



Values, Narratives, and Church Agencies: The Grace College (University of Queensland) Experience

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Church agencies in secular societies such as Australia are under pressure to abandon Christian imagery and language for generic alternatives. Such moves are often understood as primarily market-driven strategies arising from financial pressures. While those market and financial pressures are very real, church agencies making such transitions cannot lose sight of the underlying Christian narrative without raising serious questions about the role of the organizations as agencies of the church. At face value, the issue seems simple—to be Christian or not to be. The imperatives of *kerygma*, the proclamation of the gospel, however, mean that communicating the good news in word and deed in a contemporary context requires a more sophisticated analysis. This article uses the recent rebranding exercise by Grace College, a church-related agency in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, to explore the complexity of the questions raised. Understandings of values work in complex environments, and public theology as Christian *kerygma* in secular contexts informs this exploration.

Christian communities and organizations are not islands in and of themselves but exist within societies with which they sometimes differ. Christian educational institutions often struggle to define and redefine themselves within the contexts of secular societies, while still being faithful to their missions.

BACKGROUND

Australia is a secular society. Christian symbols carry complex layers of meaning within that context. These complex layers have been formed by a range of factors, including:

- Australian national development under European colonization;
- recent enquiries into institutional misconduct and abuse;
- public conversations around gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation; and
- similar debates around issues of life and death at the beginning and end of a human life.

In that complex context, basic Christian symbols carry with them deeply negative connotations as well as the positive ones claimed by people of Christian faith.

The University of Queensland (UQ) is a secular state-owned university. Its stated mission is “to deliver for the public good through excellence in education, research and engagement with our communities and partners: local, national and global”; and its vision is of “knowledge leadership for a better world.”¹ Within its secular focus, there is an implicit skepticism about the role and value of religious traditions. That skepticism is not without reason, given the adverse effects of some religious perspectives and institutions on the well-being of vulnerable people, including children, the elderly, and women. For example, Macdonald and Kirk, UQ researchers, identify religiosity as having a detrimental effect on learning ability in particular contexts.²

Grace College is a residential college for tertiary students located on the St. Lucia Campus of The University of Queensland. It was established in the late 1960s by predecessors of The Uniting Church in Australia from Methodist and Presbyterian traditions. However, it is separately incorporated both from the church and from the university. Its board members are appointed by the church and the university and out of the alumni and student resident communities.

The College opened in 1970 as the women’s college to three well-established brother colleges. Over the course of its fifty-year history, all its brother colleges became co-ed, the last in 2020.

Rightly or wrongly, over the course of its history Grace College accrued a stereotypical representation of being the virginal religious college. This stereotype was embedded in both unfortunate interpretations of Christian imagery and the long-standing and perennial Virgin-Whore gendered dichotomy.³ The crest of the

¹ The University of Queensland, “Our Vision, Mission and Values – About UQ – University of Queensland,” <https://about.uq.edu.au/strategic-plan/vision-mission-values>.

² Doune Macdonald and David Kirk, “Pedagogy, the Body and Christian Identity,” *Identity, Sport, Education, and Society* 4, no. 2 (1999): 131–42.

³ See especially in the Australian context, Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police: The Colonisation of Women in Australia*, 2nd rev. ed. (Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin, 2002).

College is emblazoned with a passion cross flory (simple cross with *fleur-de-lis* ends) while its brother colleges' crests sported more malleable symbols such as an open book, the southern cross constellation, lions, and crowns. The overtly Christian symbol of the cross contributed to the unhelpful stereotyping of the College and its residents.

A range of other factors also affected College resident numbers over about a decade. Some of these included the rise of regional universities in Australia with a corresponding reduction in the college's traditional rural/regional market and, in the last two years, the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2021, Grace College embarked upon a significant new direction and rebranding process. From 2022, the College will be gender inclusive. A new logo was designed and adopted. A stylized "G" rotated 45 degrees embraces a smaller diamond depicting the College as an enfolding community of support. It replaces the passion cross flory as the primary symbol of the College. The mission and values of the College were restated.

In that process, Christian language and imagery were downplayed in favor of contemporary generic alternatives. A brief theological justification, "Making the Connections," was provided as background. However, the forward face of the rebrand carries little overt Christian language or imagery. Yet, the mission and conduct of the College are steeped in the Christian story because of its history and its ethos.

A key example of both the complexity and the starkness of this transition is found in the rearticulation of the meaning behind the College's motto at the beginning of the College's life and in this time of transition. The minutes of the College Council dated 6 May 1969 read:

The motto is to be "My grace is sufficient."

St. Paul wrote this in his second letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 12:9). He was having a distressing time and asked God to take away the painful problem. Instead, he was assured that, though the problem remained, God's grace would give him all he needed to grapple with it successfully.

God's grace enables us to reach life's proper goals.

The new "Making the Connections" document explains the motto thus:

Our motto, "My grace is sufficient," remains.

In its scriptural context, the words are an assurance of support for the writer beyond the writer's own means.

Grace College seeks to continue to provide an environment that cooperates with the amazing capacities of our residents so that, as a community, they may expand one another's imaginations and provide support for one another beyond each individual's own immediate means.

In many ways, the transition was not very stark for the student residential community and the staff responsible for its well-being. For nearly a decade, the introduction of the motto to new residents had focused on the hope that their involvement in the community of Grace College would be an experience of something beyond themselves that would sustain them on their journeys. The College community is already a diverse one with students coming from many faith backgrounds and from none. Finding common language in the community to talk about its own journey has been important. However, for some members of the church looking in from the outside, the rebranding is confronting.⁴

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Perhaps the key point of contention is the question of the role of the Christian narrative, its imagery and language, in the context of an agency identified as belonging to the church and yet actually operating interdependently in a pluralistic environment. Does the underlying narrative matter, and should it be overtly articulated in the narrative of such an organization?

THE ROLE OF NARRATIVES AND VALUES

The grandfather looked on at his grandchildren playing. He remarked to their aunt sitting nearby, “I’m worried that the grandkids aren’t getting good enough moral teaching.” The aunt, wanting to reassure her father, talked about the good values held by the children’s parents and their effective parenting. The grandfather responded, “But they don’t know the Christian story.”

The Christian story is important to Christian people. It governs our identity, our values, our ethical understandings, and our ideas about appropriate action. We are not the only people who live out a narrative, though, and that is part of the complexity of living in a pluralistic environment. Everybody has their own narratives that govern their own identities, values, ethics, and impetus for action.

Narratives are stories. They relate connections between characters, events, places, times, and so on. They create milieus and frameworks out of which people make sense of their lives, drawing meaning, purpose, values, and justifications for actions.

Stories always require interpretation. How they are told matters. The relationships between the various pieces of the discourse and how those relationships are interpreted give rise to the values that are espoused by the reader/teller of the

⁴ For further information on the new face of the College, see <https://www.grace.uq.edu.au>.

narrative. Who is permitted to tell or interpret the story has consequences for how the story is extrapolated into values and ideal actions.⁵

The Christian story, like all narratives, is always interpreted. It is interpreted into values and ideal actions. Sometimes those values and actions have had very poor consequences for vulnerable people, such as those in domestically violent situations.⁶ Sometimes they have had socially positive consequences. Pepper, Powell, and Bouma note that “on balance, Christian groups play a positive role in the promotion of social cohesion, building both bridging and bonding capital among those who participate.”⁷ Sometimes Christians agree on the meanings that are drawn from the story; sometimes they do not.

Values are generic ideals. Generally, they arise from the narrative framework that provides a sense of meaning and purpose. They embody what the people of the narrative regard as the key ideals for which to strive to better embody the narrative. The narrative from which those values are drawn governs the nature of those ideals.

How values are lived out matters. Askeland et al. describe values as “individual and collective trans-situational conceptions of desirable behaviors, objectives and ideals that serve to guide or value practice.”⁸ Values are demonstrated by behaviors. Behaviors very quickly show where lived values are at odds with espoused values. Espoused values are seen as a mechanism for re-creating cultures that have produced poor behaviors by participants. Sirris describes values as “devices of orientation that express intentions and guide actions in managerial work”⁹ as organizational leaders seek to guide and develop work teams.

In the twenty-first century, the role of values as “key determinants of attitudes, work behavior and decision-making”¹⁰ has garnished considerable attention. Askeland et al. are particularly interested in the complex context of Scandinavian welfare organizations. These organizations are often “hybrids situated at sectorial intersections,” where they are required to mediate different institutional logics between entities such as the state, church, market and welfare sectors. This complexity challenges the “basic values and identities” of those organizations. Yet, for Askeland et al., it is precisely “values work” that assists the mediation process. In their work with faith-based organizations, founded in religious traditions but now

⁵ For further consideration of the role of narrative in human life, see Donald Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (New York: State University Press, 1988), and Stephen Madigan, *Narrative Therapy*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2019).

⁶ See, for example, Leonie Westenberg, “‘When She Calls for Help’—Domestic Violence in Christian Families,” *Social Sciences* 6, no. 3 (2017), 71.

⁷ Miriam Pepper, Ruth Powell, and Gary D. Bouma, “Social Cohesion in Australia: Comparing Church and Community,” *Religions* 10, no. 11 (2019): 1–22.

⁸ Harald Askeland, Gry Espedal, Beate Jelstad Lovaas, and Stephen Sirris, “Understanding Values Work in Organisations and Leadership,” in *Understanding Values Work: Institutional Perspectives in Organizations and Leadership*, ed. Harald Askeland, Gry Espedal, Beate Jelstad Lovaas, and Stephen Sirris (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1–12.

⁹ Stephen Sirris, “Values as Fixed and Fluid: Negotiating the Elasticity of Core Values,” in Askeland et al., *Understanding Values Work*, 201–21.

¹⁰ Askeland et al., “Understanding Values Work,” 1.

“embedded in a secular society,” they observe that strategic values work “to some degree mediated aspects of religion yet also served to bridge the Christian tradition with expectations from the secular society,” forging a renewed identity that simultaneously integrates and adjusts competing interests. This approach serves to safeguard and buffer the organization from what they regard as the “Faustian pact” between market and welfare concerns. Such work does not deny the role of the markedly different underlying narratives of the competing interests in this complexity; rather, it identifies shared ground between these competing narratives for the purpose of operating a hybrid organization in a complex environment. It is an active and engaged response to “the challenges of institutional complexity.”¹¹

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC THEOLOGY

For much of the twentieth century, Christian thinkers debated the role of Christian language and imagery in the telling of the Christian story. The dilemma is perhaps best summarized by Bultmann in the following: “*Kerygma* is incredible to modern man, for he is convinced that the mythical view of the world is obsolete.”¹² Yet the importance of both myth to humanity and *kerygma* to Christianity drive the continual reinterpretation and reformulation of the Christian story for new generations in different contexts. Myth, in this context, is the human expression of the place of humanity in a world where complex powers and experiences prompt the telling of narratives that make sense of the relationship of those powers and experiences in a cohesive story.

When the church speaks to itself, as with any organization, it uses, and indeed must use, its own framework of language and imagery. That constraint is both a matter of practicality and a theological imperative. However, when the church is in dialogue with others, it must be willing to seek to explain itself in language that is to some extent common between the parties.

To some extent the dilemma is one of communication and context. When the church speaks to itself, as with any organization, it uses, and indeed must use, its own framework of language and imagery. That constraint is both a matter of practicality and a theological imperative. However, when the church is in dialogue with others, it must be willing to seek to explain itself in language that is to some extent common between the parties. Such explanations involve stepping outside the mythological language of Christianity for the sake of the imperative of the

¹¹ Stephen Sirris, “Institutional Complexity Challenging Values and Identities in Scandinavian Welfare Organisations,” in Askeland et al., *Understanding Values Work*, 57–77

¹² Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 3.

kerygma of the Christian faith. Those explanations may be understood as expressions of “public theology.”

Markham describes public theology as “the explication of, witness to, and agency toward the vision that God intends for social life within the parameters of the Christian tradition.” He further elaborates this definition by arguing that public theology is the formulation of “our distinctive insights and commitments” for the purposes of engaging “with the pluralism of the public square” with integrity, that is, “willing to listen, learn, and be shaped by the insights of other traditions.”¹³

Similarly, Elaine Graham writes that public theology

does not attempt to colonize or convert public life so much as establish a common space in which the language of value and ultimate meaning can be mediated across confessional and institutional boundaries into a common search for the stories we live by.¹⁴

A separately incorporated organization such as Grace College draws its board members, stakeholders, and clients from the pluralism of the surrounding society. In this context, the church is in dialogue with others. Dialogue implies respect for the other parties in the dialogue. Respect implies seeking to understand and communicate. Dialogue does not assume that one party will become like the other. It does assume, however, that the parties seek to better understand each other and perhaps come to recognize both common ground shared by them and fundamental differences between them for the sake of continuing to live in a pluralistic context.

The restating of the mission and values of Grace College in contemporary generic language is, in part, the outcome of an exercise in public theology as well as the product of intentional values work by the organization. It is not the outcome of an internal doctrinal dialogue within the Christian church (or part of it); rather, it is a restatement of what the various parties involved in the dialogue agree is the hope and intention for the community of the College and the individuals within it. Such a statement will never replace the underlying narratives of any of the stakeholders in the conversation. The College board will continue to stand in the role of mediator between the complexity of the competing interests. All stakeholders will continue to hold their own narratives and to work within them in their contexts. It was, however, important that Grace College restated for itself a narrative and values that reflected its work and complexity in the context of a secular, pluralistic environment, and it has done so in the following form:

Grace College is an inclusive, respectful, safe home for a diverse community of independent, creative, compassionate tertiary students, working together to succeed academically, develop holistically, and contribute globally.

¹³ Ian S. Markham, “Public Theology: Toward a Christian Definition,” *Anglican Theological Review* 102, no. 2 (2020): 179–91.

¹⁴ Elaine L. Graham, “Why Practical Theology Must Go Public,” *Practical Theology* 1, no. 1 (2008), 11–17.

Grace College is committed to:

Community—living and working together through challenges and achievements to contribute globally

Inclusion—embracing diversity

Respect—valuing ourselves, others and our world

Compassion—treating ourselves, others and the environment with understanding, empathy and care

Engagement—engaging with each other, our studies, our work and our world intentionally, with curiosity and in a healthy way

Does this expression of the work of the College hold the fullness of the Christian *kerygma*? In many ways, it does not. In many ways, it cannot. Is it in keeping with values and actions that may arise out of that *kerygma*? It is indeed. Is the Christian story still significant? For those parties to this dialogue who work within and out of that framework, it will continue to be. But it will never and cannot be significant for other stakeholders who are not working within that framework; therefore, this hybrid organization has had to find its own narrative that mediates a common ground between the competing interests.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

In the context of complex, pluralistic societies, the role of dialogues around shared meaning, purpose, values, and ideal actions is becoming increasingly significant. All parties to those dialogues come from differing narrative frameworks. These narratives variously highlight factors such as religious belief, market or commercial imperatives, and welfare concerns. For Christians, participation in such dialogues is an activity of public theology which, while informed by the Christian story, will necessarily be interpreted in generic or shared language. Engagement in such dialogues does not negate the value of the Christian story for Christian people or the role of doctrinal conversations in a church context. Such engagement does, however, demonstrate the limits of the ability for Christian people to insist that the Christian story itself be adopted by others. ⊕

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