students in the 1980s, most theological colleges that teach a theology-rich degree are concerned with the training of ordained ministers, or of lay chaplains in contexts such as education, health and welfare. Attempts to integrate theology into more generalist degrees have mostly come to naught, with a few exceptions. In some of the religious colleges and universities, enrolments in theology degrees are small, but a Christian-values approach is found in a range of other degrees.

Perhaps the greatest problem with theological education in contemporary Australia is that no-one outside the theological education sector cares. There is no longer much hostility, unless a funding debate rears its head.

For theological education in Australia is harmless. It does not challenge the status quo of Australian higher education or Australian society. It is parcelled up in specialist institutions such as this University, or in the corners of private religious organisations. If it disappears, few outside would notice. (Once again, however, I wonder if the same is true of other tertiary disciplines, such as Classics departments.)

But we know that in practice theology has the potential to cause enormous harm. Its place in the Australian higher education sector and the external regulation this provides is of commensurate importance.

How is it that theology could be harmful? Imagine, once again, a sort of variant on the *Handmaid's Tale* in which Australian theological colleges systematically taught a generation or two of future ministers that women were the property of their husbands and fathers, and could be physically, emotionally and sexually assaulted by their owners. The result would be unmitigated domestic, social and political violence, justified by reference to sacred scripture and divine law that superseded the laws of the sovereign state.

This is precisely the sort of question that the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has been putting to church leaders: is the failure of religious organisations to protect the vulnerable attributable to the misguided deeds of corrupt or ill-equipped leaders and institutional incompetence and dysfunction, or is it in any way the outcome of the theological teachings and values of the religion itself? Are the preventable instances of abuse by repeat offenders related in systematically to practices such as the seal of the confessional or beliefs such as the forgiveness of sins? Similar questions have recently been asked by the journalist Julia Baird in relation to domestic violence in religious contexts. Does the doctrine of male headship directly or indirectly permit the abuse of women and children by men? The answers to these questions should be deeply unsettling for theologians as well as religious leaders.

7. Solutions: How might theological education address these challenges?

So how could we transform theological education to address Australia's need for critical, compassionate theology that challenges and clarifies the way we think and act as a society?

I am unashamed to start by referring to the Vision statement of the University of Divinity, the statement which has guided my professional life for the last five years:

> *Together we empower our learning communities to address the issues of the contemporary world through critical engagement with Christian theological traditions.*

This seems a modest enough vision, yet it is proving to be an enormous challenge not only for the University, but for theologians worldwide. In our current world, despite the interconnectedness of social media and instantaneous communication and an apparently increasing commitment to social inclusion, it is getting harder and harder to do things together. Moreover, while our theologians have been thoroughly trained in critical engagement with Christian theological traditions, there is less experience or appetite in our churches and academies in addressing the issues of the contemporary world. That's partly because both the world and Christianity itself are changing so rapidly that it's hard to keep up.

So what might we theologians need to do differently in order for theology to engage effectively with Australia's needs?

We need to think in a very focussed way about theological awards that are designed to prepare people for the ordained ministry. There are two key aspects here: first, the need to educate an extraordinarily diverse cohort that includes refugees, senior professionals with doctoral qualifications, and candidates who have a passionate faith but almost no exposure to the

rich heritage of Christianity; and second, to prepare ministers who are prepared for lifelong learning in that rich heritage and who have the resilience to go the distance in an increasingly hostile environment.

We need to establish theological awards that provide outcomes similarly targetted to particular professional markets, but with a sufficiently broad grounding basic theological disciplines. I am thinking here of the needs of faith-based agencies, where graduates might need two skill sets, one predominantly theological in the traditional sense, and the other specific to a vocational area such as health, counselling, education, or social policy.

But we also need to create a new form of theology degree that is available to school-leavers, students who are not necessarily preparing for ordination or professional ministry. This kind of degree needs to build both resilience and flexibility, and the capacity for life-long learning in a range of areas. These graduates would be capable of addressing Australia's theological needs. They might well have training in classical arts disciplines like logic and rhetoric so they can presuade others. They might have the much-needed capacity to apply theological insight in creative ways. They might have the skills to work in teams with experts from other professions and disciplines. They might have cross-culture exposure within Australia and overseas, and be opened to diverse ways of thinking and living. They might have been immersed in a variety of spiritual disciplines, and equipped for the challenge of discernment in a rapidly changing world. They might even have experience of starting up businesses, testing their moral vision in a specific economic context. And hopefully, they would be able to live as if love were real, able to point to the fruits that come from engaging with and serving others.

This is not the stuff of airy fairy dreams. I have served on enough university open day stalls to know how fragile the standard university admission questions actually are: "What job will I get at the end of it?" "How much will I earn?" The reality today is that these graduates will have five or six different jobs, and, if the predictions about robotisation are true, jobs that we can't even imagine in an economy that doesn't yet exist. So the questions need to be redirected: "What will sustain me in an changing world?" "How can I contribute to the community?"

8. Australian Theology and Reconciliation

Above all, however, theology needs finally to engage seriously with its Australian context. I suspect most Australian theological faculties have a token subject on "Australian Christianity" or "Religion in Australia" or "Ministry in the Australian Context", but it's almost always a token

subject. There is almost no Australian theology. Various world dictionaries of theology or Christianity that include an article on Australia struggle to identify a distinctive voice.

Writing in *Meanjin* exactly forty years ago, Richard Campbell provided a devastating critique of Australian theology in 1977 that largely holds true today.[3] Campbell pointed out that Christian theology in Australia was entirely derivative from Europe and North America. There was virtually no doctoral research carried out in Australian theological institutions, with students sent overseas instead. Theological research and theological textbooks were entirely transplanted from the northern hemisphere. Some of Australia's most praised theological writers and teachers did no more than offer in an Australian institution a curriculum or a research project that could have been undertaken in Britain or the United States - and perhaps, if you were lucky, Germany, Belgium or the Netherlands. Campbell pointed out that, unlike other disciplines in Australian universities, there was no self-sustaining theological debate in Australia. The content of theological conversation was determined by conversations in other parts of the world. Campbell's analysis noted the parochial, church-sponsored nature of theological colleges in Australia, and the virtual absence of university-level theology; perhaps the only substantive change since then has been the inauguration of two Catholic universities, the University of Notre Dame Australia and Australian Catholic University, with demonstrable commitments to theological scholarship.

Arguably, still today there is no distinctively "Australian" theology. Intriguingly the canonisation of Mary Mackillop, and the process now underway for Mary Glowrey has produced a different sort of attention to the theological experience of Australian Christians. Yet on a recent visit to the tomb of Mary of the Cross in North Sydney, I was struck by how much it reminded me not of colonial Australia, but of a fourteenth or fifteenth-century saint's shrine in England, where pilgrims would come and pray for healing or to wonder at the holy worker of miracles. I suspect there is more to learn here - how many theology subjects on the Australian context talk of Mary Mackillop and her clashes with Catholic authorities here and in Rome? - but I also suspect that the narrative so far has been about Australia's maturation on the international Catholic stage rather than the development of an authentically Australian theology.

The most glaring omission in Australian theology is a sustained engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I think - I hope - that this is starting to change. The innovative curriculum introduced at Uniting College through the Adelaide College of Divinity includes on-

[3] Richard Campbell, "The Character of Australian Religion", *Meanjin* 36/2 (July 1977), 178-188.

country experiences for students and emphasises context more than most programs. A recent consultation with Indigenous people has produced recommendations for action here at the University of Divinity. There are now Aboriginal people with doctoral level qualifications in theology. Projects such as Graeme Paulson's "the Bible through Aboriginal eyes" have produced materials for an Indigenous Australian theology. The book "Our Mob God's Story" produced by the Bible Society includes 67 images by Aboriginal people from around the country communicating and interpreting the scriptures.

But we still lack reference points, or a widespread commitment in Australia's theological higher education providers to addressing these issues. And this is despite the obvious potential for international interest: just compare the European hunger for Aboriginal works of art, or the theological conversations which have flourished in relation to minjung theology from the Korean peninsula or dalit theology from the Indian subcontinent. Can you imagine, for example, how different this lecture might be if we had in our hands a newly published multi-volume Australian Bible Commentary, produced by Aboriginal theologians?

9. Conclusion

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

Tonight I have set before you two claims. First, that Australia is lacking in vision, or at least a vision that addresses historic wrongs and present injustices, a vision that would lift us beyond the poverty of the false promise of a never-ending increase in individual wealth and household happiness.

Second, I have argued that the way towards such a vision is the commitment to search for truth. This search requires critical appraisal of ourselves and our society, with the utmost honesty about what we profess in our actions. To enable such honesty, the search for truth requires different practices in how we go about our lives, especially the disciplines of contemplation and discernment. But this critically informed, newly disciplined search must also be shaped by compassion for the frailty of the human condition, for the honesty we require is not easy to achieve; Christian theology must also provide space for the failure and imperfection revealed in scripture, tradition and experience.

Justice and mercy; love and truth; contemplation and discernment - I struggle to think of a better vision for a lively people.

In a world beset by lies, deliberate falsehood, the desire to win, the divisive misrule of absurd irrationality; in a nation whose public discourse is dominated by the desire for individual prosperity; in this time and this place, Australians need this search for truth more than ever.

Theology is nothing more and nothing less than the search for truth, conducted critically and compassionately.

My hope and prayer, then, is that you will join me in committing to this most necessary pursuit, in service of our communities.