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Theology Today – Currents and Directions

David Fergusson (University of Edinburgh)

Abstract

While more fragmented than in mid-20th century, recent trends and directions reveal some dominant approaches and particular sub-areas that have become the focus of significant attention. Although overlapping and intersecting, these are discernible both methodologically and thematically. Approaches include a commitment to cross-disciplinarity, contextuality, strategies of retrieval, articulation of confessional identity, and the re-appropriation of liberalism. Important sub-areas include the relationship with other religions, public theology, theology and Bible, philosophical theology, and apologetics. In conclusion, a plea for systematic theology is entered.

Keywords – theology, contemporary, methods, themes.

The recent *Expository Times* series has signalled a diversity within the field which is almost as bewildering as it is exciting, and it now falls to me to provide a brief summation and commentary. Mapping trends in contemporary theology is of course a hazardous exercise – it runs the risk of selectivity and thus omitting important elements. Conversely, a comprehensive discussion may end with only a bland catalogue of theologies that fails to provide an adequate characterisation or assessment of where we stand. And if that's not bad enough, any author attempting the task is liable to trail his or her coat-tails all too obviously. I shall commit all of these crimes, but, before doing so, I wish to record a debt of gratitude to my fellow-contributors for their rich series of reflections on this subject.

Are the exponents of Christian theology today part of a single activity with disciplinary coherence and integrity? Are they capable of comprising a conversation that yields useful results for the student introduced to them? Or is theology now so hopelessly fragmented that it must await the emergence of a new and acknowledged leader in the field whose work will reconstitute the discipline by providing a single acknowledged point of reference for subsequent study? Before becoming too perplexed or depressed by these questions, we might note that earlier periods of theological study have occasioned similar diversity. The 19th century provides an instructive example of new developments and approaches that coincided with the reinvigoration of older confessional traditions. These are often overlooked in accounts of the 19th century that see the predominance of historical study, revisionist theologies and the emergence of theories of suspicion.¹ This remains one of the most fruitful periods of the study of religion, the effects of which are still being experienced and understood. Other disciplines today may also be judged at least as fragmented and diversified as theology. For example, enthusiasts of French philosophy, of whom there are many in our literature departments, will struggle to converse intellectually with analytic thinkers, who continue to represent the majority in our philosophy departments. To the outsider, they appear to be addressing different problems, employing incommensurable

¹ See the essays in David Fergusson (ed.), *Blackwell Companion to 19th Century Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010).

discourses, and expressing themselves in dissimilar rhetorical styles. By contrast, with its focus on key texts (especially the Bible) and a discernible public (the churches), Christian theology may actually display a measure of coherence greater than other disciplines within the humanities.

Nevertheless, the diversity within the subject is much greater than it was a generation ago. The manse library of a minister educated in the 1960s is likely to feature works by Barth, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, Brunner, the Niebuhrs, Tillich and the Baillies. The collapse in the second-hand market for such works may tell us something. Who can guess what volumes today might populate a ministerial study? I am sometimes asked to list those books that theologians are currently reading and which are shaping the field – but it’s almost impossible to say. The plurality of approaches and themes is significantly greater than the mid-20th century when theology was still largely dominated by European intellectuals (mostly male) and when a small group of dominant figures was perceived to lead the field. The current theological scene has also witnessed a shift from the dominance of German-language theology to the increased importance of the USA. In part, this is an inevitable result of the greater number of institutions, students and teachers in the USA coupled with their significantly greater resources. One indicator of this shift is the relative decline of important German theological works now being translated into English, compared with the heyday of Rahner, Küng, Moltmann and Pannenberg. However, this recognition of the greater significance of theology in the USA needs to be qualified by attention to the more global character of Christianity today. The majority of Christians now live outside its former western heartlands. With the growing secularisation of Europe and the emergence of significant numbers of Chinese Christians, this shift is set to be much further accentuated in the 21st century, thus heralding a still greater variety of institutional and cultural contexts for the practice of theology. Having recently co-edited a reference work that seeks to chart these recent regional developments, I also suspect that the lines between practical and systematic theology (for long kept apart in traditional syllabi) will become increasingly blurred outside of traditional western settings. At the same time, more contextual approaches will abound, and the encounters with other world religions will appear more complex.²

In what follows, I sketch an overview that characterises different approaches and themes within contemporary theology. This distinction between method and content is itself quite blurred. The specified approaches signify a formal orientation towards particular methods, but usually with underlying substantive convictions. Conversely, the thematic areas of study that are most labour intensive today reveal a commitment to pursuing the subject in particular ways, often through the acquisition of specified skills and chosen dialogue partners, these sometimes revealing an impatience with earlier approaches to the subject matter. Furthermore, the signified approaches and themes are intended neither to be exhaustive nor exclusive of each other. What is offered is a selection of conspicuous methods and problems, these frequently overlapping and intersecting in important ways.

Dominant Approaches

² See Ian A. McFarland, David A. S. Fergusson, Karen Kilby, Iain R. Torrance (eds.), *Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Cross-disciplinarity. For a previous generation, the main disciplinary companions of the theologian were classics, history and philosophy. While these remain of high importance, they are now accompanied by the social sciences, the natural sciences and literature as disciplines that shares common zones of interest. In part, this development has been shaped by the demands of the teaching syllabus. Students today respond enthusiastically to the conjunction of theology with some other area of enquiry or element of culture. Courses abound on ‘theology and *something else that sounds interesting*’ e.g. film, science, art, society, sport, politics, literature, the environment, and the body. At the time, many research programmes sponsored by national councils and charitable bodies seek to promote more collaborative and inter-disciplinary work. This may be a reaction against the effects of an excessively narrow specialisation which prevents creative work at the interstices between disciplines. But it is also borne of a recognition that advances in many key areas, e.g. public health, economic sustainability, social capital and climate change, require the conjoining of several disciplinary contributions. Once again, the multiple contexts of world Christianity are significant here, with many scholars seeking help from the social sciences to gain a clearer understanding of the socio-economic and cultural forces that shape the churches and individual Christians.

Inter-disciplinarity, of course, is fraught with danger. A time-consuming activity, it is easy for an expert in one field to over simplify another, or too readily to seek a consensus position in the partner discipline from which he or she can quickly harvest conclusions. Nevertheless, creative interaction does not require the acquisition of a level of expertise and achievement commensurate with one’s own discipline. What is needed is a familiarity with problems, proposals and theories of understanding to a level sufficient for the raising of intelligent questions and the pursuit of a conversation that is mutually beneficial.³

Contextuality. This portmanteau term denotes a determination to undertake theology with specific reference to a particular socio-historical context in the conviction that theological work has a role to play in its understanding and transformation. In many ways, contextual approaches are the legacy of earlier liberation theologies but coupled with the recognition that different theologies are appropriate to the variety of settings determined by particular historical, caste, class, gender, economic, racial and religious conditions. The last twenty years has witnessed a burgeoning of regional theologies (Asian, African, Dalit, Black, Latino/a, Filipino, Korean) that seek to contribute to socially transformative practice. These reflect both the strength of the church in the global south but also, through patterns of migration, the growing presence of Christians from those churches in western societies. A powerful feature of contextual theologies is the need to make a difference in situations of poverty, sickness, civil conflict, post-colonialism and economic injustice.⁴ Even post-colonialism has its own very disparate settings and is likely to resist any generalisation of its context. Understandably, all this generates some impatience with the more theoretical and detached agenda seemingly pursued by scholars in more affluent parts of the world. Yet the neglect of the history of theology or its more (apparently) theoretical issues ought not to be required by a proper attention to context. Moreover, it can be argued that theology has generally been

³ For a recent example of a cross-disciplinary project see J. Wentzel van Huyssteen & Erik P. Wiebe (eds), *In Search of Self: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Personhood* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

⁴ See, for example, Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner & Mayra Rivera (eds.) *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St Paul, MO: Chalice Press, 2004).

contextual whether one is considering the 2nd, the 16th or the 19th century and that, as Kant once said, there is nothing more useful than a good theory. Only recently has the *diastasis* between church and academy arguably generated some disconnection of concerns.

A further outcome of the heightened awareness of contextuality is a blurring of the traditional curricular distinctions between practical theology, Christian ethics and systematic theology. It is impossible to characterise much of this work as belonging to one of these categories to the exclusion of the others. Students and younger scholars today (especially women) are increasingly impatient of older lines of demarcation as attention becomes increasingly focussed on issues surrounding church, mission, ethics, social impact, pastoral care and liturgy. And this applies *a fortiori* outside more traditional western academic settings.

Retrieval. Already in the 20th century, we can discern attempts to return to pre-modernity to identify sources and approaches that reinvigorate contemporary theology. These include the theologians of the early church (as in the *nouvelle theologie* of de Lubac), Thomas Aquinas (as a resource for overcoming standard Thomism) and the Reformers (as in Karl Barth's rehabilitation of Protestant dogmatics). To some extent, this approach reflects a greater degree of traditionalism within the churches, perhaps in reaction to liberal and secular trends which were judged to yield an unsatisfactory theological minimalism. In Roman Catholicism, we have witnessed a turn in some areas from the trajectories of Vatican II, while in Protestantism there has been an interest in writers, ancient and modern whose work is self-consciously situated within a catholic mainstream that includes western and eastern theologians. Closely related to all this is the significant resurgence of work in Christian ethics that has been inspired by the seminal writings of MacIntyre and Hauerwas with their (post-Wittgensteinian) stress on the formative role of community, narrative and tradition. This has often been accompanied by an assault on theological liberalism.

One correlate of theologies of retrieval is that these have further energised work in the history of theology whether ancient, medieval, Reformation or modern. The interpretation of earlier periods of theological history is integral to contemporary constructive theology. Today there is probably as much attention given to the Cappadocians, Augustine, Aquinas, Scotus, Calvin, Schleiermacher and Barth than at any other period of study. Critical editions, translations and previously unpublished texts continue to appear. Moreover, the forthcoming quincenary celebrations of the Lutheran Reformation in 1517 are likely to signal a self-consciously ecumenical assessment of Luther's work and its significance.

Articulation of confessional identity. Related to strategies of retrieval are attempts to maintain and represent traditional confessional positions whether these be Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican or Reformed. We should also add to this list 'evangelical theology' although it is more trans-denominational in character.⁵ As noted above, this was also a feature of the 19th century although it has received less attention in scholarly surveys. The maintenance of confessionalism today, however, is conducted in a less partisan spirit; it is a means of realising resources and insights for the wider church, e.g.

⁵ Its vitality is evident in Timothy Larsen & Daniel J. Trier (eds.), *Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

accounts of personhood, divine kenosis, incarnation, the eucharist, Scriptural authority and social transformation. This might be seen as one of the gains of 20th century ecumenical theology, although it should be added that much of its energy has since been lost. Today there is a dearth of younger scholars ready to don the mantle of Newbigin, Lindbeck and Wainwright in the painstaking work of understanding confessional differences, doctrinal rapprochement, and the lines adopted in bilateral and multilateral dialogues.⁶ Another feature of this confessional endeavour is the increasing attention devoted to Orthodox theology in the west, where representatives of Greek, Russian and other traditions can now be identified in greater numbers. The one ecclesial grouping whose perspectives are in need of greater reckoning are Pentecostal theologians, although representatives of this tradition are now appearing in more traditional scholarly contexts. Their published work increasingly demands attention in courses on pneumatology and ecclesiology.⁷ The global spread of Pentecostalism is likely to ensure that we hear much more from this quarter in the coming generation.

Re-emergence of liberalism. This may be a more tendentious claim than any of the above, yet it seems that the late 20th century reaction against liberalism is now being countered by other trends. If one regards liberalism as a set of habits or tendencies, rather than a single system or cluster of doctrines, then it is not hard to identify its continuing strength. These habits include a commitment to historical study of Scripture and doctrine, an awareness of doctrinal mobility across time and space, an openness to new and heterodox patterns of thought, a willingness to think more positively about the gains of modernity, and a determination to bring theology into a positive relationship to the best insights and advances of contemporary culture. The risks of accommodation, capitulation and reductionism were all pointed out in the 20th century, especially in the reactions against Catholic modernism and Protestant liberalism; these surely remain real risks. Nevertheless, the mood and tendencies of liberalism are present, particularly in some of the suspicions surrounding over-confident projects of retrieval and in ecclesiological approaches to ethics that are too sanguine about the distinctiveness of the Christian community in the contemporary world. In some respects, liberalism has become a reactionary phenomenon in the face of anxieties about the shrill denunciation of secular trends during a time of church decline. Jeffrey Stout has spoken perceptively in this context of theologies of ‘resentment’.⁸ Similarly, fears surrounding an intemperate fundamentalism (another contested term) may also occasion a reassessment of features of earlier forms of liberalism. It is not clear how best to label the current *Zeitgeist*, but it appears that we are now moving away from a widespread commitment to postmodernism and postliberalism in theology. Earlier forms of liberalism may thus be receiving a more favourable hearing.⁹

Thematic Concerns

⁶ See however David S. Cunningham, Ralph del Colle & Lucas Lamadrid, *Ecumenical Theology: Essays Presented to Geoffrey Wainwright on his Sixtieth Birthday* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and, Carl Braaten & Robert Jenson (eds.), *The Ecumenical Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

⁷ E.g. Mark Cartledge, *Encountering the Spirit: The Charismatic Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006). On a personal note, I can attest that, in lecturing on the Holy Spirit each year, my perspectives are regularly challenged and enriched by students who have a close personal acquaintance with Pentecostal church life.

⁸ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁹ See the various essays in Mark Chapman (ed), *The Future of Liberal Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

Closely related to the above set of approaches, we can also identify a recurrent set of themes or topics that provide a common focus for much recent work in the field. Many of these also overlap and intersect in important ways.

Encounter with other religions. Given our current socio-political context, the attention devoted to the relationship between the major world religions is hardly surprising. What seems more remarkable is the extent to which these issues were neglected by most of the leading figures of the 20th century. Karl Barth's dismissive remarks about Islam may be explained by his own context, but these are impossible today. Several initiatives are now well underway, these attracting significant attention from younger scholars. We should include here the project on Scriptural reasoning based in Cambridge and led by David Ford, Peter Ochs and others. With a focus on the sacred scriptures of the three Abrahamic faiths, its work is primarily textual.¹⁰ Activities extend to conferences, a website, a journal and a growing list of spin-off publications and projects. Comparative theologies have also been attempted with high degrees of scholarly sophistication and in closer contact with representatives of other traditions.¹¹ This is associated with Frank Clooney in Harvard but is also evident in the multi-volume series of Keith Ward which compares doctrinal themes in different tradition.¹²

The interest in inter-faith topics may be directing attention away from ecumenical theology, this being perceived (perhaps unfairly) as a narrower and less exciting endeavour. At the same time, pluralist theologies continue to have their exponents around the world, these insisting on a strategy of 'parity' that rules against claims for any privileged epistemic or soteriological access to the transcendent. While it is difficult to predict what strategies may emerge or dominate, it is clear that as a scholarly theme it will attract increased attention (and funding) in the teaching and research of theology in the 21st century. In any case, we are now entering an era in which theologians of different religious traditions will increasingly find themselves working side by side in the same higher education institutions.

Theology and Bible. A frequent complaint in much recent literature has been the extent to which theology and Biblical studies have become divorced from one another. Theological works engage too little and cursorily with Biblical materials, often using these only as illustrative or as a point of departure. Simultaneously, much of the material in commentaries is dominated by narrow philological and historical issues at the neglect of the wider religious and contemporary significance of the text. In reaction to all this, a growing number of theologians have attempted to write theology by way of Scriptural exegesis; several commentary series in German and English have emerged which seek to offer accessible theological interpretations and applications of the text which bridge the gaps between Biblical scholarship, theology and the pulpit.¹³ A Biblical scholar such as Ellen Davis works explicitly to show ways in which the fruits of Old Testament scholarship can enrich preaching in the contemporary world. In

¹⁰ See David Ford, *Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 59–72, and Nicholas Adams, *Theology and Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,)??

¹¹ A good example is in the closing section of James Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

¹² For an excellent introduction to this area of study see Francis X. Clooney SJ, *Comparative Theology: deep learning across religious borders* (Malden, MS: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

¹³ An outstanding example of this is William Placher's posthumously published, *Mark* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

registering this activity, Miroslav Volf has made the bold claim that constitutes the most important turn in contemporary theology. ‘In my judgment, the return of biblical scholars to the theological reading of the Scripture, and the return of systematic theologians to sustained engagement with the scriptural texts is the most significant development in the last two decades. Even if it is merely formal, it is comparable in important to the post-World War I rediscovery of the Trinitarian nature of God and to the resurgence of theological concern for the suffering and the poor in the late sixties of the past century.’¹⁴

Public Theology. A sub-discipline known as public theology has crystallised, particularly in the last decade. This might be represented as a species of contextual theology insofar as it seeks to make a theological contribution to significant public issues (social capital, democratic participation, global civil society, welfare, humanitarian military intervention).¹⁵ What distinguishes recent work in public theology is the awareness that it takes places in collaboration with other disciplines and that the voice of the church is typically only one amongst several in democratic, pluralist societies. Here there are obvious links with the aforementioned commitment to cross-disciplinarity. Public theology has gained further momentum in recent years with the emergence of a network of centres throughout the world and an international journal published by Brill.

Philosophical Theology. The gathering of interest amongst analytic philosophers has rectified a rather barren spell for the philosophy of religion in Anglo-American philosophy.¹⁶ This has extended not merely to the classical topics of the proofs for divine existence, the problem of evil and miracles, but also to more substantive issues in Christian doctrine including providence, resurrection, atonement and Christology. In effect, what was previously a topic of study has now become an approach within the field. Much of this work has been conducted in the USA. To what extent it will prove capable of export remains to be seen but its commitment to clarity, brevity and argumentative rigour are exemplary and badly needed in some quarters. A stronger sense of historical context and doctrinal mobility together with a closer acquaintance with biblical criticism would also enrich much of the output in this field.¹⁷

The appropriation of continental philosophy requires competence in a different universe of discourse but the ‘post-secular’ turn in much recent work has provided contemporary theology with a series of conversation partners and reinvigoration of theological themes through exploration of concepts such as ‘gift’. In particular, the recent work of Žižek which deploys Scriptural and religious themes, albeit without embracing a positive

¹⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflections*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 14. See also Ellen Davis and Richard Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

¹⁵ A recent example is Peter J. Casarella, William F. Storrar, & Paul Louis Metzger. *A World for All? Global Civil Society in Political Theory and Trinitarian Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

¹⁶ The recent memoir of Basil Mitchell reveals how difficult it was for a professional philosopher in Oxford to take an academic interest in matters pertaining to religion during the mid-20th century. See *Looking Back on Faith: philosophy and friends in Oxford* (Durham: Memoir Club, 2009).

¹⁷ In my view, the most notable achievement in this context is that of Nicholas Wolterstorff. See, for example, *Hearing the Call: Liturgy, Justice, Church and World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

theology, has received much attention.¹⁸ Difficult in expression and rarified in tendency, its potential for access by a wider theological audience remains uncertain.

Apologetics. An unfashionable term that appears too defensive, apologetic theology nevertheless flourishes in surprising ways. If it is represented as the attempt to defend faith claims from criticisms that intend to defeat these, then it is an ineluctable task of theologians in a pluralist environment, just as it was for the writers of the early church. The plethora of responses to the new atheism, theological comments on social problems, and engagements with evolutionary science and theories of secularisation reveal the extensive apologetic work that continues in much of the theological world. For example, discussion of the relationship of theology to science now commands the support of several journals and research centres across the world. Moreover, the need to show the compatibility of faith with the best insights of other forms of knowledge is not only an intellectual obligation but a pressing pastoral concern for churches whose members are professionally engaged and committed to secular fields. Likewise, the missiological task of commending the faith to a secular audience will require an approach that is sensitive to the language, thought and habits of contemporary culture.¹⁹

Is there a place for systematic theology? Fewer instance are now evident of a complete overview of Christian doctrine accompanied by an exploration of sources, systemic coherence and orientation to the history of the tradition. The *virtuoso* works of Pannenberg and Jenson are the exception rather than the rule. Yet there is surely a place for this activity and for familiarising ourselves with it.²⁰ It reflects a need already perceived in the early church for identifying a *regula fidei* by which the principal elements of Christian belief are comprehended in their totality. Those attempting to produce theological commentaries on Scripture have sometimes remarked on the need to have a single theological vision in mind, even if this requires a sufficient degree of flexibility to be altered by renewed study of the text. The effort involved in engaging with systematic theology also requires a breadth of exegetical, historical, philosophical and dogmatic skills that can generate the necessary theological ‘muscle’ for exercise in more occasional and *ad hoc* projects. These need not be seen as mutually exclusive activities or in competition. For the preacher, it will also facilitate a theological range that is needed for the seasons of the Christian year and for connecting the Biblical text to beliefs that have significant organisational and practical force.

¹⁸ A recent example is John Milbank, Creston Davis and Slavoj Zizek, *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010),

¹⁹ One of the best is Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2007).

²⁰ In some respects the most important single work in recent years – David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) – reflects a traditional commitment to systematic theology.

