



— **Conference Papers** —

Neal Nuske 14 July 2012

WHAT DO THEY THINK?

Thank you for the invitation to present at this Conference: *Time to Soar*.

Firstly, the topic is: *What do they think?* This begs the question: Who are the “they” in the question?

My reference point is a group of Year 12 students from St Peters College, Indooroopilly who have chosen to take *Study of Religion* as part of their subject selection for matriculation. The reflections below are drawn from Research Essays submitted and assessed in accord with an approved Work-Program based upon the Queensland Studies Authority Syllabus:

http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/downloads/senior/snr_study_religion_syll_08.pdf. I am reflecting on twenty years of classroom teaching at St Peters. This constitutes both the scope and the limits of my answer to the question: *What do they think?* I cannot presume to speak about other Lutheran school contexts.

For twenty years I have taught *Study of Religion* at St Peters College Brisbane. This subject contributes towards tertiary entrance scores in the Queensland Secondary School context. On average 50 young adults in both Year 11 and Year 12 take the subject. Usually 80% of these students are female. The students come from a variety of religious traditions representing both the major world religions and the diversity of denominational groups within Christianity. Some students represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spiritualities. While some students are atheists and have no religious connections, other students are agnostics. The classroom is a multi-cultural and poly-religious context, a microcosm of the modern world.

The final Semester of their Year 12 is devoted to a study of *Sacred Texts* from Indigenous Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, as well as the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic and Jewish religious traditions. The entire semester focuses upon *hermeneutics*, that is, the way sacred texts are interpreted and applied within and across these religious traditions. Part 1 is called: *The Art of Hermeneutics* and Part 2: *Sacred Texts in Art, Literature and the Performing Arts*.

This classroom experience forms the basis for the comments I make about the contemporary mindset of these young adults.

The Key Question for the 16 Week Semester is:

In order to have relevance for the modern world, to what extent does the interpretation of a sacred text need to take into consideration current modern thought?

Topics: The following list of topics has been negotiated with the students and represents their interests.

- a) Religious beliefs concerning the way sacred texts are interpreted: *Hermeneutics*
- b) Religious beliefs concerning the nature of the universe: *Cosmology (Science and Religion)*
- c) Religious beliefs concerning gender issues: *Feminist Theological Perspectives*
- d) Religious beliefs concerning global environmental issues: *Eco-theology*





— **Conference Papers** —

- e) Religious beliefs concerning global peace: *Fundamentalisms and religious violence*
- f) Religious beliefs concerning race: *The Religious Roots of Anti-Semitism*
- g) Topic to be negotiated with teacher

Topic (c) explores gender issues which includes studying the way various religious traditions prescribe the role and identity of women. I use the word *prescribe* deliberately because this refers to the manner in which religious ideation is used to exercise power over women and, in some instances, to justify violence perpetrated upon women in the form of either physical violence, or the negation of human rights, or the way women are construed to be less than equal human beings in social contexts that practice, for example, arranged marriages, or organise divorce proceedings, or insist on female circumcision, or advocate honour killings, or prohibit the ordination of women. These are issues which deeply concern young adults. They are intrigued that religious traditions justify the ordering of their communities through interpretations of sacred texts and appeals to their respective views of god.

The contemporary mindset of my students construes all of the above as discriminatory practices which are seen to be justified on religious grounds within the respective community. In all these topics sacred texts are interpreted and used to justify actions and exercise *power* in order to shape the social structures of religious communities in ways which disadvantage or marginalise women. Students also compare the way women are treated across religious traditions.

Those religious communities which forbid the ordination of women are understood to be communities which use religious ideation and beliefs to support injustice and to justify discriminatory and/or violent practices against women. It is incomprehensible to these young adults that religion is used in order to justify such actions, or to organise social networks which marginalise human beings, or negate women's rights and, in some cases, determine the future of young girls by taking away from them their freedom of choice.

When informed about the doctrinal position of the LCA and provided with source material to read which the LCA believes supports its doctrinal position on not ordaining women, these young adults –both male and female- are surprised. I could also add the response of disbelief. They immediately raise questions about human rights issues and discrimination against women. They explore the way men are seen to exercise power over women on the basis of fear. When informed that these men, and in some instances, lay-women, have a concern for living according to their understanding of religious truth, they are interested in examining the connection between religious truth and discriminatory acts: *How can it be that religion justifies discrimination against women?* When compared with other religious traditions, the LCA is placed alongside of those traditions which are seen to negate human rights and/or marginalise women and the gifts they are understood to have been given by a creator.





— **Conference Papers** —

Questions which appear year after year are pertinent to the respective religious tradition chosen for the Research Essay:

- What are the relevant sacred texts in the debate, for example, within the LCA?
- How are these sacred texts interpreted, for example, within the LCA?
- Who interprets these texts, for example, within the LCA?
- Is there a connection between interpretation and practice, for example, within the LCA?
- How can this practice be justified, for example, within the LCA as a religious organisation within the democratic context of our Australian society, given Australia was an original signatory to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* sixty years ago?
- What kind of creator supports discrimination against women and/or negates the belief that men and women are created equally *in the image of that particular creator*?
- Who exercises power in this community, for example, within the LCA?
- What are men afraid of, for example, within the LCA?
- Why are women submissive and obedient in such religious contexts, for example, the LCA?
- Are there variant viewpoints in this particular religious community, for example, the LCA? If so how do they interpret the same sacred texts?
- What is culture?
- What is religion?

Students present their research and analysis of the chosen topic in the form of a 1,200 to 1,500 word research essay fully referenced with a Bibliography that evidences diverse perspectives. The criterion requires of them that they are acquainted with diverse perspectives so that they can demonstrate the skills of research and critical analysis. They are dissuaded from using the research essay as a vehicle or platform to present their point of view only, or to disparage other perspectives. The subject aims to develop research skills and promote inter-religious and inter-faith dialogue, draw informed conclusions and argue a case. If a student is undecided about an issue at the completion of the research and writing process, then they are encouraged to present this as a valid conclusion and personal perspective.

The subject requires that a teacher is 'grounded', that is, the teacher informs the student of his/her personal perspective and the reasons for this. In this way personal bias is acknowledged as a factor which influences pedagogy. For this reason, students are provided with copies of all LCA documents, for example, CTICR documents, should they choose the LCA as their case study to demonstrate the connection between hermeneutics and practice. My personal perspective is that I would argue for the ordination of women on hermeneutical and confessional grounds.

Addendum (not presented)



**Time
to soar!**

**the ultimate women's ordination
conference ~ Adelaide 2012**

<Friday 13 & Saturday 14 July 2012>



— **Conference Papers** —

The Lutheran Church of Australia has an impressive school system thoroughly grounded in its theology and guided by *Lutheran Education Australia*. Not all students will take the subject *Study of Religion*. However, all students are required to take *Christian Studies*.

The Rationale for *Christian Studies* in Lutheran schools states:

Rationale

Christian Studies provides a safe and supportive context in which students can reflect on their experiences of the world and on their own beliefs and spirituality as they attempt to make sense of their rapidly changing and complex global environment, and as they develop their identity as individuals. They do this on the basis of their study of Christianity and their increasing awareness of how the Christian faith relates to all aspects of existence.

Christian Studies initiates students into biblical literacy and the teachings, culture and history of the church in general and the Lutheran Church in particular. It also relates the Christian response to insights, teachings, practices, and challenges of other major world religions. Students are also encouraged to appreciate the Christian response to social justice and ethical issues and the servant role of the Christian church within society. <http://www.lutheran.edu.au/tools/getFile.aspx?tbl=tblContentItem&id=351>

Having also taught *Christian Studies* as a Head of Department for 13 years, it is worthwhile considering, with a degree of humility and concern, what the young adults in our schools may think about the debate within our midst concerning the ordination of women thereby gaining some understanding of how these intelligent and perceptive young adults respond to the theological position of the LCA. It would be ungracious to disparage either the questions they may ask of us, or the insights they have about spirituality and ways of living in a complex world.

Neal Nuske

Bachelor of Theology (Luther Seminary)

Bachelor of Educational Studies (The University of Queensland)

Master of Educational Studies: {Research} (The University of Queensland)

Graduate Diploma Social Science (Counselling) {Queensland University of Technology: Carseldine}

