

# Threshold Learning Outcomes in Australian Theological Education

## *Draft 5 [March 2011]*

### **Background**

The *Council of Deans of Theology*, in cooperation with the *Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools*, is seeking to compose a set of Threshold Learning Outcomes for degrees in Theology at bachelors and coursework master's levels, covering three academic / professional fields. The purpose of this exercise is to place Theology within the *Australian Learning and Teaching Council* (ALTC) Standards Project.

The document was prepared by a representative Steering Committee, which drew on responses from Australian Higher Education Providers offering degrees in Theology.

The decision was made by the Steering Committee at its September 2010 meeting to:

- i] focus at this stage on the Bachelors' degrees;
- ii] make a distinction between a Bachelor of Ministry and a Bachelor of Theology, mindful of the need to consider articulation into Master and Doctorates of Ministry and Theology.
- iii] confine the focus for this initial document on the Bachelor of Theology.
- iv] construct two documents, relating to different audiences: the first is external and concentrates on generic outcomes for Theology as a whole; the second is designed for theological providers, fastening on the outcomes for the respective fields (see Appendix 1).

### **Further work**

The Steering Committee made the following decisions at its meeting on 18 March, 2011:

- i] This committee should now proceed to work on similar standards for the degrees of Bachelors of Theology Honours and Master of Theology.
- ii] The committee decided that it would only create TLOS for a Masters once agreement had reached on the BTh. It was agreed that the Masters would be an MTh and not a Master of Arts in Theology or Master of Ministry.
- iii] This committee requests the *Council of Deans* to set up a sub-committee whose particular brief is to determine a set of minimum threshold learning outcomes for the degree of Bachelor of Ministry.

### **NB:**

- i] What is the next step for the first, generic document? Should it now be converted into the format followed by the history and geography disciplines? There is need to receive advice from an overseas expert as well as a recent graduate. There is need to describe what kind of employment graduates in theology might do.
- ii] How often should TLOs be reviewed? 3-5 years.

# Threshold Learning Outcomes in Australian Theological Education

## *Bachelor of Theology*

### **The nature and extent of the discipline – what is ‘Theology’?**

The word ‘theology’ combines the Greek words ‘*theos*’ (God / the divine) and ‘*logos*’ (learning / reflection / study). The discipline of theology is classically described as the ‘knowledge of God’, in the interwoven senses of ‘exploring what is known about God’ and ‘reflection on what knowing God means’. The distinctively Christian understanding of Theology [as pursued in this document] is essentially a response to the revelatory claims arising out of the confession that God is reconciling creation to Himself in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is a discipline with a long tradition as well as an energetic engagement with the present. The practice of theology involves ‘faith seeking understanding’ and the responses this quest evokes. Its centre lies in considering the significance of Jesus Christ, and the understandings of the triune God, creation and humankind which flow from this revelation. The study of theology is informed at a foundational level by the authority assigned to the Bible and how these Scriptures are subsequently interpreted in the light of a range of other sources – tradition, reason and experience.

The discipline of Christian theology speaks into a three-fold audience – namely, the church, academy and the public domain. It is expressed in an Australian context which embodies a mix of Christian, post-Christendom, secular, spiritual and multi-faith dimensions. The discipline of theology is inseparable from questions of allegiance, world-view, ethical and social commitments. Engaging in theology involves relationships, often supportive, sometimes sharply contested, since the questions explored touch personal identity, the nature and direction of society and the meaning of life – human, organic and cosmic.

The study of theology plays a key part in the preparation of Christian ministers. In contemporary Australia most students engage in the study of theology for a range of wider reasons. These may include the desire to deepening their Christian understanding, to explore spirituality and religious practice out of curiosity, or a need to consider fundamental questions which society does not or is not able to address. The student body is culturally diverse, and across Australia women and men are roughly equal in numbers; students from disadvantaged backgrounds are welcome, some theological providers make available alternative entry pathways.

In this discipline of theology, rigorous methods of exploration and critique have been developed over the centuries. These methods include philosophical, textual, historical inquiry and (during the last century) in the social sciences. Particular church commitments are respected though, at the same time, they are not shielded from scrutiny – critique and commitment go hand in hand.

### ***Bachelor degrees in Theology***

Bachelor degrees in Theology as a broad discipline come under two main nomenclatures – Bachelor of Theology and Bachelor of Ministry. They are normally built around three inter-acting loci of study:

- a) **‘Biblical Studies’** engages with the foundational texts of the Christian tradition, comprising the Old / First and the New Testaments, the Church’s ‘canon’ of authoritative writings (‘scriptures’). This involves genre analysis of the highly varied literature involved, study (at appropriate levels) of the original Hebrew / Aramaic and Greek texts, and learning a range of critical tools for their interpretation and use.

- b) **‘Systematic Theology’** and **‘Historical Studies’** deal with understanding the path of Christian faith in its historical engagements (‘Church History’), and the ways by which the beliefs arising from such faith have been systematised into integrated worldviews (‘Systematic Theology’). These studies engage with philosophy and other critical disciplines, and constantly interact with alternative perspectives, whether from other Christian traditions, other faiths or ideologies.
- c) **‘Ministry and Mission Studies’** explores the implications of Christian faith for living, and – conversely – the impact on Christian beliefs of changing and varied contexts, especially in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. Such theological reflection can be considered in relation to the life of the churches (‘ministry’ – e.g. homiletics, liturgy, pastoral care, personal ethics, religious education, spirituality) and wider society (‘mission’ – evangelisation, social ethics, media studies, pastoral care, inter-faith dialogue), though the line between these is blurred, as these discipline lists reflect.

The Bachelor of Theology as a whole involves more than the study of particular theological disciplines separately – it seeks to help a student integrate these into his or her person, so equipping them to be able to continue with a lifestyle of integrity and the possibility of further higher studies in theology. Attitudinal outcomes are therefore sought, alongside knowledge and skills, but how these are assessed, or thresholds set in place, is a complex matter.

Theological education is classically set in the context of a community of learning that embraces students, faculty and staff, and regards study, worship, prayer, reflective practice and living as a formative whole. Experience shows that this setting does not distort academic freedom: rather, it fosters the (seemingly paradoxical) reality that only as students have a sense of safety and integrative growth do they find themselves open to explore new ideas openly.

### **Threshold Learning Outcomes for Graduates holding a theological degree**

Upon completion of a Bachelor’s degree in Theology, a graduate will be able to

- i) demonstrate an ability to engage in the study of the primary texts of the Christian faith, and describe a range of historical and contemporary reflection on those texts;
- ii) demonstrate knowledge of the Christian tradition in one or more of its central and varied forms;
- iii) demonstrate an awareness of key themes, debates and methods of the discipline of theology and its sub-disciplines;
- iv) demonstrate a range of study skills that will support a life of continued theological learning;
- v) attend to, reproduce accurately and critically reflect upon the ideas and arguments of others;
- vi) communicate theological knowledge, ideas and arguments to specialist and non-specialist audiences using appropriately selected written, oral and visual means;
- vii) reflect upon and communicate the implications of the Christian faith for personal and communal life to specialist and non-specialist audiences, using appropriately selected written, oral and visual means.

## **Appendix:**

### **Threshold Learning Outcomes in the three professional fields**

The audience for this Appendix is theological providers. It is designed to identify a set of theological Learning Outcomes for the three professional fields or sub-discipline areas of Theology.

The original drafts included these Learning Outcomes inside the document above. Following further reflection on the ALTC consultations with the disciplines of Geography and History, it was decided to adopt a more simplified approach and propose a set of generic attributes. It was recognized that Theology differs from History and Geography insofar as it is made up of a series of sub-disciplines.

#### **Threshold Learning Outcomes for three Academic / Professional Fields**

The following Threshold Learning Outcomes are also indicative for significant study taken in other bachelor's degrees – for example, a BA with a major in Biblical Studies.

##### **1 Biblical Studies**

Graduates with a major in Biblical Studies will be able to

- i) interpret and demonstrate an understanding of biblical texts in their historical, social, linguistic, canonical, inter-religious and cultural contexts;
- ii) describe, identify and reflect critically upon the contents and shape of the Bible as a whole and its nature as a text;
- iii) reflect theologically on biblical texts and integrate biblical studies with other theological disciplines;
- iv) explain, evaluate and apply appropriately a variety of methodologies in interpreting biblical texts;
- v) where biblical languages are studied, read basic biblical texts in the original language(s) and use knowledge of issues in morphology, syntax and grammar in producing an idiomatic English translation, and in better understanding of the biblical texts.

##### **2 Systematic Theology and Historical Studies**

Graduates with a major in either Systematic Theology or Historical Studies will be able to:

- i) describe the purpose of a systematic theology, its sources, norms and methods, as an integrative system of Christian belief;
- ii) describe and critically evaluate key doctrines of Christian faith, recognising ways in which they relate to one another and contribute to a coherent account of the whole;
- iii) display a nuanced appreciation of the role and relevance of philosophical, historical, socio-political, linguistic and cultural influences in the development of Christian doctrine;
- iv) demonstrate a critical sensitivity to how the Christian faith has been expressed in and through the history of the world;
- v) demonstrate an awareness of the breadth of the Christian tradition and be able to explain how one or more theological perspectives is situated within the whole;

- vi) reflect critically on how history and theology inform the contemporary practice of Christian living, both personal and communal, and foster the communication of Christian perspectives;
- vii) describe the nature and purpose of a Christian theological ethic.

### **3 Ministry and Mission Studies**

Graduates with a major in one or more of the discipline(s) in Ministry and Mission Studies will be able to:

- i) articulate and assess the biblical and theological foundations of ministry and mission;
- ii) demonstrate a capacity for critical reflection, and be able to articulate a mature and authentic awareness of self, others and creation;
- iii) explore effectively her or his experience and practice (personal and/or professional), appropriating, evaluating and integrating the insights of the social and behavioural sciences and/or cultural studies, and engaging with the written, contextual and living texts of ministerial practice;
- iv) demonstrate an ability to celebrate, contextualize and communicate the Christian faith within the diversity of multi-cultural and multi-faith Australian society;
- v) articulate the nature and purpose of Christian discipleship.