

John Dawkins Versus John Calvin

These were the closing comments made at the
First Reformed Post-Graduate Conference
held at Knox Presbyterian Church, Wantirna, Victoria,
20th February 1993.

*Indeed, men who have either quaffed or even tasted
the liberal arts penetrate with their aid far more
deeply into the secrets of divine wisdom.
[John Calvin Institutes I:V,2]*

These comments are given with concern for the structure and character of the university education in this country at this time. You and I are part of a spiritual revolution which has relentlessly tried to transform higher learning into a form compatible with its religious beliefs. In our western and "post-capitalist" society the university is clearly subject to momentous forces for change. Let us then draw the current situation as we now find it.

Our corner of Western civilisation is in the process of radical and far-reaching change. Sure, we have an election the week after next, but the impact of the gods of Science, Reason, Progress and Technology have all made their demands upon "post-Christian" society in Australia and the person-in-the street is increasingly confused and unable to live consistently with the changes that keep occurring with daily regularity.

As third-world countries now adopt and adapt the revolutionary humanism which has shaped European society since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the entire globe is caught up in the maelstrom. And we are caught up in it. Fellow Christian students let us take a sober look at ourselves!

Our meeting today has been to encourage us to begin to plumb the depths of our own intellectual responsibility. We are led to ask : Just how much has our learning and our view of things has been shaped by the "religion of unbelief" that underlying religious thrust of the modern or post-modern university which is the mortal enemy of Christian discipleship in science and scholarship. Sure, we have been encouraged to begin the painstakingly difficult task of "knowing the enemy"; we need to become much more critical of our own

accommodation to the intellectual vision which shapes the contemporary university, which has shaped us.

Ordinary citizens, fed and catechised with the dogmas of our time from an early age, are very often paralysed; something very serious has gone wrong. They feel it in their bones, and we do too, but our minds are too often distracted from the task of understanding what it is. How do we diagnose the disease? How do we know what to do so that we can bring about some healing? Pessimism and a sense of futility reigns. This sense of pessimism and futility does not just stay out in the street. It invades our homes; it has even taken a strong hold of our cherished churches. How many times have you raised some serious questions about the **spiritual** direction your church or congregation is taking only to be put in your place by pious anti-intellectualism? How many times have you heard the word "intellectual" or "theoretical" or "academic" spoken as a swear word when you were struggling to put your fears into logical form?

The only option for many of us appears to be a more sophisticated life-style, with further refinement of our consumer tastes in art, literature, private hobbies and liturgy.

But what of our public responsibilities? How is the nihilism, emptiness and blatant materialism which has our neighbours enslaved to be understood so that it can be effectively resisted? How can we ever get to a position where government and nation, economy and society, is changed so as to encourage, rather than to discourage, the cultivation of human talent?

Or to apply this line of questioning to our universities : Is it possible to study so as to gain some integral and unified perspective upon - the breakdown of the ozone layer; the destruction of the earth's vegetation; the smog and pollution in our air, water and food; the melting of the ice-caps and the erosion of the coasts and arable land; the destruction of animal life; the traffic problems of big cities; the population explosion; droughts and famines that afflict African and Asian peoples; massive destruction of food surplus; the spread of HIV infection and AIDS; the rise in terrorism among and between nations; Glasnost, Perestroika and the end to the Cold War and the consequences; the world's refugee problem; homelessness; resurgent Islam

and fundamentalist regimes of East and West, Europe, America and the third-world; arms proliferation and reduction; inflation; crime and police corruption; institutionalised immorality and the search for profit in all kinds of previously questionable practices; psychiatric and other mental disturbance; divorce and marital strain; the effects in the next generation of abortion law reform; and so on.

This list would be impressive if it wasn't so depressing. Surely the university, as a place of serious and disciplined learning, would be the place where students, of all kinds and specialties, could come to frame for themselves a coherent and integral perspective from which to contribute to the many-sided discussion of these momentous issues? Surely the university would be the place where students would be encouraged to form a non-self-centred, non-provincial, global outlook? Surely the university would be the place where one could investigate the inner-connectedness and the inter-connectness of all these matters? Surely the university and its proud traditions of honest and objective scholarship would be the place where we could discern where western society had made a wrong turn? Surely the university would be the place to gain historical and philosophical insight into the underlying religious/cultural commitments which have brought the cultivation of the planet to the brink of such manifold disaster?

But no! So many of my colleagues, who have had to negotiate their way through the bureaucratic and political maze of the Australian university over the last decade, would listen to these questions and then, in all probability, dismiss the implication as misplaced idealism. For the post-modern humanist the "community of scholars" is dead and gone. And the university has been emptied of that kind of commitment which led to its emergence many centuries ago. The nihilism which is the presupposition of the person-in-the-street, as he sucks on his tepid meat-pie and scans the football results in the newspaper, is the same nihilism which is leading the armies of university and college bureaucrats into a deepening crisis.

And it is my own experience of that crisis first-hand which has brought me to organize these conferences for reformed university students. I fear for the future of reformed students because the spiritual crisis which has rocked the

university has in all likelihood worked its way very deeply into their own way of thinking - and sadly it is the rare Christian student who seems to care very much that it has done so! And as Christians that presents us with a very serious problem indeed.

Like lemmings, universities and colleges throughout Australia, and the rest of the industrialised world, have moved ahead taking the unabashed form of "degree factories"; over-paid senior executives in tertiary education, completely dominated by "corporatist values", have thoroughly capitulated to the government requirement that financial profit be the primary, if not sole, purpose of scientific research in all fields. And then senior academics, scholars some of whom have outstanding record for research and publication have also capitulated in spectacular fashion. And this is all bad enough in itself. But let us note that Christian students, like lemmings, have travelled a similar path and seek to work out their discipleship when they are so thoroughly un-prepared to meet the challenges of our time with specialist insights that are born of a Christian world-view.

Academics are fragmented by an arbitrary, but fiercely defended, professionalism; they seem to be quite incapable of indicating any alternative direction. But among Christians it is no different. Our own pious inflexibility insists that the many serious problems mentioned above can only be addressed by specialists working on problems one-at-a-time. Specialists, we plead, must be given their respect. But do we ever stop to consider in what this professional autonomy consists? Moreover, just because a Christian has specialist training -say in psychology, or business administration or law - it does not mean that their professional advice is Christian as it should be. For over twenty years now we have heard that it takes much more to have Christian teaching in our schools than simply placing Christian teachers in front of a classroom of children. If it is so important in school what about all the other professions? Where do we hear of a biblical approach to psychiatry? I hear lots about "not judging" and "being loving" to my Christian brothers and sisters in the psychiatric and psychological professions. But what about the development of a Christian philosophy which would shape and inform the conceptual basis of these so-called "caring professions".

Consider how reformed thinking over the past two decades has been inordinately shaped by an uncritical appropriation of the latest insights in psychology? And by reformed thinking here I mean, quite frankly, the way congregations encourage Christian discipleship. These ideas about professional respect and autonomy I have also heard propounded from our pulpits. Well the crunch time is here! It is long passed the time when reformed Christians should have had done with attempts at avoiding Christian thinking by artificial attempts at accomodation and synthesis.

Despite what any discipline's theories might assert about the inter-relatedness of all knowledge, our actions bespeak a firm commitment to the view that our corporate responsibility can be neatly divided into water-tight compartments. Yet the problems are not so easily isolated from each other as you will have learned Sunday by Sunday trying to relate what you hear to what you learn at university.

Universities may be organised to isolate history from philosophy; social science from the laboratory of the natural sciences. But a Christian university must encourage all to work together to furnish insights which will be of benefit to all because they deepen our understanding of the way God has made us and thereby contribute to our reflection about how our discipleship is to be developed in this time, in this place.

But the problems which confront us cannot be addressed by specialist academics working in splendid isolation of each other. In point of fact the problems which we confront have been exacerbated by the professionalistic fragmentation which is the hall-mark of academia.

Even if any one academic specialist wishes to come to terms with the problems, as seen from the perspective of one particular discipline, it will yet require the closest possible co-operation with many other specialists. Such co-operation has been found to be extremely difficult, if not totally impossible, within the hallowed halls of enlightened academic self-interest - the (post-)modern university. The university finds itself in the embarrassing situation where it has used up all its resources on an institutionalised internal squabble in which each science goes its own way. In so doing each puts itself forward as the true source of those theoretic insights which alone can be the basis for

the entire enterprise of higher learning. This process may have produced some valuable insights in times past. But we are now entering a new phase. Keep in mind that under the impact of the Australian Federal Government's "re-structuring" proposals, the university has been required to transform itself into many multi-faceted business schools. The internal intellectual competition between disciplines is now being re-constructed under a public-business philosophy which gains its momentum from a world-view which is liberal, socialistic, bureaucratic and materialistic. In my own experience Monash is said to have "merged" with Chisholm some two-and-a-half years ago. Some ex-Chisholm die-hards claim that Monash has taken over. What has actually happened is that the mentality that once dominated Chisholm has now been given free rein to take total control of the "Greater Monash".

In decades past, salvation has been offered in the name of scientific research. Yet such salvation has been found wanting; alternative scientific specialties fought each other for pre-eminence with equally convincing counter-perspectives. Now this general theoretical competition has been re-interpreted to be one form of market-place competitiveness; the university is now to be interpreted in terms of "the market". Specialists in the various disciplines are now required to form their programs and to re-form their curriculum, to maximise their "competitive advantage". Each discipline in the university/academic curriculum is viewed as a centre of self-interest and the Government's policy is being implemented as the epitome of "enlightened self-interest". In other words, business management rhetoric has become the Queen of the Sciences, and the Federal Government insists that it be so.

An abstract theory called "economic rationalism" is foisted upon the entire academic community, as each academic sector labours with the burden of being a "cost centre". The Federal Government's proposals mean that the entire intellectual community is required to judge itself in terms of a monetarist understanding of the "national good". Now, the universities are to be organised on the principle that the monetarist approach, adopted hitherto by Business Schools, is the only means of effectively running tertiary education. As Minister for Trade & Industry, John Dawkins commissioned the project that led to "Australia Reconstructed". As Minister for Employment and Education

and Training he simply applied the Big Government/Big Union/Big Business mentality to universities. He has wanted Big Universities! How did all this come about? Why is the Government's initiative actually deepening the crisis in our universities? At the outset of his ministerial career Mr Dawkins claimed to be reversing the destructive influence of monetarism. As Minister responsible for Education he has acted in a way that will indelibly stamp our universities with the monetarist mould. His is an ideology thoroughly compatible with monetarism. Accountants are the priests of this religion in which the staff/student ratio is the Government enforced law which must be obeyed.

There is more to this than can be covered in a short speech here. There is, however, a very interesting reversion at work in the Dawkins' ideology. It can be seen most clearly when his approach to learning is contrasted with that of John Calvin. This Reformation prophet, whose name has often been associated with the Capitalist's profit¹, explained the purpose of university study in these terms:

Indeed, men who have either quaffed or even tasted the liberal arts penetrate with their aid far more deeply into the secrets of the divine wisdom. (Institutes I:V,2).

Battles, Calvin's translator, adds in a footnote: "To Calvin, liberal studies were an aid to comprehension of the divine wisdom conveyed in Holy Scripture". In other words, university study is of inestimable value on the human pathway to wisdom. It is part of that cultivation of the earth in which mankind will find and fulfil its vocation. It is indispensable for men and women as they work in all spheres of society. Such knowledge will encourage wise and useful living even in the marketplace. But Dawkins has reversed all this. For him, and those of his school - a nation-wide horde - those who have self-indulgently quaffed the divine wisdom of mammon, and who have carefully calculated their own market-value, have gained the one thing necessary to understand all the secrets of the liberal arts. Indeed for them a larger market share is the way of salvation. In other words we are in very desperate times. The

¹. In my view the association has as much to do with the various theorist's attempts to **distance** themselves from calvinism as it has to do with any purely "objective" search for the origins of capitalism.

universities of Australia have been taken over by a sect. This sect has Federal and State Government blessing. The sect has received the backing of the major political parties, and will not be content with simply ensuring that a responsible fiscal policy be adopted by the various university bureaucracies. No! The aim is the transformation of the entirety of the intellectual outlook of those trained in the universities of this land. Salvation through profit: this is the key to knowledge.

Further investigation and analysis of this sect and its doctrines is called for. It will require painstaking and unremitting labour for insight to emerge. But it will also require that we graduates give ourselves unstintingly to the task of establishing a Christian university in this land; yes we do it so we can work together as Christ's disciples in the world of learning and scholarship; yes we do so to provide a place for our children to follow Christ in scholarly research; but we also do it for the purpose of restoring the student vocation to its God-honoured place of searching out the way of the Lord in His creation; and we do it to contribute to the genuine reformation of universities in this land.

Because understanding does not come magically at the click of some spiritual fingers, or via the increment of some trade-weighted index, it is still an open question whether the universities of this land have the intellectual openness to philosophically push back the worst excesses of this sectarian take-over. But we Christian graduates should have no doubts about the power of Jesus Christ in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. And it is in His power and in His service that we shall labour long and hard in the belief that in Him something permanent can be established.

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This chapter develops the argument of an article of the same name published in the Chisholm IT student newspaper *The Naked Wasp* 12:5 1989 p.18

