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HAVING FAITH IN THE UNIVERSITY? ASPECTS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND THE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

In this paper, five aspects related to the study of religion in the university setting, in its classically liberal mode, are considered. First, the author's commitment to this kind of university is developed further by noting a surprising new development in academic freedom. Then, the author argues against the a-religious impulses of modernity and discusses the place of the study of religion at the university from three perspectives: the paradigmatic philosophy of science, the sociological continuation of faith and the evolutionary importance of religion. Last, the kinds of relevance that have been, ought to be and are likely to be demanded of theology at the university are discussed briefly.

1. TO BE, OR NOT TO BE A UNIVERSITY?

In this paper, the long-controversial issue of the place of the study of religion at a university is under review. The views I expressed earlier in favour of the classically liberal university are taken further by discussing an unexpected recent twist in the developing debate on academic freedom. Aspects of the philosophy of science related to the continued and even growing importance of faith in our current cultural phase, and from the intersection between evolution and religion, lead to concluding thoughts on a form of relevance that may well be placed increasingly before the door of academic theology. This attempt may well be understood as trying to find a balance between the three paradigms of the university formulated by Rossouw (1993:25-30), namely the pedagogical, the cognitivist and the pragmatist views of what a university could/ought to be, but then in critical debate with what has come to be known as the primarily managerial/business perspective on the nature of the university.

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Acta Theologica
2011 Suppl 14: 49-65
ISSN 1015-8758

<http://www.uovs.ac.za/ActaTheologica>

SUN MEDIA BLOEMFONTEIN

The background against which I argue below, despite criticisms of such an approach (e.g. Duke 1992:xi-xii), is unashamedly that of what in our time is known as the classically liberal university (cf. Lombaard 2006a:71-76, 81; for overviews of the history of the classically liberal university, see McNeely & Wolverton 2008:79-117; De Ridder-Symoens 1992.). It is an institution of higher education at which learning and research are pursued vigorously, with the kinds of freedom that benefit maximally both the subject areas studied and, thus, the spheres of society served. Alternatives to these constituent aspects exist and are quite pronounced at times today. However, were these alternatives to wipe out the classically liberal nature of the university, it would amount to no less than the demise of the university (cf. Jansen 2005:225; Johnson & Cross 2004:34-58; Du Toit 2001:4-7).

In my previous publications, which touched on "the idea of the university" (Newman's famous phrase – cf. Newman [1852]1999; I refer here most specifically to Lombaard 2006a:71-84, but see also Lombaard 2003:52-55), I strongly favoured the classically liberal identity of the university. My subsequent reflections have continued along these lines and have now led me to formulate a definition that, though brief, I believe captures the essence of what it is to be a university; namely, *a university is a community of scholars*. This formulation is a distillation from the most basic characteristics of the university, which Wethmar (1996:477-481; summarised in Lombaard 2006a:72, and here somewhat reformulated) has summarised carefully:

- *Universality*; that is, who may study? Anybody with the intellectual ability, and where the qualification studied for is recognised, namely – ideally, or at the very least: potentially – everywhere.
- *Diversity*, with application to subjects taught and approaches taken to those subjects.
- *Community service*, namely, in the first instance, through the academic acts of teaching and research, but also extending to wider involvement of academics in (spheres of) society.
- *Academic freedom* and, as its oft-associated practical corollary, *academic loneliness*, which relate respectively to what is offered to and what is required of an academic, namely a context in which to pursue scholarly work with the primary restraints only of intellectual and ethical norms of individuals and peers, but then in often – in some senses, at least – relatively isolated circumstances.[1]

1 Academic loneliness remains a relative concept. Even academics who work in the most isolated of environments do so with a myriad voices in their minds, namely from the academic discussants – literature, colleagues, different impulses from

Where those who teach – the professors (here meant in the loose sense, including what are termed lecturers, readers, and the like) – and those who learn (namely all students *and* professors) congregate, the university exists in its essence. This lies at the core of what theorists of the liberal university, among whom Wilhelm von Humboldt and Henry Newman are the most famous, have expanded upon. Scholarship, and in its wake, society, are served best in conditions where these characteristics are found.

At present, this understanding of a *university as a community of scholars*, and specified here also as it relates to theology among its most ancient constituent disciplines, is questioned from at least the following three culturally generated impulses:

- The managerial/corporate view is often maligned and thoroughly faddish (cf. Birnbaum 2001; more analytically, cf. Bess & Dee 2008a & 2008b) but currently dominant at a university that pursues making money and should be organised into doing so.[2]
- The modernist understanding of religion is still accepted widely in intellectual circles as essentially a-scholarly, with the implication that matters of faith ought to have no home at an institution where matters of fact are studied clinically (cf. Van der Merwe 2009);
- A certain view of "relevance" is largely instrumental and self-serving, not to say short-sighted, in insisting that what "the economy" or the "broader society" needs at times must be delivered forthwith (cf. e.g. Naudé 2005:342-355; Bolsman & Uys 2001:173-175).

In what follows, I shall deal only with certain aspects of responses that may be offered to these extant cultural impulses.

2. FREEDOM WITHIN

With reference to the first of these three cultural impulses listed above, I retain the sentiments expressed in my earlier publication referred to (Lombaard 2006a:71-84), namely as being strongly in favour of a classically liberal university, save to add one observation on a newly noticeable trend, namely that academic freedom is now increasingly formulated as a value against institutions of higher education themselves, specifically as

culture – in their intellectual history that have in/formed their current thinking, and to which/whom their thinking is now directed in turn.

2 To be clear: I thus prefer higher education that educates a person to be more of a person and "hires" education – the university as "an investment in training and skills" (Maskell & Robinson, 2001:169).

a protective measure for academics against their bureaucratic[3] leadership. (This bureaucratic leadership, I insist, *is* not the university, but merely ought to serve the university – *the community of scholars* – in the same manner as supervision of facilities, the library, financial management, recordkeeping, acceptance of applicant students, national legislation, and the like do. Thus, it is proper to refer to the bureaucratic leadership of an institution of higher learning in no grander terminology than "the administration").

The irony that a need for such a bulwark should now be felt *within* higher education institutions should not escape one, precisely because of the increasing managerial/corporate self-definitions of many such bodies. Hence, formulations such as the following can be found (as part of its "definition of academic freedom" section, in the submission of the Freedom of Expression Institute [FXI], 2009, to the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Council Committee on Governance and Academic Freedom, drawing also on Section 16 of the South African Constitution[4]; the most relevant sections to the argument here are italicised):

> Definition of academic freedom
>
> The FXI agrees with the following definition of academic freedom, taken from the UNESCO recommendations of 1997 on the rights of teaching personnel[5] in higher education, namely that it is the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine to freedom:

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3 I do not use the term "bureaucratic" in a negative sense here, as is often done popularly. Bureaucracy is indeed a very necessary part of a higher education institution, which purpose it is to see to administrative functions delegated to it by the university – *the community of scholars* – and should be highly valued as such, because it frees up time for academics (the persons) to get on with academics (their work of teaching and researching).

4 This section of the Constitution reads (e.g. see South African Government Information, Chapter 2 – Bill of Rights, Article 16 1996):
16. Freedom of expression
1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes
   (a) freedom of the press and other media;
   (b) freedom to receive or impart information or ideas;
   (c) freedom of artistic creativity; and
   (d) academic freedom and freedom of scientific research.
2. The right in subsection (1) does not extend to
   (a) propaganda for war;
   (b) incitement of imminent violence; or
   (c) advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm.

5 Namely Section VI.A / par. 27; cf. UNESCO 1997a. See also UNESCO 1997b.

- of teaching and discussion;
- *to carry out research and disseminate and publish the results thereof;*
- *to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work;*
- *[to be free] from institutional censorship;*
- to participate in professional or representative academic bodies; and
- to participate in legitimate labour organisations and industrial actions without prejudice to the status of their academic or research freedom rights.

The conclusion one is left to draw from observing such a trend, locally and internationally, is that academic freedom, one of the cornerstones of healthy university life and scholarly integrity, is accepted increasingly as no longer necessarily subsisting in and guaranteed by institutions of higher learning. Rather, academic freedom must now be fought for within such institutions, by or on behalf of academics, against the administration. In my proposed brief definition of the university as *a community of scholars*, the university thus has come to exist in its housing institution of higher learning. The degree of synonymy between these two entities has decreased. "The university" has now become something akin to an *ecclesiola* in an institution of higher learning.

This is a situation that plainly approaches absurdity – something many academics who work in institutions of higher learning more inclined to the managerial model feel daily, as they serve managers' requirements that have little to do with their academic calling.[6]

Rectification is called for urgently.

3. OLD MODERNITY

Modernism, with its insistence that (the power of) the mind[7] would solve all, included an aversion to less concrete matters of human existence, such as,

6 See Schimank (2005:361-376) for an example of a well-informed consideration of better-balanced options.

7 From the discussion of this paper upon its presentation, I have been prompted to add a note here to make clear that the way I use the word "mind" in these pages should not be read as in any respect implying a negative attitude towards employing the intellect in the analysis of faith and related matters. To the contrary, I regard the mind as being of major importance to the health of religion, both in and outside the university context. However, I do regard the way in which the employment of certain intellectual categories in modernist thinking has cast religion as a-intellectual as problematic. In such a context, the use of "mind" as something

most notably, morality and religion. Restricting our analysis here to the latter, the modernist project of the mind, however, has run into the following three unexpected challenges, amongst others: the replacement of a developmental philosophy of science with a paradigmatic philosophy; purely sociologically speaking, the continuation of faith; and the evolutionary importance of religion. On each of these three aspects, some brief notes:

3.1 Unnatural science?

The well-known contribution by Thomas Kuhn (1962; cf. Mouton 1987:57-79) to our understanding of the interpretative framework within which sciences operate, has been foundational to scholarly work. Historically, not linear progress, as was assumed, but paradigmatic frameworks was the agenda against which findings were explained. Logical positivism, the model of science most cogent to the modernist frame of understanding, rendered all humanities to a broadly perceived deferential position to that of the natural sciences[8], in which the former to a substantial extent had to adapt its format of scholarship to, preferably, a numbers game to gain scientific respectability. However, Kuhn's paradigmatic understanding frees humanities – including theology, for our purposes here – from such strictures. With full confidence, different fields of scholarship can now develop various methods, with quantitative and qualitative methods being the two most broadly employed groups of approaches (cf. Neuman 2003; Roux & Du Preez 2005:276-279). These approaches are equally interpretative, though in different ways, and both are usually adapted by disciplines according to the interests of the scholars involved and tailored to the aims of the research project. Hence, in this paradigmatic understanding of scholarship, it becomes increasingly important to explain methodological matters in research projects, "so that the interpreter may be interpreted" (Lombaard 2009a:11, 65). Not the choice of method (cf. Lombaard 2006b:912-925) but the quality of the intellectual activity involved determines the quality of science/scholarship[9] (cf. Lombaard & Froneman 2006:151-158; Lombaard 2004:2-8). As peers evaluate intellectual contributions, this implies a social process of science; thus, scholarship becomes a more human and humane (cf. Lombaard 2002:97-102) affair, namely that of seeking understanding –

against "religion" is unacceptable rhetoric in which one way of thinking does not recognise other ways of thinking – an irrationally exclusive rationality.

8 One still sees (remnants of...?) this in different ways: the continuing language on "hard sciences" or "soft sciences"; the untenable distinction between "science" and "scholarship"; the funding of study opportunities by government; the direction in which school teachers point their most promising students, etc.

9 I regard these two terms as fully synonymous.

an approach to scholarship that places theology fully within the ambit of all sciences at the university.

3.2 New neutrality

The recent sociology of religion work undertaken by Peter Berger and others (cf. Berger, Grace & Fokas 2008; Koschorke & Schjøerring 2005; Berger 1999), confirmed by the recently published *Atlas of Global Christianity* (Johnson & Ross 2009),[10] indicates that the idea of grand secularism (meant here as personal a-religiosity) was a relatively restricted engagement, mainly by intellectuals. The foreseen growth in humanity towards non-religious life has not occurred. Naturally, having been posited by influential intellectuals (Hegel, Kant, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, Durkheim, Weber – cf. Berger 2008), thoughts on humanity growing past/out of religion were highly influential in university settings and among the intellectual elite in broader society. However, for the greater part, religion retains a highly prominent role in society and for most persons. Not taking this seriously when trying to understand aspects of societies, groups and individuals would simply lead to poor results.

Of course, this sociological state of affairs has no direct implications for the contents of traditional theological encyclopaedia. It also does not imply that religious identities have remained unchanged by impulses from modernism, globalisation, war, looming ecological doom, etc. What this does mean, though, is that a university could hardly claim to take the society it serves seriously if, as an institution, it ignores matters of faith, even if this is done to demonstrate objectivity in the sense of non-involvement in what is perceived as a contentious issue.[11] In the same way that new developments in law are recognising that as a form of liberal secularism, "neutrality" with respect to religion serves less well than an inclusive and affirming recognition of and positive engagement with public religion does (Benson 2008:297-312),[12] as public institutions of higher education also ought to. The time of an irreligious university has passed (if indeed it has ever existed).

10 Projections for the next 40 years, based on past growth, indicate that all major religions will continue to gain adherents (Johnson & Ross 2009:44-45).

11 Would the same argument ever be built for other contentious issues, for instance politics?

12 For a call towards greater overlap between law and religion at the university, cf. De Freitas (2007:45-66); on education and religion, cf. Roux & Du Preez (2005:273-282).

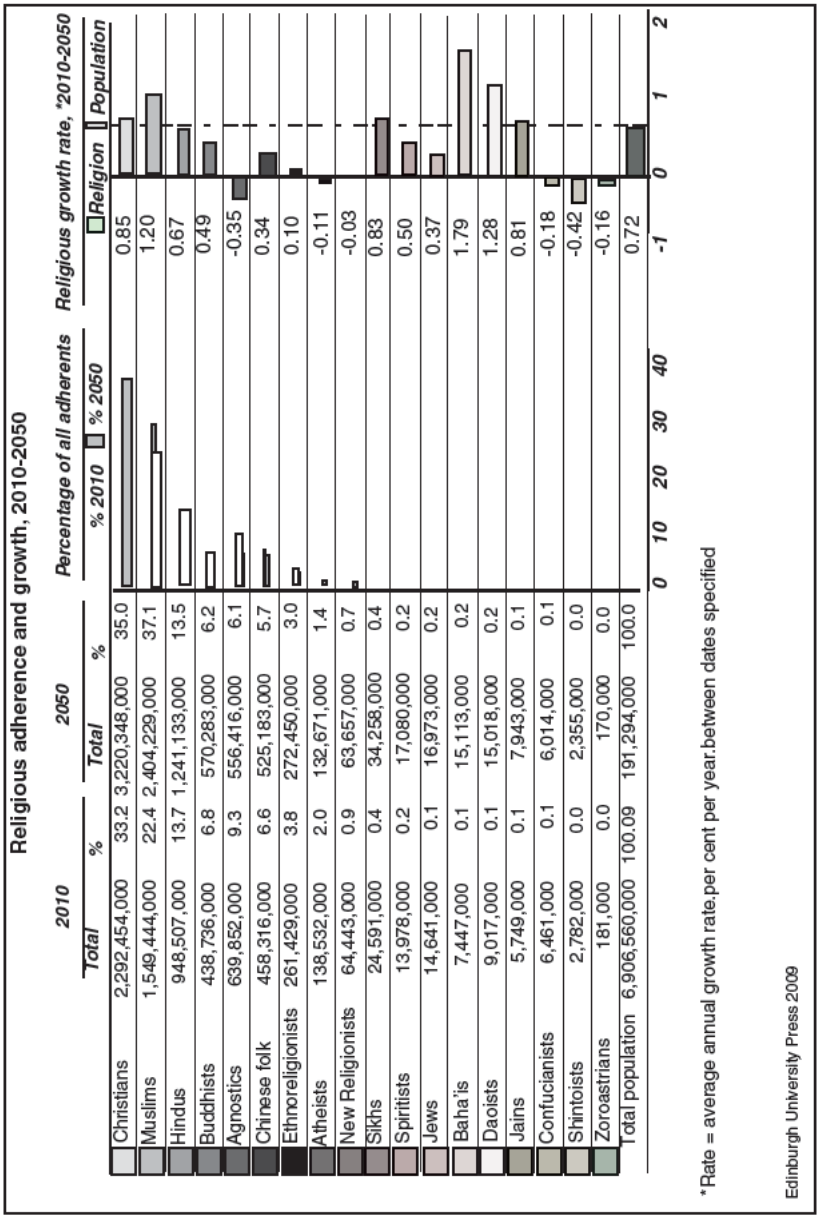

Figure 1: Religious adherence and growth, 2010-2050. (Johnson & Ross 2009: 44)

3.3 The evolution solution

One of the common strands of thought in modernism was that humanity would "outgrow" religion. A *Homo sapiens* that is more evolved and mature would rely less on untestable, obsolete, superfluous and logically unsatisfactory myths (meant here in the popular sense). The perceived conflict between religious, most specifically Judeo-Christian, accounts of creation and Darwinian evolution theory (on the latter, cf. Branch 1996:210-225; Swanepoel 1991:11-17) added to this thought construct. Not only did religious people and institutions act negatively to Darwinian understanding (and they still do – cf. Lombaard 2010:263-283), creating little space for mature consideration, but the evolutionary paradigm of scholarship in most natural sciences and many humanities became dominant to such an extent that it hardly bore questioning (cf. Van Dyk 2003:281-295). Since the fiercest rejection of Darwinian evolution came from religious circles, an understandable reaction was to question the legitimacy of theology in a university context. However, in a recent book, in my opinion (cf., in popular format, Lombaard 2007:13) set to alter the creationism-evolution debate fundamentally, Wentzel van Huyssteen (2006) argues from a thorough interdisciplinary approach (including natural sciences and humanities) that religion was as much a constitutive factor as language, technology etc. were, and are, in the evolutionary success of *Homo sapiens*. To summarise somewhat brusquely: Had it not been for faith, as is the case with technology and language, for instance, we probably would not have been here.

The apologetic implications of this insight neither extend to proof of the existence of God, nor to the choice for any religion above others, as Van Huyssteen (2006) clearly indicates. However, it does make the case that religiosity is as much a part of the impulses as many others in the survival make-up of *Homo sapiens* are, namely as "the fittest" among its rivals. The argument that religion is the only characteristic of humanity that it should lay off to evolve further is thus superseded. Following on that, the subsequent implication that religion would have no place in university life dominated by evolution as an explanatory framework (itself an illiberal kind of argument, a matter I leave to be explored another time, however), is thus rendered without support.

4. RELEVANCE

Questions on the contextual relevance of theology for the society it serves often are, and ought to be, on the debating table. Leaving the matter of whether contextual theology is necessarily good theology (cf. Lombaard 2001a:69-87, largely reflected in Lombaard 2009b:274-287) aside for the

moment, the noteworthy point by Rossouw (1993:35; cf. Du Toit, 1989:126) on universities in general is just as important for the place of faculties of theology or departments of religion at institutions of higher education:

> Dat relevansie as 'n eis beklemtoon word, is in sekere mate juis aan die sukses van die universiteit toe te skryf.

Put differently: Education in general, and for our purposes here, matters of faith in particular, are of such importance to significant numbers and influential constituent groups in society that, had the appropriate higher educational facilities not existed, there would have been substantial pressure towards their establishment.

The bitter cup of uncertainty in South Africa about the place of theological faculties at state universities, which characterised the 1990s and early 2000s, has now passed (cf. Lombaard 2006a:7723, building upon Lombaard 2001b:17-24). The causes of these fears – the a-religious impulses from modernism; the more overtly anti-religious impulses that were expected to accompany the current ruling party's earlier association with Moscow Communism; a reaction against earlier Christian national education philosophy in South Africa, with its highly religious component of a certain kind – have been surpassed by history. In fact, under the current presidency, we may see an altogether more appreciative inclination towards religion, and hence towards theology at institutions of higher education, though by no means in an unproblematic way (cf. West 2010). Personally, I would opt for a more permanent, existentially more tenable mandate than political winds, namely in the foundational quests for and experiences of meaning in life and death, common, yet diverse, across humanity, and then specialised according to societal composition in conversation with the demands of the disciplines involved. This would be the kind of theology, following the church father Anselm's fides quarens intellectum – faith seeking understanding – which Van der Merwe (2009) formulates as an academic theology that "reikt naar dieper inzicht... – ondervraging die zelfs radicale vertwijfeling riskeert".[13] After all, along with the dawn of postmodernism, we have seen a broader "turn to spirituality" (Kourie 2006:19-38) over recent decades, which has been accompanied by the insight of the mind that the human mind, "hoe wonderbaarlijk en vermogend ook, is beperkt. Het kan het onbekende aftasten, maar het onzichtbare niet zien"[14] (Van der Merwe 2009). For the mind at work on what it cannot grasp, there is no better place than the university.

13 Translation: "reaches for deeper insight... – questioning which risks even radical doubt."

14 Translation: "no matter how wonderful and powerful it may be, is limited. It can look for the unknown, but it cannot see the invisible."

However, such a foundational road to acknowledging the place of theology at the university, thus securing it to a greater degree, is probably too much to call for. Whereas in the past insistence on relevance had meant economically, politically and – for theology – ecclesiastically immediately "useful" employees, citizens and clergy, I strongly suspect a different cocktail of such demands is about to be ordered from faculties of theology. Although theology students almost always have chosen their field of study based on pious, often pietistic commitments accompanied by a sense of wanting to mean something to people (existentially, that is; although the balance between more individual-psychological and more social-political awareness of which needs should be served varies substantially amongst students), the kind of evangelical theology growing across the world (cf. Johnson & Ross 2009; Berger, Grace & Fokas 2008; Koschorke & Schjøerring 2005; Berger 1999) is likely to create a different kind of pressure for relevance. The initial Weberian confluence of Calvinism and money to create modern capitalism (cf. Otto 2005a & 2005b) is funnelled in a new way through current evangelicalisms/Pentecostalisms, so that also in South Africa "the underlay of prosperity orientation is general" (Johnston, 2008:26). More and more students and even churches are going to seek to exact a kind of relevance or "responsiveness" (Naudé 2005:339-358) from academic theology that combines emotional faith with material wealth, namely as a sign of spiritual success. Precisely how academic theology is to deal with such right-wing postmodernism (Cupitt 1998:13), which – as is the case with all demands for relevance – for the most part will be unimpressed by thoroughgoing intellectual, historical, exegetical, dogmatic, ethical and other analyses, currently remains an open question.

5. MIND YOU...

The modernist belief that, once rid of ignorance, including the ignorance of religion, (the power of) the mind would solve all – ironically, a messianic claim with clear utopian expectations – has had to reckon with philosophical, anthropological and evolutionary-theoretical qualifications, as we have seen above. Of course, these qualifications have not questioned and have certainly not destroyed the importance of mind, but have mediated it, which is typical of the transition from modernism to postmodernism. This mediation changes the application of the academic mind in our time into a less stark, more maturely, multi-dimensional, less self-confident but really more realistic, less above-worldly, more humane project. Religion, apart from its other historical, psychological, literary and other significances (cf. Van der Merwe 2009), also has clear philosophical, sociological and evolutionary interesting aspects to its study, also to a thoroughly modernist mind. To exclude religion from these fields of study in university curricula and research programmes have never

made any academic sense.[15] If the university is to reflect, as it always strives to, and does so meaningfully – that is, substantially and critically – the society which has brought it into being, maintains it and that it serves, a demand for excluding religion cannot be upheld rationally. For such an a-religious, modernist mentality, one can provide reasons in its own terms why its initially strong a-religious impulses ought to be mediated, and that has been done briefly above with relation to the paradigmatic philosophy of science, the sociological continuation of faith and the evolutionary importance of religion. Naturally, one could provide further reasons, from within the domains of the respective disciplines of theology, separately and together, why their continued position at the university would be mandated foundationally. However, that remains an enterprise for another time.

Finally, in my view, the kinds of relevance that have been, ought to be and are likely to be demanded of theology at the university have also been discussed briefly. Such relevance can never be prescribed centrally – not by the state, big business, the church, students, the traditional theological encyclopaedia or recent academic and societal trends only. All these in interaction create relevance – a rather untidy affair. The best, most non-prescriptive context in which this can occur quite naturally is one in which maximal allowance is made for the traditional freedoms of the university.

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15 It could make ideological sense, though, if a society were to turn to severe forms of atheism, as was tended to in certain respects under Soviet Communism in the previous century.

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Keywords	*Trefwoord*
Study of religion at the university	Godsdiensstudie aan die universiteit
Academic freedom	Akademiese vryheid
Relevance of Theology	Relevansie van Teologie