The idea of a Christian university in church history

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In this paper I want to suggest a distinction between the idea of a Christian university and a Christian idea of the university. The modern university can look back to the twelfth century for its institutional antecedents, though institutions of learning and scholarship long preceded that time and confronted the early Christian movement. In early Christianity the task for Christians was to formulate relations with the institutions of society at large. In the long period of Christendom public institutions were Christian because they were institutions of a Christian society. With the collapse of Christendom, and of established religions in particular states, the questions for Christians again became how to relate to the institutions of wider society. The idea of a Christian university persisted in this context for Christian traditions that had strong ecclesiastical institutions which enjoyed substantial theological legitimation such as within strands of Roman Catholicism and Reformed Protestantism. Others returned...
to questions of a Christian idea of a university, or more particularly a Christian way to relate to the university.

**Christians and Social Institutions**

From the earliest times Christians were forced to relate to the social institutions of their day and to form some way of creating their own ecclesial institutions. The sense that Jesus fulfilled the expectation of Israel meant that the key institutional markers of Israel's faith (Law, Temple, Land, and nation) were set in a different context and when the gentile mission was embraced that difference became even greater.\(^1\) Within the life of the growing Christian churches habits and customs quickly developed which in time took on varying degrees of institutionality and authority.\(^2\) Not all Christians gave the same authority to these emerging institutions, most obviously those of ministerial order and the sacraments.

As the Christian movement spread around the ancient world Christians had to come to terms with the social institutions of that world. Institutions such as government, family and slavery appear in the New Testament, but others, including those to do with learning and education, soon arose.\(^3\) The idea of what a Christian family might look like only emerged when those with power in the existing social structures of the Graeco-Roman world, and in this case the family, took the opportunity to give up their power in favour of some simple and general principles of Christian behaviour.\(^4\) For the earliest generation there was no ideal of a Christian family in the sense of a defined shape and membership, just as there was no ideal of a Christian school or academy. As opportunity arose they sought to discover what it might mean to be Christian in these different environments.

**The Christendom Experience**

Eventually when the society around them had become officially Christian they asked the same question and then the answer became that this was a Christian school, or academy or family that was part of a Christian society. The era of Christendom was thus shaped by assumptions and perceptions, which in an earlier time were neither relevant nor available.\(^5\) As the Christendom of Europe disintegrated those assumptions and perceptions became problematic. It is just this kind of transition that is visible in the investiture crisis and also in the emergence of universities. However these changes did not take place all at once or at the same pace in every country. While Christendom in the large scale may have crumbled in Western
Europe, it continued for many centuries within the new kingdoms and nation states that emerged in Europe and in those countries the marks of a Christian establishment continued to affect the character of the university.

After the consolidation of the nation state in Europe and the religious divisions of the Reformation some states adopted a particular religious faith as the state religion. That pattern was confirmed in the treaty of Westphalia in 1648. *Cuius regio, eius religio* (whose kingdom his religion) became the order of things, even though it meant a compromise of papal claims to universal jurisdiction which had been made formally in the eleventh century by Pope Gregory VII.

The nation state thus became the framework for the social and political forces that shaped the development of the university. In the long eighteenth century different patterns emerged in different nations. The political had long been referred to as the secular (sometimes the temporal), as distinct from the ecclesiastical or spiritual. During the eighteenth century religious diversity within nation states presented challenges for the existing monopoly church establishments found in England and continental Europe. Under that model the university, especially in England, remained a church institution. At Oxford and Cambridge graduation was conditional on signing the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion and teaching fellows were ordained clergy of the Church of England. These regulations continued into the nineteenth century. The church retained a powerful grip on the university.

But the balance between the old-style (ecclesiastical) Christian, the university and the political order was changed dramatically with the erosion of the idea of a Christian state expressed in terms of the establishment of one form of Christianity. The establishment of the Church of England persisted, and indeed persists in a fairly hollow form until this day. But already during the eighteenth century it became increasingly difficult to ignore the political implications of such a large body of loyal dissenters as the Methodists. The progress of religious toleration and of the emancipation of non-Anglican religious bodies from legal impediments constituted serious challenges for the understanding of the institutions of Anglican Christianity in England and also in its colonies. It was pluralism in the body politic that overwhelmed these older ideas of the role of the
church in society. The university was just one of a large number of social institutions in which this change was worked out.

The university as an emerging post-Christendom institution

The university as a social institution entered European civilisation relatively recently emerging as a crucial part of the transition into the modern era. It bears some resemblance to the medieval guilds, which formed at about the same time in order to shape various aspects of craft and trading activity in the growing towns of Europe. Bologna is generally thought to be the first university in Europe. In the eleventh century in part as a consequence of the revived interest in the Roman Justinian Code teachers in Bologna began to teach law in order to provide educated civil servants of the emerging modern state. In 1158 the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa I (1122–1190) declared by a *Constitutio Habita* that the students of Roman law would have similar protection to the clerical students of canon law. It meant that the study of Roman law could go on unhindered. The changing political configuration of Europe and the weakness of the church following the ructions of the investiture controversy, in which Pope Gregory VII overreached himself, made these changes possible.

The university of Paris began around the same time as Bologna and was more closely related to the church and not centrally committed to the study of law as in Bologna. However it had the same general structure. It was a guild of teachers, or in the term of the Latin of the day as *universitas*. Oxford and Cambridge began a little later and in similar terms. All these seats of learning were responding to emerging social needs. Vivian Green is right in asserting of the universities that ‘at all stages of their history their studies have been more or less correlated to the national needs.’

These universities were either urban or near to the centres of urban and political life and they embraced the new humanist interest in the wider created world and social and political literature. In both respects they were in contrast to the rural or isolated ecclesiastical learning of the monasteries.

Just as the investiture crisis had shown up a changing pattern in relations between ecclesiastical and political, so the emergence and development of the universities illustrated a similar transition. They were emerging as a medieval guild whose focus and discipline was learning and understanding. The political significance of such a vocation is apparent
in almost every period of European history and goes beyond the study of law.

When Bede wrote his ecclesiastical history of the English people early in the eighth century he quite deliberately sought to give to the English a national story and divine vocation. Two hundred years later Alfred the Great brought together a group of scholars to translate the great classics of the Christian culture including Bede’s *History*, Boethius’ *Consolations of Philosophy* and the *Pastoral Letters of Gregory the Great*. He did this in order to consolidate and build the nation that he had by war defended and consolidated. “These books would show his nobles how to govern; remind his bishops of their duties to their flock; and inspire his people with knowledge and wisdom that would bring them closer to God and hence farther from the reaches of their Viking enemies.” Learning and scholarship provided the ligaments of culture, tradition and social and political identity. They served the social realities of their time. The universities of the thirteenth century continued this tradition of learning. However the emergence of the modern university in tandem with the new nations and then the nation state was not simply coincidental. The university provided educated servants for the nation state and thereby also shaped and served the rationality of the nation state.

**The great transition to the modern and its mystifications**

The great transition to the modern both represents and creates some significant mystifications. When Peter Gay declared in 1967 that ‘there were many *philosophes* but there was only one Enlightenment’ he framed an enduring image of the enlightenment as a unified force or movement. That image favoured the perception of the Enlightenment as the generating force of modernity working to secure the removal of the *ancien regime* and build the free world. While for decades that image has proved to be enduring and popular its limitations are now being more widely identified. It was already challenged here in Canberra at a seminar at the Australian National University two years before Peter Gay made it popular and twelve years before David Martin’s *A General Theory of Secularization*.

The enlightenment activists did indeed share a number of general dispositions such as the near autonomy of the natural order and the inclusion of the human condition in that order. Some believed that this order could be identified by reason and thus the social order brought to the perfection
of a new social system by the application of rationality. But it is increasingly recognised that this group of social activists operated in different ways in different national contexts and addressed different kinds of questions. In describing England, Roy Porter declares,

The simple fact is that Enlightenment goals – like criticism, sensibility or faith in progress – throved in England within piety. There was no need to overthrow religion itself, because there was no pope, no inquisition, no Jesuits, no monopolistic priesthood with a strangle hold on children through education and on families through confession. As Chadwick has argued, the real business of European secularization remained to nineteenth century infidels.\textsuperscript{19}

In place of the ultimate authority of the Pope there was the tradition of the ‘Glorious Revolution’ and the dispersed character of religious and social authority.

In England, as indeed in Australia, many clergy were involved in the characteristic enlightenment quest for understanding about the natural order. “The cardinal fact is that in England, and in England almost alone, the realization of Enlightenment hopes was not thwarted at every turn by the existing order of state and society.”\textsuperscript{20} On the contrary many of the French philosophes looked to England as a paradigm of the new society. That does not mean that there was not some opposition to clerical political activity on the grounds that it had no place in politics,\textsuperscript{21} but in general there was not the same shrill anti-church and anti-clerical strand to the English enlightenment. Indeed that notable enlightenment figure Joseph Banks himself defended the established order in church and state.\textsuperscript{22}

Given that these early changes in understanding were taking place in the relatively recently formed nation state and alongside a move to a more urban and industrialising economy it was inevitable that mercantile economies would give way to capitalism and that the religious character of the state would be a point of significant contention. Various interpretations of this secularising have been on offer. Alistair MacIntyre’s youthful presentation of modernisation from an agrarian hierarchical society to a mainly urban and democratic society that meant a loss of religion caused by social displacement\textsuperscript{23} sits alongside the popular notion of the
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enlightenment as a force which changed society and would lead to the collapse of religion. American historians and more recently sociologists favour the idea that secularisation has not pointed to the inevitable decline of religion in the face of changed understanding about the world through science, but rather the change has been from a state sponsored commitment to a private enterprise style of competition between religions. On this analysis the US represents the competition model where religion is said to flourish and Europe the patronage model where religion is declining.

There is another narrative of this secularising that is more relevant to the case of the university. This narrative sees the main driver in the move to modernity as taking place in the mind, in Owen Chadwick’s famous phrase, “The Secularization of the European Mind.” Roy MacLeod cites three factors in this; the impact of Darwin in any understanding of humanity, the corrosive effects of the scientific investigation of the bible by the Tübingen school of theology and the scientific study of society pioneered by Comte and Spencer. Each of these had the effect of desacralising the world of human activity, the traditional texts of Christianity and human identity. Indeed it is the changed character of time that marks out this desacralisation process. The time set within the Christian narrative which gains expression in the ‘liturgical calendar’ points to an eschatological change whereby the kingdom of Jesus, which is not of this world and which is the true home of the Christian, is eclipsed by the overwhelming presence of the time set by the narrative of the secular nation state. As Stanley Hauerwas puts it, ‘Under the spell of Constantine, Christians began to hold their eschatological conviction that we simultaneously live in two times.’

The university was profoundly affected not just by these social and general intellectual movements, but also by the introduction of science into the university. Mark Pattison, a literary academic at Oxford and later Rector of Lincoln College noted in his diary in 1854:

Meantime an influence had been growing up among us – an influence which the Commission did but little to help or further – one of which we said little, and that little not approvingly, but which was destined to work a revolution in the scope and functions of Oxford life far greater than has been effected by two successive Commissions. This
was the museum, and through the museum, the introduction of the thin end of physical science. It is to the silent permeative, genius of science that the growth of a large and comprehensive view of the function of the University and the desire to discharge it, has spread among us.28

These changes were very significant in the university. The creation of the Humboldt University in Berlin in 1810 represented a commitment to the imperative of scientific discovery. This model of a research university has influenced not just institutions like Johns Hopkins in the US but has provided an example for the imperative of research in almost all universities to this day. A second effect, which followed the introduction of science into the universities, was the creation of discrete disciplines of enquiry and knowledge that served the new professions of the industrial revolution.29

The changes at Cambridge and Oxford brought in by the mid-nineteenth century Royal Commissions also removed the stranglehold of the Church of England on these two universities by removing religious tests and reducing the power of the existing colleges that had church foundations, and allowing for the foundation of other colleges.

Recent scholarly investigation of these broad social changes has tended to see differences in the character of this secularisation. The revolutionary antireligious sentiment seen in France is quite different from the gradualist approach observable in England. The revolutionary pluralist sentiment about the state in the US is different from both in the distinction between religious community and citizens and secular state.30 The English experience tended to produce weak public religious institutions and low levels of anti-clericalism. The French experience led to a polarisation between extreme anti-clericalism and low participation on the one hand and a strong Roman Catholic sub-culture on the other. In the US, religious institutions flourished and there was little anti-clericalism.31

It is not surprising that there was little attempt to create independent religious universities in England, whereas in the US they grew naturally. The question therefore of what a Christian university might look like is thus complicated by each national context. In England, the university was no longer Christian in the sense that it was ecclesiastically determined within a society that was Christian and united with the Church of England.
Even when Newman addressed the question of the ‘Idea of the University’ in 1854 it was a conception set without any real reference to scientific endeavour and the vision was for a Roman Catholic confessional university in Ireland. But his Idea and its fate throws light on another aspect of the transition in the university.

Newman’s proposal was set within the framework of the gradual abandonment of Britain’s own version Christendom. When he wrote, Roman Catholics were still not able to take up seats in parliament. His Idea failed to take in its home soil. In revolutionary free enterprise US where a ‘new world’ was being created, Roman Catholic universities emerged and liberal arts colleges flourished. Both were widely inspired by Newman’s Idea. Also in the US, Protestant universities emerged at Yale and Harvard built on theological understandings that were internally coherent to a high degree. Both Presbyterian Puritan and Roman Catholic universities shared a greater sense of an authoritative epistemology expressed institutionally in a singularly authoritative scripture (sola scriptura) in one case and a singular and authoritative magisterium (the pope as Christ’s only vicar on earth) on the other.

Radicalised epistemology and social opportunity made the idea of a Christian university both conceivable and possible in the US. A less radical more porous and moderated epistemology in Anglicanism and its derivatives did not provide the same dynamic in England where change came by accommodation rather than revolution.

The Australian experience

These issues were all at play when tertiary education began in Australia with the founding of the University of Sydney in 1850. There had been a number of moves to establish a university in New South Wales before William Charles Wentworth raised the question in the Legislative Council in 1849. Not least was an Anglican proposal to develop a tertiary institution for the training of clergy and offering wider liberal arts courses.

Wentworth argued that any university ought not to be collegiate in character where religion had a powerful role. Indeed, there should be no religion and no religious tests in the university.

He felt bound to say that the attempt to introduce any collegiate education into this colony, to be endowed as the public expense, in which peculiar tenets were to be
promulgated, peculiar sectarian doctrines taught, should have no support from him. He believed if any higher system of education than had hitherto been obtained in the colony was to be perfected, it must be kept entirely free from the teachers of any religion whatever; and he did not hesitate to avow what his own opinion was – and it was the opinion he should advocate in the committee, that no religion at all should be taught in an institution such as he proposed.

Wentworth went to say that he envisaged that it would be entirely appropriate for denominational colleges to be affiliated to the proposed university and that these colleges might indeed teach divinity. Wentworth was opposed by Mr Cowper, a prominent Anglican layman, who said that education without ‘sound religious principles ... would be only rearing up more accomplished villains’.

There followed in the next six months a very great deal of debate. Petitions were received for changes to the bill from all over New South Wales and the churches, in particular, were opposed to the exclusion of the clergy. In the following year, when a new bill was introduced two significant changes had been made. The Executive Council was to nominate the Senate of the university and the Senate was enlarged by four to allow clergy from each of the major denominations in the colony. On 1 October 1850, the Act of Incorporation was assented to by Governor Fitzroy and the University of Sydney came to existence. It provided for the establishment of a university to confer degrees in arts, law, and medicine. The university was to be controlled by a Senate and there would be no religious tests for staff or students. There was provision made in the Act for colleges and their maintenance by the university.

At the inauguration on 11 October 1852 Sir Charles Nicholson, the Vice Provost, declaring the university bill said it was expedient for the better advancement of religion and morality and the promotion of useful knowledge, to hold forth to all classes and denominations of Her Majesty’s subjects resident in the colony of New South Wales, without any distinction whatever, an encouragement for pursuing a regular and liberal course of education.
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Nicholson went on,

Limited to no sect and confined to no class, its sphere of action was calculated to embrace men of every creed and of all ranks. Dispensing mere secular instruction and leaving the inculcation of religious truth to the spiritual guardians of each denomination of religionists, the University presents the widest possible area for all who are willing to come within her precincts.

It would be improper, he said, to include revealed religion as a special element in the teaching of the university.

Such a proposition would be totally inconsistent with the spirit of an institution established and maintained from public funds to which all alike can contribute, and in the benefits of which all have a right to share. In thus abstaining from blending secular and religious teaching, neither the legislature nor the present conductors of the institution can permit it to be inferred that such a separation is to be held as implying indifference on their part to those higher objects of revealed religion, upon the due perception and practical observance of which the happiness of all both here and hereafter must depend. It is not because we abstain from inculcating, that we ignore the existence of dogmatic truth. Rejoicing in the blessing of religious freedom, and believing that religious convictions are the most valuable of possessions, we leave the guardianship of them to parents and teachers, whose special function it may be to assume and to exercise a trust.34

Behind the rhetoric lay a determination to keep the university outside the influence of the Church of England, and to contain sectarian conflicts. Pluralism overcame Anglican establishment and ascendency.35

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the Anglican ascendancy has long since gone and sectarian conflict diminished in the second half of the twentieth century. Thus religion returned to the university curriculum, first for non-Christian religions, but then to include all religions, and later theology as a discipline with the same internalities and externalities as
other similar disciplines. By this time the university had become a multi-
faceted set of institutions called a sector.

The idea of a Christian university has returned in the form of several
Roman Catholic universities. On the other hand a Christian idea of the
university has begun to gain expression in other encounters between
Christian institutions and universities through practices of accommo-
dation and engagement. Such an accommodation can be seen in relation to a
less radicalised, more porous epistemology. It can also be seen as a further
phase in the transitions that have occupied European civilisation over a
very long period in the more gradualist form of secularisation.

In this situation the question becomes what would be the lines of such
a Christian view of the university and what kind of contribution would it
bring to the university, and what contribution would the university bring
to theology? The challenge for the university lies not in the rigour of rea-
soning that theology brings since the issue of ‘niveau’ is in the hands of
those making appointments. Nor is the challenge in any idiosyncrasy in
the assumptions of the discipline of theology since every discipline in the
university has its own idiosyncratic assumptions and methods. Nor is the
challenge in any deficit in theology in contributing to the general intel-
lectual endeavour of the university as it struggles, often unsuccessfully, for
some conversation between disciplines.

The challenge for the university is that theology testifies to a different
kind of time. Not the ‘immanent frame’ to which Charles Taylor draws
attention\textsuperscript{36}, but the time which is constituted by the Christian narrative of
Jesus’ crucifixion and kingdom. The challenge for theology is to witness
to that time in terms which inhabit a society in which faith ‘is one human
possibility among others’\textsuperscript{37} and in particular address the context of the
university and its operation.\textsuperscript{38} It is not surprising that this is, in principle,
the challenge of the church in a secular age. Theology therefore finds itself
serving both the university in its role in society and also the church in its
role in society.
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Notes


2. Such things as the role of the apostle, especially in the Pauline churches, the stories of Jesus, the presence of the Spirit in the church, arrangements for welfare for Christians and the tradition of beliefs and practices from the first generation all came to have a role in the emerging institutional appearance and diversity of the Christian churches.


4. On the general question of the emergence of institutions in Christianity see Kaye, *Web of Meaning*.

5. I am adopting here the usual practice of seeing Christendom begin with Constantine’s deal with the bishops and the adoption of Christianity as first a legal and then the official religion of the empire. See HA Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops : The Politics of Intolerance*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Ancient Society and History, Baltimore, 2000.

6. The Lutheran lands of the Schmalkaldic League were settled on this principle by the peace of Augsburg (1555) and Calvinists were brought into this cover by the Treaty of Wesphalia in 1648.


9. The steps which dismantled the Anglican ascendancy in the period 1835–1855 in New South Wales were also steps which enabled a new understanding of the society and also of the church. For the struggle of William Grant Broughton the Anglican bishop in New South Wales see

10. Initially Duke of Swabia, he became successively King of Germany (1152) King of Italy (1154) and Holy Roman Emperor (1155).

11. Alan B Cobban, *The Medieval Universities: Their Development and Organization*, London: Methuen, 1975, p. 52. In time Frederick’s *Constitutio* was used to support claims for academic freedom, though its actual scope was much more limited.


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25. Tom Frame has shown that there is evidence of a favourable reaction to Darwin in Australia and that local ‘scientists were less constrained by the establishment than their British counterparts.’ Tom Frame, *Evolution in the Antipodes: Charles Darwin and Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2009, p. 124.


33. See the close analysis of Newman by Stanley Hauerwas in *The State of the University*, pp. 22–29.
34. Sydney Morning Herald, 12 October 1852.