



## Confessional Theology and Contestation in a Secular University

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Issues arising from relationships between academic departments in universities and external stakeholders are numerous and complex. The matter is illustrated in this paper by focusing on a dispute in the theology department at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, which came to a head from 2004 to 2007. The dispute itself is detailed and developments influencing it at the local, national and global (worldwide theological education) levels are considered. A number of education issues that were at stake in the dispute are then examined in relation to models of leadership, models of teaching, student learning, equity, and the place of stakeholders.

### Introduction

Issues arising from relationships between academic departments in universities and external stakeholders are numerous and complex. For example, controversy between stakeholders on the funding of university teaching and research is rife (Hottenrott and Thorwarth 2011). The particular situation of church stakeholders and theological university education can also have its own unique set of

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concerns. The matter is illustrated in this paper by focusing on a dispute in the theology department at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, which came to a head from 2004 to 2007. The dispute arose when a number of students officially complained that lecturers were publicly undermining the confessions of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), even though they were expected to uphold them as they held dual appointments with the Church and the theology department.

The paper is in three main parts. First, the dispute itself is detailed. Developments influencing it at the local (Theology Department), national (South Africa) and global (worldwide theological education) levels, are then considered. Following this, a number of education issues that were at stake in the dispute are examined in relation to models of leadership, models of teaching, student learning, equity, and the place of stakeholders. It is held that cogitating the exposition in each of the three parts can be instructive for those working in theology departments in various universities where a particular religion constitutes the foundation position.

## **The Dispute**

The dispute commenced when a number of students expressed their dissatisfaction with the stance of certain DRC-affiliated theology professors in the Theology Department of the University of Pretoria, who allegedly were publicly undermining the Church confessions that they were required to uphold, and particularly in relation to the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Attention came to focus on chairman of the DRC student body, Frederik 'Ferdie' Mulder. In the midst of numerous attempts to engage in negotiation to address the dispute, the University appointed a judge, who questioned Mulder and the professors in the Theology Department. The student was found to have acted with dishonesty, and was barred from studying theology at the University for life. This decision was highly publicized, and led to significant controversy within the University and the Church.

Du Toit (2009) has provided a comprehensive chronology of events. While it is disputed in certain respects by the student who initiated the original complaint (Mulder, 2010), it does provide a valuable overview of the dispute. It became a serious matter of dispute in 2004, when a letter of complaint from Mulder was acknowledged by the University. The following April, a commission was appointed to investigate the matter, and the findings were reported and discussed with lecturers. Then, in June 2005, a newspaper reported the discontent among a number of University of Pretoria theology students and there was a strongly worded repudiation by the board of curators of the DRC. Mulder then distributed a document outlining complaints about public stances on confessional issues by certain professors and which listed 46 students as being supportive of the complaints. In his account of the incident he notes that several of these students were contacted by Dr du Toit and threatened with legal action and non-ordination in the DRC. Apart from himself, he claims, all then withdrew their complaint.

The professors named by Mulder reacted strongly against his document and argued that the process that led to the 46 student names being added was unethical. The Executive of the Board of Curators then held hearings and found Mulder guilty of misconduct. Then, in August 2006, a separate university disciplinary hearing concluded that while he was correct in claiming that the professors had disputed the bodily resurrection, this was not necessarily incompatible with the Church confessions. Mulder was, therefore, deemed to have made false accusations regarding faculty members and was barred for life from further theological study at the University. Also, statements released by the DRC Hierarchy stated that the lecturers had been acquitted of any wrongdoing because the accusations had failed to show a grasp of “the conventions whereby theological debate is being conducted and the recognized principles of rhetoric are followed” (du Toit 2009, 15). The following year, 2007, a DVD expressing dismay at the decision of the University was produced and widely disseminated by disaffected DRC members.

Overall, from the perspective of the members of the Faculty of Theology, Mulder was the willing puppet of disgruntled external stakeholders from the DRC. Together, as the Faculty members saw it, Mulder and these Church stakeholders were conducting an ‘onslaught’ (du Toit 2009, pp. 11, 15) on the Faculty. This, to them, was offensive, naïve, and baseless. The claims that Mulder made about professors, it was held, were unfair, because they involved the assumption that disbelief regarding bodily resurrection was incompatible with a commitment to the Church confessions. Furthermore, they argued that the manner in which the document with the 46 student names on it was developed, was unethical.

From Mulder’s perspective, the key issue was that the University of Pretoria took a theological position in support of certain professors, and against a natural and time-tested reading of the confessions of the Church with which it had a formal agreement. This, as he saw it, was to the detriment of students, who believed they were being educated in accordance with the historic standards of the DRC. The key issue was most clearly evident when the University-appointed judge asked the professors, who admitted that they did not teach or believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, if the confessions of the Church required them to believe in a bodily resurrection. The reply, according to Mulder, was that the Church confessions did not require it. The judge, Mulder further held, then accepted the word of the professors being investigated as being that of authoritative spokespersons for the external stakeholder to whom they were being held accountable.

From Mulder’s perspective, the professors’ self-approved disavowal of the bodily resurrection of Jesus meant that they were not taking a fair approach in seeking to educate a range of students who were committing themselves to the Church’s confessions in preparation for Church ministry. Mulder’s position was that students should at least be exposed to both believing and unbelieving scholarly positions on the matter, rather than being exposed to only one view, in the guise of what Punt (2006, p. 890)

has described as an ironically narrow and uncritical “scientist, positivist paradigm”.

### **Developments Influencing the Dispute**

In order to try to arrive at an understanding of the dispute, it is necessary to give attention to a number of broader issues of setting and history. These are now considered in relation to three levels, namely, the local context, the national context, and the global context.

#### ***Developments at the local level***

The theology department has had a long and rich history of association with the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Malan (2009) has described how they have been intertwined, with the denomination requiring ongoing training for its clergy, and the department providing this training through its education. Up until 2000, the DRC was the single denomination with which the department was affiliated. Since that time, the department became ‘multi-denominational and the DRC “could no longer refer to the faculty as ‘our faculty’” (du Toit 2009, p. 7). However, individual faculty members can still be dually appointed by the university and the DRC, as was the case with those who were at the centre of the 2005 dispute.

#### ***Developments at the national level***

Karram has commented that higher education institutions in South Africa have ‘traveled the path of secularization’ (Karram 2011, p. 489), and may continue to do so in the future. Any consideration of this proposition must take account of the influence of apartheid and its aftermath. In 1986, the DRC admitted that apartheid had been wrong (Battersby 1989). Punt, (2006), in considering the effects of this, discerned a change in attitudes to biblical hermeneutics in post-apartheid South Africa. He argued that a ‘scientific paradigm’

began to emerge in the 1980s, displacing the previously prominent doctrinal-fundamentalist model. According to the ‘new’ paradigm, valid (‘scientific’) readings of texts are meant to be detached from any theological or ideological interest and to result in ‘objective’, singular, universally valid interpretations. Punt (2006) also noted in the mid-2000s that this model was continuing to exert a strong influence.

### ***Developments at the global level***

Withrow and Menachem (2014) have highlighted a range of problems associated with confessional ties in religious higher education and have called for theologians within universities to have greater freedom from religious constraints. There is nothing new about such a call. Privilege (2014), for example, has discussed the influence of the Holy See on faculty teaching at St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, in Ireland. Also, Oden, has commented in his memoirs that early in his career as a theologian he presented himself as religiously orthodox, even though this was not the reality. “The trick”, he stated, “was to learn to sound Christian while undermining traditional Christianity” (Oden, 2014, p. 81). He went on as follows to describe the approach he took when teaching about the resurrection of Jesus:

I was able to confess the Apostles’ Creed, but only with deep ambiguity. But I stumbled over ‘he arose from the dead.’ I had to demythologize it and could say it only symbolically. I could not inwardly confess the resurrection as a factual historical event (Oden, 2014, p. 81).

In similar vein, Dosen (2012) has argued that theological education in the United States, especially for Protestants, underwent secularization over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as successful religious higher education institutions aimed to “emulate the top-tier secular universities” (Dosen, 2012, p. 41), thus causing some friction with denominational stakeholders.

A similar development took place in Germany, which had been at the centre of Protestant academic theology for four hundred years (Wright 2015). With the onset of the Enlightenment, this influence had increasingly involved a strong repudiation of ecclesiastical tradition, despite German academic theology being sponsored by the Lutheran Church. In the opening to his classic historiographical work, Albert Schweitzer made the following comment that is worth quoting at length:

When, at some future day, our period of civilisation shall lie, closed and completed, before the eyes of later generations, German theology will stand out as a great, a unique phenomenon in the mental and spiritual life of our time.... And the greatest achievement of German theology is the critical investigation of the life of Jesus. What it has accomplished here has laid down the conditions and determined the course of the religious thinking of the future. In the history of doctrine its work has been negative; it has, so to speak, cleared the site for a new edifice of religious thought (Schweitzer 1954, p. 1).

This section of Schweitzer's work is cited with admiration by Le Roux in his article on the study of the historical Jesus at the University of Pretoria (2011), showing the special influence that German 'site clearing' theology had in South Africa.

It was in this setting of Church-funded, critically-minded, somewhat iconoclastic, German theology that a dispute occurred, described by Neusner (2002, p. ix) as

....a signal, significant event in the academic study of religion in the universities of the West. That event is the expulsion of Professor Gerd Lüdemann from the Theology Faculty at the University of Göttingen by reason of the content of his academic writing and lecturing on the history and theology of earliest Christianity.

As Lüdemann himself describes this event (Neusner 2002, pp. 1-11), he was forced to leave his position after he publicly concluded

that the critical views he shared with a great number of his German theological peers on issues such as supernaturalism and the alleged resurrection of Jesus meant he could no longer label himself as a ‘Christian.’

While many of his peers held that it was possible to maintain this label and to continue to be sponsored by the Church, despite not believing in the bodily resurrection, Lüdemann came to believe that “it is an intrinsic contradiction for academic theology on the one hand to claim for itself the epithet ‘scientific’ and on the other hand to subserve the goals and principles of the church” (Lüdemann in Neusner 2002, p. 7). On this, it is important to point out that his use of the adjective ‘scientific’ (or *wissenschaftlich*) to describe the academic study of theology is not a worldwide phenomenon. Rather, it is a feature of theological language in Germany, Holland and South Africa, and specifically at the University of Pretoria (du Toit, 2009; Coetzee, 2013).

According to Lüdemann, the “key issue” is the alleged resurrection of Jesus from death (Neusner 2002, p. 8). Rejection of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, he stated, represents the rejection of Christianity. Those theologians who reject bodily resurrection, he therefore urged, should be honest with the Church. This very issue was at the heart of the dispute at the University of Pretoria, just three years after the documentation of the Lüdemann dispute was published.

### **An Examination of a Number of Associated Education Issues**

Clearly, the situation at Pretoria arose within a complex ecosystem of ideologies, commitments, traditions, trajectories, and expectations. While it will not be possible to understand every element of this situation, its key contours can be discerned, and the voices of key players can be heard. The intention here is not to evaluate who was ‘right,’ but to consider the educational issues that were at stake, or were put on display, in this dispute.



### ***Model of leadership***

Bush (2007) identifies a number of educational leadership styles that he sees as being particularly relevant to the South African setting. He lists these as follows: managerial leadership; transformational leadership; participative leadership; political and transactional leadership; post-modern leadership; moral leadership; instructional leadership; contingent leadership; and African models of leadership. Each of these styles is partial rather than comprehensive (Bush 2007, p. 403).

Of these, one style that was particularly evident in the Pretoria dispute is political and transactional leadership. On this style, Bush states (2007, p. 398) as follows: 'In political models, there is conflict between stakeholders, with disagreement being resolved in favour of the most powerful protagonists.' While the University clearly offered opportunities for students and disaffected stakeholders to be heard, it is also clear that its resources ultimately served to affirm the *status quo*, providing a legally approved demonstration that no change was necessary. This message was later publicly disseminated in a journal article that squarely represented the viewpoint of the department's leadership (du Toit, 2009).

### ***Model of teaching***

The university clearly held their lecturers to be highly educated, reliable experts. They were entrusted with the task of appropriately interpreting and delivering the theological content of their courses. They had academic freedom, even if the extent to which this was constrained by their denominational commitments is debatable. Thus, the University's demonstrable estimation of their lecturers as competent, free-thinking teachers is commendable. Indeed, the situation does not appear to have fallen into the internationally recognisable twenty-first century problem evident in "a removal of power from teachers and professionals and giving it to special

interest groups and government” (O’Donoghue and Clarke 2010, p. 18).

Nevertheless, a clear expectation is evident in the published materials that *because* the lecturers are regarded as the experts, students should be submissive and passive. This was demonstrated, for example, in the following personalising framing of the dispute by the Department: “Mr Ferdie Mulder, a student in his early thirties, was apparently of the opinion that he should question the religious convictions of his lecturers” (du Toit 2009, p. 11). While the student might have understood his complaints as pertaining to matters of formal obligation by DRC-affiliated professors, they were clearly perceived by the Department as being offensive personal attacks. Students, it seems, were not encouraged to question the views of the ‘experts’.

One can relate the Department’s model of teaching to Beeby’s (1966) classic stages of educational development. In doing this, a certain paradox becomes evident: as one would expect in an institution located at Beeby’s ‘stage of meaning,’ the relevant teachers of the Department were extremely well educated. They had highly sophisticated understandings of their own subject areas, having been awarded multiple degrees (Van der Watt et al, 2009). However, these same teachers were not necessarily well equipped in terms of pedagogy. Like teachers located in Beeby’s ‘stage of formalism,’ there appears to have been a strong emphasis on promoting intellectual development in a didactic manner, with only very restricted space for promoting student creativity and probing questioning.

### ***Student learning***

The adoption of the ‘scientist-positivist’ hermeneutical paradigm identified by Punt may well be a serious constraint on the social-constructivist worldview that underlies self regulated, communal, problem-based learning (O’Donoghue & Clarke 2010, p. 5; Liu and Matthews 2005). Where students are given the impression that a

purely 'scientific' interpretative endeavour leads to the objective determination that an item in their confession of faith must be demythologised, there is little room for the fostering of genuinely creative exploration or dialogue. This is not to say that any topic ought to be up for endless debate. Rather, it is to argue that the particular issue under discussion in this instance was one on which there was serious denominational and scholarly contestation, and not much space or acknowledgement was given to this in the classroom. This, perhaps, was a factor influencing Mulder's sense of frustration and disempowerment, and may have contributed to his taking an overly polemical and litigious approach in response.

### ***Equity***

It is clear that once the dispute was underway, the University made certain efforts to listen to students, lecturers, and denominational stakeholders. Mulder, in particular, was provided with an opportunity to express dissent in the company of legal representatives. Further, the Department's approval and justification of its professors would seem to indicate that the University was providing an environment in which it was safe for its constituents to critically question ecclesiastical orthodoxies, without fear of being silenced. However, this is only part of the picture. For one thing, one might ask whether the 'scientist-positivist' paradigm evident in the Department unwittingly advantaged traditional strongholds of European/colonial power. In particular, the tendency to 'demythologise' the core Christian conviction regarding the resurrection of Jesus reminds one strongly of the German liberal Protestant tradition, in which the iconoclastic resistance of ecclesiastical orthodoxy has almost become a new imperialising orthodoxy.

Given that interpretation of core confessional tenets was clearly contested, one might reasonably wonder about the intersection of race, hermeneutics, and resurrection belief (Copeland-Linder, 2006). Were certain interpretative traditions being uncritically privileged, while others were silenced? On this, the rising

prominence of (doctrinally conservative) black Charismatic churches in South Africa is instructive (Anderson, 2005). While universities ought to be able to provide a critical, rather than simply affirmational, voice, it is important to question whom the voice of critique is empowering or disempowering, and what ideological ‘drivers’ are involved. In a top-heavy, ‘political and transactional’ atmosphere, this issue becomes particularly pressing.

Bush (2007, p. 397) points out that often in post-apartheid South Africa “there is a chasm between the rhetoric and the reality of transformation”. It is worth considering, then, whether in an educational department that may offer “rich... political symbolism of equity” (Bush, 2007, p. 397), deeply embedded Euro-centric assumptions and patterns regarding the nature and findings of critical scholarship can remain.

### ***Place of Stakeholders***

The Theology Department was clearly in a difficult position during this dispute. Some of its representatives of the department were attempting to negotiate the place of academic freedom and the obligation to show fidelity to a key stakeholder confession of faith. The difficulty for them, however, was compounded by the fact that the confession of faith in question was interpreted in sharply contrasting ways within that major stakeholder community. While this put the Department in an unenviably difficult situation, certain questions about its stance toward stakeholders can be instructive.

In particular, one is prompted to ask if a university can really hold its own professors to be the authoritative spokespersons for external stakeholders to whom they are accountable? While the University did delegate some issues for consideration to relevant external denominational bodies (which, it should be noted, overlapped with the faculty in terms of personnel), its own appointed judge made a theologically significant decision based on the advice of the professors who were under investigation.

Further, one has to ask if both students training for ministry and the congregations for whom they will be responsible should be regarded as important stakeholders? If the answer in both cases is in the affirmative then one has to cogitate how they might be provided with opportunities to *safely* express dissent or dissatisfaction. The seriousness of this is brought home on considering Mulder's contention that some of the 46 students who originally had their names under the document of complaint, distanced themselves from it after being threatened with legal action by the Department.

## **Conclusion**

While this essay has focused on one localised case, several issues have emerged that could stimulate interest beyond the bounds of the original situation. Key among these is the question of how to please a divided or diverse stakeholder group to which one has an obligation. In the particular situation considered, the University made an effort to listen to various parties, but also used legal and somewhat self-affirming methods of negotiating a way forward. This resulted in a workable result: no major change was necessary, and it became clear publicly that a particular interpretation of the stakeholder document, namely, the historic Church confessions, was taken by the University, with the ultimate endorsement of the DRC Hierarchy. This result, however, came at a cost: one student was banned for life from the Department and a number of others were possibly left in fear of legal opposition. Further, dissatisfied stakeholders within the DRC community were given little satisfaction that their concerns were being taken into account (Coetzee, 2013).

Given the situation as summarised so far, we suggest that three areas in particular are worthy of careful reflection. First, it is important to consider the shortcomings of the 'scientist-positivist' hermeneutical paradigm in education in the humanities. It has been pointed out in this paper that the paradigm fits best with a model of teaching in which established 'experts' transfer the assured findings

of Euro-centric scholarship to passive students, who should regard these findings as non-ideological. This is out of step with recent advances in scholarship in education (Harris and Muijs 2005). If this paradigm is to change, it cannot be done by a bureaucratic decree. Rather, lecturers, students and other stakeholders will need to be given voice in this process (O'Donoghue and Clarke 2010).

Secondly, it is important to consider the need to provide safe avenues for dissent among stakeholders, and especially for students. This should involve thoughtful consideration of appropriate models of leadership. From Bush's list of models, the 'participative' model (Bush 2007) may be particularly useful. If lecturers, students, and other stakeholders are able to regard themselves as truly valued in educational decision making, there may be less recourse to subversive and litigious forms of complaint.

Thirdly, it is important for universities to consider the need to determine a clear understanding of the nature of accountability to external stakeholders and statements. For example, an institution might consider whether it is acceptable for internal faculty and external stakeholder groups to have an overlap in personnel. On this, means of identifying and acknowledging conflicts of interest could be developed. Furthermore, if it is necessary for an institution to take an influential interpretative stance on a stakeholder document or issue, the factors of history, ideology, and equity should be acknowledged. Finally, given the problematic nature of the complexities that have been examined in this paper, one might even ask whether it is appropriate for a secular university to have dual appointments with an ecclesiastical stakeholder that places confessional constraints on its academics.

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