

# **All-Africa IAPCHE Conference on Integral Christian Scholarship**

**Guiding Creativity and Controversy  
in a Christian University**

**Dr Harry Fernhout**

**President Emeritus, The King's  
University (Edmonton, Canada)**

**Past-President, Institute for  
Christian Studies (Toronto, Canada)**

# **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

**Four preliminary points provide the context/matrix for this topic**

**1. a Christian university is *community* of learning, not a collection of individuals (Ubuntu; Paul's analogy of the body)**

# **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

## **2. a Christian university exists as a community to serve God's Kingdom in a web of relationships**

- **internal community (faculty/non-academic staff/students)**
- **other academic institutions**
- **regulatory agencies/government**
- **church**
- **Christian community**
- **alumni**
- **donors/funders**
- **society as a whole**

# **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

**3. Part of the mandate of a university is to explore the frontiers of knowledge (research, scholarship)**

**4. A Christian University shares in the mandate to explore the frontiers of knowledge**

# **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

## **One Christian institution's articulation of this mandate:**

The faculty of ICS is a voluntary association of scholars working within the parameters of a worldview and within a tradition of inquiry which the faculty believes will fruitfully assist and guide its efforts to gain reliable, fruitful and redemptive insight about the world. The Institute's confessional matrix is understood to be basic to the scholar's freedom to explore. In exercising this freedom

# **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

a scholar fulfils a vocation which is a meaningful part of our human response to God and renders responsible service to the wider Christian and human community. Work at ICS is undertaken in a spirit of awe and celebration of the redemptive possibilities of "engaging in scholarship that reveals the religious roots of all learning and contributes to a scripturally-directed understanding of our world" (Mission Statement).

# Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University

## Christian scholarship and Creativity/Controversy

- “Inner reformation”: implies change, transformation
- Change requires creativity; creativity brings contention and controversy...
- but in the context of the web of relationships; relationships of *trust*

# Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University

A university and its non-academic constituencies:

- -interestingly unsettling/alarmingly unsettling
- -culture of creativity/culture of conserving
- -risk: a healthy 'check and balance' becomes a strong reaction that polarizes and freezes discussion



# **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

- disciplinary issues are usually less contentious outside the academy than life-world issues
- Flashpoints: social-moral issues with which the broader culture is engaged
- Result: low tolerance for unsettling debate; high risk of freezing discussion

## **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

- Part of a Christian university's calling is to cultivate in the supporting constituency a spirit which welcomes exploration and which tolerates differences of opinion within the shared confessional framework.
- Toleration of differences is not incompatible with strong, persistent convictions. Rather, toleration is an expression humility.

## **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

- A Christian university's board and administration (led by the president) play a key role in this calling to foster understanding of and enthusiasm for the academic calling of scholars, and a joyful tolerance of the creativity and change which come with it.

# **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

- be a cheerleader for the mission; constantly make the connection between the university's basis and mission and the creative scholarly work of the faculty
- be informed, tuned in to what faculty are doing
- challenge undue, inappropriate pressure from constituents
- don't be defensive
- don't make pronouncements; on the other hand, be direct and honest about your own views
- express trust in the faculty, and invite trust from constituents

# **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

## **Central or peripheral?**

### **What is central?**

- personhood of God, (Father, Son and Spirit/Trinity)
- God is the creator of all that exists
- God is sovereign in revelation, redemption and final judgement
- Bible is God's revelation; authority of Scripture in matters of faith and conduct
- humans are by nature sinful
- redemption is made possible Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead
- believers anticipate the return of Christ
- indwelling of the Holy Spirit is crucial to the Christian life (i.e., the Apostles Creed)

# Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University

## **Divisive but peripheral issues:**

- interpretations of biblical inerrancy
- place of social justice in relation to evangelism
- role of women in church/ministry
- ecumenical cooperation
- gifts of the Spirit
- relation of the Bible and science (mechanism of creation; age of the earth)
- role of the state in relation to faith traditions
- economics/capitalism/global economic issues
- biomedical issues (abortion; genetics, end of life issues)
- violence, war, terrorism
- marginalized people; urban and/or international migrants
- issues regarding sexual orientation
- climate change

# Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University

Gareth Jones, *Coping with Controversy*

4 main strategies used among evangelical Christians:

1. x is a peripheral matter, and it doesn't matter a great deal what position Christians take on it. Lines need to be drawn on central matters, but on peripheral matters we should tolerate a very wide range of views and approaches.

2. x is a peripheral matter, but biblical principles are as relevant on this issues as with central matters. Christians should be open to creative engagement regarding x. We need a great deal of study and discernment to determine whether someone's different approach to x is a reason to dissociate from him/her. Dissociation or separation should only occur

# **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

3. x is a peripheral issue, but is of such importance that in practice it should be viewed as if it were central. Christians should not tolerate a lot of variation with regard to x. We can have a clearly defined position on it, and can take decisive action regarding fellow Christians who do not adhere to it.

4. x is so important that central Christian affirmations should contain statements about it. There is no room for deviation on x among true Christians.



# Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University

## Types of controversy

- Creative Controversy embodies the healthy, stimulating energy which is part and parcel of the academic vocation
- Negative controversy creates polarization, alarm, and a breakdown of trust
  - may result from poor judgement, or from a mismatch of

# Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University

- Intolerable creative controversy?

In the academic context a particular issue is a legitimate subject of creative scholarly reflection and the professor's views are not at odds with the confessional basis. But the issue itself is so sensitive in either academic or non academic circles that efforts to address it, *by this institution or faculty member at this time*, will inevitably result in negative controversy despite a strong effort to act wisely (a conflict of strategy 2 within, and strategy 3 outside the institution)

# **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

Intolerable absence of controversy

- occurs when scholars and/or institutions fail to exercise their calling to provide creative, stimulating leadership, perhaps out of a desire to play safe.

- cannot maintain enthusiasm for the mission in the long run

# **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

## **Guidelines for Dealing with Controversial Topics (ICS 1991)**

- 1. All parties agree that the institution's foundational documents articulate the confessional context for all faculty work.**
- 2. Faculty members agree to regard all public utterances (written or spoken) as ministry, in God's service.**

# **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

3. The university's primary concern is not to restrict the subject matter of faculty utterances, but to consider their appropriateness as to time, place, circumstance, occasion, context, and audience.

4. Views expressed should be within the competence of the professor, and should be developed in interaction with other members of the academic community at the university and beyond. What is said or written does not first of all need to be agreeable or recognized as true by others, but must be defensible by the professor. If in the process it is shown that the professor is mistaken or in error, he/she must be prepared to withdraw.

## **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

5. The university acknowledges that controversy and contention are inherent in scholarship that involves critical thinking at the cutting edges of understandings of our world. The fact that elements within the university's constituency dislike discussion of a particular issue, or disagree with a professor's view, is not sufficient reason (though it may be a factor) for judging that what a faculty member says or writes is inappropriate.

## **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

6. The university and its staff will avoid double standards concerning what views are deemed to acceptable internally while public sharing of such thoughts and beliefs is avoided or prohibited. Nevertheless, intellectual honesty needs to be wedded with a large measure of sensitivity; honesty must not a lead to a dismissive attitude to the views of non-academic constituents

## **Guiding Creativity and Controversy in a Christian University**

7. The board acknowledges that the faculty's task includes serving the body of Christ by engaging with potentially controversial issues. The board pledges to uphold and defend professors carrying out this task within these guidelines. If and when the board becomes directly involved, it will exercise the same spirit of community that is expected of professors.