

Title	"The godless college?" Response by Professor Áine Hyland to a paper by Professor Seán Freyne, School of Hebrew, Biblical and Theological Studies, TCD, 'That the university is incomplete without a School of Theology/Religious Studies'
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Publication date	1995-02-11;1995-02-11
Original Citation	Hyland, Á. (1995) "'The godless college?' Response by Professor Áine Hyland to a paper by Professor Seán Freyne, School of Hebrew, Biblical and Theological Studies, TCD, 'That the university is incomplete without a School of Theology/Religious Studies'", Conference organised by the Chaplaincy, University College Cork, as part of the UCC 150 Celebrations, 11 February, 1995.
Type of publication	Conference item
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Download date	2026-09-16 12:54:11
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17815



UCC

University College Cork, Ireland
 Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

"The Godless College?"

Conference organised by the Chaplains at UCC
as part of the UCC 150 Celebrations
Saturday, 11 February, 1995

RESPONSE BY PROFESSOR ÁINE HYLAND
TO A PAPER BY PROFESSOR SEÁN FREYNE,
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That the University is Incomplete without a School of Theology/Religious Studies

On behalf of all of us here, I would like to congratulate and thank Professor Seán Freyne for an interesting and stimulating paper.

Before responding to the paper I would like to make some brief comments on this morning's session by Professor Finlay Holmes; he gave us a fascinating insight into the presbyterian background and response to the setting up of the Queen's Colleges, especially Queen's College Belfast 150 years ago. He showed the majority of presbyterians accommodated themselves to the new situation created by the foundation of Queen's University Belfast and seized the opportunity to build a Theological college in close proximity to the Queen's College while also taking advantage of other courses provided within that college.

In his response, Professor John A. Murphy referred to the difficulty encountered by the Reverend Webster of the Church of Ireland in Cork in the late nineteenth century when he attempted to get the use of rooms in Queen's College Cork for students who wished to avail of his religious services. The refusal of the college authorities seems to me to be in

direct contravention of the 1845 Act where under section 14 it is specifically stated that "it shall be lawful for the president and professors or other governing body of each of the said colleges to assign lecture rooms within the precincts of such college, wholly or in part, for the use of such religious teachers as shall be recognised by such governing body ...". Indeed I find it difficult to have any sympathy with the description "Godless Colleges" when we bear in mind another section of the 1845 Act regarding worship: "but this proviso shall not be deemed to prevent the making of regulations for securing the due attendance of the students for divine worship at such church or chapel as shall be approved by parents or guardians respectively". It is difficult to imagine attempting to implement that regulation with our present day students!

Professor John A. Murphy ended his response this morning by declaring his opposition to the inclusion of Theology in a university on the basis that he regarded intellectual activity under this heading as "sophisticated speculation on the unknowable ...". Professor Murphy would indeed have many supporters for this view including the German philosopher Johann Fichte who argued at about the same period that since theology is based on revelation and faith it ought to be denied academic standing in the university.

However, Professor Freyne has presented us with an alternative argument deriving to a significant extent from a different contemporary definition and interpretation of theology. He brought us on an interesting historical journey through the centuries where we were introduced to the changing attitudes and fortunes of theology within Trinity College Dublin. In the mid-nineteenth century, theology was taught within the Divinity School whereas in the present day it has established its place firmly within the Faculty of Arts. He referred to the impressive adjustment made by the Church of Ireland as a result of this change which

necessitated the transfer of the theological training of ordinands for the Church of Ireland from Trinity College to the Church of Ireland Theological College in Braemor Park.

The current approach to the teaching of theology in Trinity College is similar to the approach taken to the study and teaching of theology in universities within the western intellectual tradition. A Professor of Theology at Oxford recently explained that approach as follows:

"Theology, as taught in Oxford, is largely a textual, historical and linguistic discipline. It involves the literary and the historical analysis of ancient texts, a critical study of some major movements in western intellectual history and rigorous analysis of some central concepts (of great philosophical interest) of the christian intellectual tradition. It may also involve, and in most other British universities will involve, study of the sociology and psychology of religion and of the history, beliefs and practices of one or two religious traditions in some depth. None of this requires or presupposes any particular set of beliefs in either teacher or student. Indeed, at Oxford we make a point of warning students with strong religious beliefs that our approach is critical, does not attempt to defend any one viewpoint, and may be found unsettling by some."

Professor Freyne referred to his experience as an advisor to the Department of Education on the introduction of religious education as an examinable subject in our secondary schools. I have also followed this debate with interest and frustration for the past fifteen years. I have been sceptical about the argument put forward that the introduction of religion as an examinable subject is precluded by the Intermediate Education Act of 1878. It is true that the Intermediate Education Act contains a proviso "that no examination shall be held in any subject of religious instruction" but it goes on to state "nor shall any payment be made in respect thereof". Nobody expressed any concern when in 1924 the Government introduced the practice of paying incremental salaries to secondary teachers, and this practice which has continued to the present day includes the payment of salaries to teachers of

religion. If we are seriously concerned about the implementation of 1878 Act then we should be as concerned about the payment of salaries to teachers of religion as we are to the issue of introducing religious education as an examinable subject.

Professor Freyne has provided a very useful overview of the tensions within the church in relation to this issue. It is important that this episode is recorded publicly so that the less informed should not continue to be misled into thinking that it is the state alone which is preventing the full recognition of religious education as an examinable subject. What has occurred during the past fifteen years has been collusion (either conscious or unconscious) between conservative, cautious and fearful individuals within both church and state bureaucracies to prevent the introduction of religious education as an examinable subject.

If one accepts the importance of providing for the full and harmonious development of young people through our education system, one will accept the general statement of the aim of education as set out in Curriculum and Examination Board documents in the mid-80s and subsequently repeated in the documents of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. And I quote: The general aim of education is:

"To contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual, including aesthetic, creative, critical, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, political, social and spiritual development, for personal and family life, for working life, for living in the community and for leisure."

If the school is to contribute then to the full development of the young person, the area of religious education is one of the areas of experience which the school should provide. In the Curriculum and Examination Board *Issues and Structures of Education*, published in

1984, it was proposed that religious education should indeed be one of the eight areas of experience for all young people. The approach suggested by the Curriculum and Examinations Board at that time was one where religious studies should be a core subject for all pupils and that religious instruction (of a denominational nature) should be provided as an additional enhancement where and if schools deemed this appropriate. A strong educational argument can and indeed was made for the inclusion of religious studies as a core subject; this of course would presuppose that the curriculum for the subject should be such as to be acceptable to pupils of all religions and none.

University of Ireland. The course is designed to provide a broad-based education for all students.

Chairman: In the context of the renewed debate on the introduction of religious studies as an examinable subject, I understand that advice has been received by the Minister from the Attorney General about the constitutionality of such a move. My understanding is that such advice supports the line taken by the Curriculum and Examination Board ten years ago, i.e. that religious studies could be included as an examinable subject provided it was not of a denominational nature and that a strong educational rationale could be provided for its inclusion. Parents would of course continue to have the right as is clearly stated in the 1937 constitution to withdraw their children from any religious programme.

I am now entitled to the Public Health and Safety Commission for the purpose of the

Chairman: The question of the training of teachers for religious studies (either as an examinable or non-examinable subject) has been somewhat problematic for many years. There is a particular problem in the southern region of the country where because of the failure of the higher education institutions to provide an undergraduate course of an appropriate nature there is a shortage of suitably qualified teachers of religion. I understand that less than a half of religious education teachers at second level in the Cork and Kerry area have a formal third level education in religious studies or in a cognate area. In an effort to address this problem,

the Education Department of University College Cork successfully made a case three years ago for the introduction of a post-graduate diploma in the teaching of religious education. This two-year part-time diploma is now in its third year and currently is offered both in the diocese of Cork and of Kerry with a total of about forty teachers taking the course. In developing and implementing the course we were fortunate to have had support from biblical and theological scholars from both the Catholic and the Church of Ireland churches. Here I must pay tribute to my predecessor Dr. Mary Wall who succeeded in having the course validated at all levels within the College and by the Board of Studies of the National University of Ireland. The course is also recognised by the Secondary Teachers Registration Council for teachers of religion in secondary schools. The aim of the course is to provide a sound methodological and educational base for such teachers.

The first group of those teachers who graduated last summer have already begun to indicate their wish and need for a more advanced course in the areas of theology and biblical studies - a course perhaps at Masters level. At present, there is no possibility for these teachers to pursue such a course in the Cork area or indeed in the southern region.

I am more optimistic than Professor Freyne about the likelihood of the introduction of religious studies as an examinable subject during my lifetime. When this development occurs it will be particularly important that our teachers are prepared academically for the challenge. Teachers of other subjects at senior cycle are very aware of the challenge and the demand of teaching highly intelligent, able young people who during their earlier schooling have been encouraged to question and search for knowledge and are no longer content (if they ever were) with prepackaged simplistic answers. Teachers must be able to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of these young people and explore with them the wealth and depth of

the various theological traditions and share with them the excitement of discovery. But to do this the teachers themselves must have a firm and deep grounding in the subject to have the confidence to embark on such an intellectual journey with their pupils.

We look then to the amendment of the 1908 Act and to the freeing up - if indeed such a freeing up is necessary at all - of the colleges of the N.U.I. so that they can and will be able to introduce a school of religious studies within their portals. Such schools should, as Dr. Freyne has indicated, be sufficiently broad to respond to the pluralist nature of Irish society. While recognising that the vast majority of Irish people come from either the protestant or catholic tradition, we should not ignore the other great intellectual traditions of the world. It would be ironic that if, as we dismantle the divisive barriers which have separated catholic and protestant for so long we erected new barriers between christians and others. We should have a long term vision and in introducing religious studies into second and third level educational institutions we should strive to ensure that we develop a programme where nobody is an outsider.