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Searching for a Self-Reflexive Theology: Ways Forward for Systematic Theology in Relation to (Non) Religious Thought in Contemporary Western Culture

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**Searching for a Self-Reflexive Theology: Ways Forward for Systematic Theology in
Relation to (Non) Religious Thought in Contemporary Western Culture**

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to draw attention, first, to the need to explore the inner *plurality* of theological discourse, as such plural discourses serve to promote a certain dynamism and fullness within theology as a field, especially in relation to religious studies today. Second, such a potential fullness is reflected in the modern struggle to characterize the relationship between faith and reason. Comprehending the misunderstandings, often construed as an impasse between faith and reason, could foster new relations between scientific methods and theological imaginations. Third, understanding these tensions from a systematic theological perspective also entails a more precise analysis of the structural dynamics between theology and the Church. Our contention is that there must be a permanent, dynamic tension between theology and the institutional structures that are the Church in order for self-critical impulses to be maintained as well as for the individual's life of faith to find its reason.

KEYWORDS

Introduction

There are many within the Christian faith today who are concerned about the state of theology in an increasingly secular culture. As studies on the state of our ‘secular age’ continue to fascinate and challenge theologians, there is, however, also a sense that many such developments are occurring far beyond the scope of what theology—seemingly confined both *by* and *to* its more traditional and communal boundaries—is capable of handling.¹ The fitting questions subsequently needing to be addressed by theologians are, as a consequence, often stuffed with hollow answers, forms of desperate and defensive apologetics or self-referential discourses that do little to speak to our globalized world at large. For many, any form of ‘public theology’ has become, from this perspective, more or less extinct.

Yet there are at least three prominent questions that linger, though often in a stifling ecclesiastical atmosphere: First, what place is there for theology in the ‘secular’ academy today? That is, how can a modern university, with its increased reliance upon those more scientifically oriented and well-funded disciplines, sustain its relations with a seemingly (to many) medieval ‘pseudo-science’ of the metaphysical? Second, what exactly is the relationship between the more ‘confessional’ theology and the more ‘scientific’ field of religious studies? And, third, what

¹ See, among others, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

can theology say that is of relevance to the world today, one that increasingly has difficulties taking seriously the particular truth claims of an almost parochial religious faith?²

In what follows, I wish to examine these three interrelated trajectories of inquiry for theology in order to realize and expand upon its relevance both in and for the world today. As I hope to demonstrate, it is by paradoxically delving further into the heart of fundamental (or ‘systematic’) theology and its historical development that we might begin to deduce the general ‘religious’ elements necessary for more a fruitful dialogue with Western religious culture and its struggles to come to terms with its religious heritage. My claim, in essence, is that the only way to foster a dynamic engagement between theology and religious studies—and so the only possible way for a theological truth claim to have an impact upon a general ‘religious’ culture—is by developing a transformative and self-critical model of theological praxis. It is through the evolution of such a self-reflexive methodology that theology will be better able to see how its inherent tensions and debates speak to the larger religious, political and cultural landscape than might at first glance be apparent, and thus in a very precise sense to provide answers to the three questions raised above.

I aim, first, to draw attention to the need to explore the inner *plurality* of theological discourse, as plural discourses serve to promote a certain dynamism and fullness within theology as a field. Recognition of this inherent plurality *within* theology (its many ‘theologies’ in fact) can realign dialogue between theology and religious studies today, as well as open theologians toward a larger global picture.³ If twentieth-century theology has taught us anything on this score (from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth and Simone Weil to John Caputo in our own day), it

² On the relationship of theology to the university specifically, see Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *Philosophy Between Faith and Theology: Addresses to Catholic Intellectuals* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

³ On the plurality of ‘theologies’ in relation to ‘Theology,’ see Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011).

is that theology has often been uneasy with its own ‘religious’ dimensions. Such a critical distance on the part of theology in relation to religious structures must therefore be addressed and further analysed in order to find a way forward for theology amidst an increasingly developed—but also detached—scientific outlook on the world. Second, such a potential fullness, I will contend, is reflected in, as well as challenged by, the modern struggle to characterize the relationship between faith and reason (and, hence, the often perceived gap between history and *salvation* history), an ongoing tension that must be seen in a new light today. Comprehending the misunderstandings often construed as an impasse between faith and reason could in fact foster new relations between scientific methods and theological imaginations—a much needed restoration that I wish to highlight. Third, understanding these tensions from a systematic theological perspective also entails a more precise analysis of the structural dynamics between theology and the Church. There must be a permanent, dynamic tension between theology and the institutional structures that are the Church in order for self-critical impulses to be maintained and for the individual’s life of faith to find its reason. It is in this last section then that I will seek to unite the major lines of thought laid out in the first two sections.

Systematic Theology in Question

It would be a truism to state that we live in times where the pluralisation that characterizes contemporary theology in the Western world, along with the concomitant forces of detraditionalisation and individualization, do indeed characterize our culture.⁴ Such forces undermine more traditional forms of religious practice, though they also call us to perform a

⁴ Lieven Boeve, ‘Theology at the Crossroads of Academy, Church and Society,’ *ET Studies: Journal of the European Society for Catholic Theology* 1:1 (2010), 85.

‘recontextualization’ of theology today—which becomes a chance to (re)develop theology in light of the world’s activity and to find a meaningful place for theology to take root and sprout new insights. To be clear, however, we should note that such a state of things is as much a positive potential for the future of theology as it is a cause for concern.

I therefore agree with Lieven Boeve that, rather than give in to the divisions between ‘opposition and accommodation, neo-traditionalism or fundamentalism and religious pluralism and relativism,’ we must encourage a more ‘self-reflexive’ Christian identity⁵—one that is willing to engage its general ‘religious’ nature and to critically examine its cultural role in a Western setting. Similar projects have of course been present before, as, for example, in the writings of H. Richard Niebuhr, who boldly took up the challenge of removing any sort of ‘defensiveness’ from theological perspectives that sought to be grounded upon a more self-aware foundation.⁶ Despite such a focus, however, theological self-reflection has often been a very difficult goal to achieve, as defining the universal transcendent nature of the divine has often led theologians to neglect the influence of their own context on their work.

In many ways, we could view a theological self-examination as one of the central ongoing projects of contemporary theology, witnessed to perhaps nowhere more emphatically than in Karl Barth’s assessment of Schleiermacher’s portrayal of the Christian faith as a general religious phenomenon. Barth’s opposition to this claim was essential, he felt, in order to isolate the uniqueness of the Word of God over and against a general religious sensibility.⁷ The Word of God was not, in his opinion, reducible to just another religious experience, and such a sentiment has been shared by many—even in some sense by those like John Caputo who search for a

⁵ Boeve, ‘Theology at the Crossroads,’ 86. See also the analysis as developed in his *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (London: Continuum, 2007).

⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941).

⁷ Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Gottingen, Winter Semester of 1923-24*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982).

(Christianized) ‘religion without religion.’⁸ As was the case with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil less than a hundred years ago, the Word of God often appears to Christians as a critique of general religious structures and prompts many to seek out a form of ‘religionless’ Christianity. Though far from being dropped as a ‘religion’ in most people’s definitions of the term, Christianity, for its part, must contend directly with such tensions so that it might not only grasp its own identity, but so that it might also provide itself as a critical-productive dialogue partner with the world and its varied religious phenomena.

Within such a context, the development of a theological-hermeneutical project that takes such tensions seriously—that is, that examines how Christianity both *is* and in many ways *is not* typical of a general religious experience—has the potential to become one wherein self-examination exists as the *primary* option for living a life of faith. At the same time, such insights are also an awareness that it is only from this place of recognizing internal tensions that we can begin approaching the general religious atmosphere within a pluralistic culture. In other words, unless Christianity can comprehend itself in relation to its own ‘religious’ elements, and this despite its claims to uniqueness, it has little chance of dialoguing with other religious traditions. This means, moreover, that theology must learn to see the plurality of religious elements and their tension-filled presence *already within* Christian traditions in order to reach out to other (also plural) religious traditions. As David Tracy once put it, Christians must first learn to see the plurality *within*—one that includes other religious traditional elements even—before they can address the pluralism external to them.⁹ For from such a place—a place as much of confession

⁸ See, for example, the first volume of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics I.1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 2nd ed., eds. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975). See also, John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁹ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

as of the recognition of Christianity's own diverse identity—Christians are more likely to develop a new understanding and comprehension of the various theological tasks before them.

I think here, for example, and developing Tracy's categorizations, of the essential and inherent link between fundamental, systematic and political theological views¹⁰—though this is a coherence that is not often established in practice. There is need for theological practice to dwell within the tensions of these three subfields of inquiry, allowing them to play off one another and provide a reflexive model for self-critique of theological propositions. Reinforcing such a configuration, I would argue, is precisely what a hermeneutical theology must enhance *through pointing toward its own internal theological struggles*, and not by cutting the Gordian knot, so to speak. Rather, I suggest, theology must find a way to speak *about* and *to* its internal tensions, beginning, for systematic thought, with its relationships to foundational and practical theology, and expanding from there outwards and towards religious studies in general, before beginning that long and arduous trek back from general religious concepts and interreligious dialogue, to genuine foundational and then systematic theological insight. It is within such a fluid (re)configuration of theological methods that I would regard the critical discourse of (practical) political theology as a means toward opening up relations between fundamental and systematic theologies, and as what ultimately enables us to move toward a self-reflexive awareness of our actions as theologians and their consequences.¹¹ Political theology, as a discourse developed in order to promote a critical consciousness of one's involvement and embeddedness in a particular

¹⁰ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 47-82.

¹¹ Though I am aware that the phrase 'political theology' has many meanings in today's theological scene, from Carl Schmitt's original usage of the term to John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas' usage of the phrase (and including William Cavanaugh) to Clayton Crockett's philosophical revisioning of the field in his *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics After Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), and encompassing everything from Spinoza to Giorgio Agamben in-between, I am here referring to the phrase in its post-war German sense as a form of self-critical theological praxis. See, for example, the work of Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007).

context, and which goes under a variety of contextual theological names today, offers the theologian the tools necessary to perform critical acts of self-reflexive thought.

As Boeve put it, ‘Precisely to pursue its theological finality, theology is required to work from the intra- and extra-theological interdisciplinarity it is situated in’.¹² This is a reality for many theologians and has already led them to work in close proximity with the methods and models of a variety of other disciplines—and this much to the benefit of theological discourse. For example, and as many working within the academy realize, there are feminist theologians who are closer to those working in feminist theory than to those in the discipline of theology. Rather than deplore such a state of affairs, I would rather be tempted to see such movements as a result of the ongoing contextualization of theology referred to above, and therefore as a kind of carrying of the Christ-event out into the world, into the culture, and into dialogue with other religious faiths. Just as we should not be ashamed to call ourselves Christians or theologians—and thus to have spent much time forming ourselves *as* Christians—we should not fear the close connections we maintain with those wholly immersed in other disciplines, at least insofar as these things bear an ‘elective affinity’ with our theological interests and starting points.

What I am suggesting is that there must be a complementarity between the various forms of theological practice, just as there must be a certain dynamic tension between systematic theology and religious studies if theology is to flourish as an academic discipline. Both are necessary for developing tensions productive for Christians, ‘other’ religious believers and/or those situated outside traditional religious structures (i.e. atheists, agnostics, seekers, etc.). What I wish to focus on, however, is the manner in which such an effort to maintain a productive, hermeneutical tension—and not to give in to any fideistic temptation to resolve it as if by sheer will-power—can be situated within the dynamism of doubt and faith that looms as the spectre of

¹² Boeve, ‘Theology at the Crossroads,’ 80.

modernity over the ‘European hemisphere,’ and which is a real problem for the audiences (student, lay, ecclesial) we aim to address as professional theologians. I believe that by taking up such a dynamic directly, we might be able to speak more effectively to those whose faith has been crippled by an unnecessary overreliance upon a form of reasoning that was not intended to deal with the fullness of existence in isolation by itself. My interest in returning to this nineteenth-century debate is that I believe the issues Newman addressed then are very relevant today for the tensions that exist between theology and religious studies, and between Christian particularity and secular scientific study.

The Cultural Tension between a Reasonable Doubt and an Undiscovered Faith

Christopher Lane’s recent *The Age of Doubt: Tracing the Roots of Our Religious Uncertainty* takes up the Victorian task, as he puts it, ‘on behalf of doubt itself. It dwells on the advantages of religious and philosophic uncertainty as a creative stimulant and assesses the benefits of skepticism in a world that still tries to rid us of that quality.’¹³ His point of departure is the contrast between faith and reason in the sermons of John Henry Newman, and how Newman was able to find ‘certitude’ in the midst of so much Victorian doubt brought about by the ‘nagging questions’ that Christianity was not (and presumably from his point of view still is not) able to address adequately.¹⁴

Lane’s deciphering of Newman’s nuance between faith and reason, however, raises some serious questions. As he sets the scene: ‘Sermon after sermon warned congregations that doubt was not just sinful and immoral but a condition marred by emptiness and despair. “Consider the miseries of wives and mothers losing their faith in Scripture,” urged Cardinal John Henry

¹³ Christopher Lane, *The Age of Doubt: Tracing the Roots of Our Religious Uncertainty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 5.

¹⁴ Lane, *The Age of Doubt*, 2.

Newman, as some doubters tried to cling to their faith by focusing on the sorry plight of those who had lost theirs'.¹⁵ From this, Lane concludes that, 'Like that of so many other men of the cloth, Protestant and Catholic, Newman's strategy backfired and sent the Church into defensive retreat. [...] The Church was ill equipped to engage with scientific naturalism, rationalism, free thought, and growing interest in liberalism; it confronted internal rifts over the very nature of belief and found that evidence was not on its side.'¹⁶

We see one of the major problems here open up through the relationship of history to theology—and thus, we might add, to *salvation* history.¹⁷ For many, the relationship between faith and historical-critical scholarship (perhaps most pointedly exhibited in biblical studies, but extended as a general principle throughout the theological field) is what pre-eminently characterizes the modern day relation of faith and reason, and why the relationship between theology and biblical studies is not an easy one to sort out.¹⁸ How theology, and the Christian faith in general, absorbs the critical impulses of a modern rationality is often viewed as a litmus test for whether or not one's belief system is credible. At times, however, Christians have retreated so far from the critical appropriations of reason that they have risked discrediting themselves within the surrounding culture almost entirely, and have brought about the rise of some extreme Christian fundamentalisms—concerning this, Lane's point is well made. Yet, I still contend that only a fuller articulation of the historical subjects that we are, as cultural and religious beings immersed in a permanent and necessary tension between these expressions of faith and critical (scientific) rationality, will allow theology to move forward.

¹⁵ Lane, *The Age of Doubt*, 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See the various articles gathered in the volume *Tradition and the Normativity of History* (eds. Lieven Boeve and Terrence Merrigan with the collaboration of Colby Dickinson, Leuven: Peeters, 2013).

¹⁸ See, among others, Luke Timothy Johnson and William S. Kurz, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

In Lane's all-too-brief sketch, however, there are at least two possible objections concerning his reading of Newman—problems that speak as well to the larger portrait of faith sketched by many in Western society. First, the Church's 'defensive retreat' was not necessarily something that Newman's thought either condoned or conditioned. Newman's thought seems in fact to have little to do with such a defensive posturing as Lane describes. Newman's efforts appear far more holistic in their treatment of the human person as a 'person of faith' and do not necessarily lead one toward a defensive ecclesiastical structure.¹⁹ And what I am already hinting at here is what I want to develop as an essential trajectory of our theological aims: the development of a non-defensive form of apologetics—an underdeveloped side of theology signalled today in the interest which figures such as Newman and Maurice Blondel continue to arouse in theologians.²⁰ Such models for making the faith intelligible to a general (worldly) audience have been present within the last century of Christian thought, but they are often forgotten or pushed directly aside in an effort to make Christianity appear triumphant over other religious truth claims.

This brings me to my second objection to Lane's reasoning: there is the fact that Newman's understanding of the relationship between doubt (or reason) and faith was far from being this simplistic. If anything, Newman's understanding of the responsible human being was that there must be a dynamic interplay between doubt and faith—yet not one that simply capitulated the fullness of our being to reason *alone*. As he indicated quite directly in his Oxford sermons, for example, 'Reason has a power of analysis and criticism in all opinion and conduct, and that nothing is true or right but what may be justified, and, in a certain sense, proved by it, and undeniable, in consequence, that, unless the doctrines received by Faith are approvable by

¹⁹ See, among others, John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford* (eds. Gerard Tracey and James David Earnest, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁰ See, again, Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*.

Reason, they have no claim to be regarded as true, it does not follow therefore that Faith is actually grounded on Reason in the believing mind itself [...].²¹ As would befit such a view, Newman had no problem in declaring that ‘Faith is content with weaker evidence’ than that which is accepted by reason,²² for this is the nature of faith, and how most of us live our daily lives—taking things on faith (in a general sense) and yearning for a fullness to life that is not always sovereign in the sense that some take reason to be. Even within such a model, faith can still be an ‘assent without doubt, or a certitude,’ but not necessarily in the sense that those who seek to give themselves over purely to the dictates of reason might understand it to be. The series of convergent probabilities that actually bring a person to faith are far more complex than a reductionist reliance upon reason alone (and which is much valued and needed within a narrow scientific point of view), and we would do well to heed Newman’s assertions once again.²³ Faith comes about through the place one finds oneself in at a particular point in life, concomitant with all the emotions, relations, thoughts, confusions, stressors and traditions that being human entails.

Perhaps it is a simple category mistake, but it is one that we make over and over again: Lane’s sense of faith and doubt are based on a particular version of the operations of reason. Newman’s sense of certitude, however, is based on the probabilities that lead one to embrace faith, and which support the ‘everyday’ assumptions that undergird our lives. Doubt, when understood from this perspective on faith, is indeed crippling—truly debilitating—to one’s life. Doubt, understood as an operation of reason, however, is a necessary feature of thought, and something which a religious viewpoint should have no trouble engaging as need be. Reason is a much

²¹ Newman, *Fifteen Sermons*, 182-83.

²² Newman, *Fifteen Sermons*, 185.

²³ I would even suggest, moreover, that this is precisely why Newman’s views at times come into conflict with certain (post)modern thinkers who would too hastily abandon the Church or theology in favour of a more (Kantian) rationalistic and general ‘religious’ framework.

needed tool to aid the believer in sorting through the complexities of one's immediate context of faith.

My reason for using this illustration is not, however, simply to focus on what a more nuanced recovery of Newman's claims could do for theology today; rather, it is to demonstrate the manner in which contemporary authors continue to caricature the 'theological' in order to emphasize the 'rational' (or what for many becomes a static 'scientific' worldview or even a detached postmodern rationalism)—a modern legacy we are still struggling with, and which does little to deal with the foundations of theological or religious thought.²⁴ Indeed, in the face of so much de-traditionalization and the erosion of centuries of cultural practice in some contexts, we would be well advised to take a more serious and sustained look at what exactly our faith (religious or otherwise) is rooted in. This is also precisely where we sense the importance of reason in performing those necessary self-critical reflections I spoke of in the first section.

Faith is, as Karmen MacKendrick has pointed out, first and foremost a 'self-critical' stance taken with regard to one's own faith and one's own self.²⁵ As she puts it, 'To be faithful to divine revelation, in this view, is to place oneself always in question.'²⁶ As Kierkegaard once put it in his own polemical way: before God we are always 'in the wrong,' or what I take here to mean much the same thing as what MacKendrick espouses to be a form of perpetual self-

²⁴ For more on this theme, see Bruno Latour, *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

²⁵ Karmen MacKendrick, *Divine Enticement: Theological Seductions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 44. Considering the implications of this point, I sense a strong resonance with Newman's claims in a more recent exposition of the relationship between faith and reason in MacKendrick's work, who stresses that 'Doubt is not, then, something that destroys faith, but a step on the way to making it stronger, rather as minor illness can lead to a sturdier immune system, or fatiguing exercise to a greater muscular strength' (38). These thoughts may sound like obvious statements when made to a room of discerning theologians, but they continue to be speculated and written upon because they have not yet been absorbed by the culture at large, a culture it could be also noted that often fears religion as an irrational abdication of reason. In a rather reductionist framework, such as the one Lane seems to espouse, faith should be little more than a form of absolute certainty (measured, however, on a reason-based scientific scale) which dispenses with doubt altogether—an improbable, unwanted and indeed impossible task. But such portraits do little to advance the subtleties inherent in the actual *faiths* which people manifest daily and of which Newman was well aware.

²⁶ MacKendrick, *Divine Enticement*, 50.

examination.²⁷ Faith is, in MacKendrick's words, a 'seductive epistemology,' one that falls upon us much like Newman's probabilities, slowly overtaking us when we are perhaps unaware, but also building up our confidence over time.²⁸ When viewed from this angle, we can see why MacKendrick, among others, will note the 'grave and slightly silly disservice' that is perpetuated in faith's 'modern reduction to propositional belief.' The reality, on the contrary, is that 'Even what the faithful seem, in devotion to truth, to believe—to affirm propositionally—turns out to render the proposition so strange that it becomes not a declaration, but an inquiry.'²⁹ It is such a devotion to the perpetually ongoing inquiries of faith that we should seek to highlight, as these often 'poetic' truths speak more loudly to our existence than a cold scientific rationality ever could.³⁰ What I am highlighting is an inquiry into the development of the human person and its history, as much as these are also reflected in the fullness of a salvation history and its development.

In many ways, and this is where I will again invoke the necessity for a political theology to mediate between the systematic and the fundamental, the question becomes one concerning which rationality reigns sovereign? Which conceptualization of the human person wins out over another? For far too long, a scientific rationality (i.e. scientism) has dominated the Western cultural landscape, something which Pope John Paul II warned against in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*.³¹ As Newman himself pointed out, however, there is a certain 'weakness' to the arguments that faith will accept, and which characterizes the state of theological understanding. Or, as MacKendrick contextualizes the problem, 'Too often, faith within Christianity is

²⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part II* (ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 339ff.

²⁸ MacKendrick, *Divine Enticement*, 36.

²⁹ MacKendrick, *Divine Enticement*, 45-6.

³⁰ Among the more recent treatments of the poetic within the theological, see Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

³¹ Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §88.

triumphal, a firm belief in historical “fact” linked to exultation in the victory of the battle over death. But I would argue for a faith incapable of dwelling in victory, of being fully answered, no longer called and calling.’³² I would read such claims as these (and even of Caputo’s ‘weak theology,’ for example) as efforts to find a way for the fullness of the human being to be heard and uplifted, a task that I find joined to attempts *within* the history of theology and *within* the Church to provide a similar perspective. The seeds for a fuller vision of faith, I would argue, are already within us, all around us even—though they are often casually pushed aside in the rush to achieve a ‘greater’ certitude through a more ‘reasoned’ examination. And so we fail, again and again, to embrace the fullness that faith and its history (of salvation) offers.

Systematic Theology and the General Sphere of a Cultural Religion

So, what am I suggesting concerning the relationship between theology and religious studies? In other words, what might be advanced concerning the relationship between systematic theology specifically, and religion in contemporary Western culture? I want to address, in what follows, how maintaining a productive tension between these two fields is perhaps the *only* reasonable solution to their co-existence, and it is a tension that must be intentionally cultivated and learned from. To emphasize how this can be done, I want (again) to take a look at how political theology can function as a tool to bring about a critical form of self-awareness for the discipline of theology as a whole.

I have wrestled for a number of years now with the work of the Italian philosopher and cultural and political theorist Giorgio Agamben, someone whose work could be broadly

³² MacKendrick, *Divine Enticement*, 69.

construed as a form of ‘political theology,’ though he is certainly not a theologian.³³ If anything, he shares in a radical critique of theology that would see Christianity as the leading proponent of the ‘profanation’ of our world today—the eradication of the falsely sacred and the institution of a life lived without a sovereign, transcendent deity hovering just over our heads.³⁴ In many ways, he thus appears to share in those calls for a ‘religionless’ core of Christianity. Indeed, in his writings, Agamben’s own views have often seemed to depict the only true Church as a Church that should exist *without (religious, structural) content* completely, and that *this* would be the only authentic form of following a genuine messianic claim.³⁵ Many have thus read his work as a certain form of *antinomianism*, or as that which would see the institution of the Church completely abandoned, much like the antinomians that Martin Luther was forced to respond to in his own context.³⁶ This is something, I would further note, that Caputo, among others, shares in as well, the recurring ‘issue’ that I am wagering we are really wrestling with today.³⁷

Surprisingly in one of his more recent writings, however, Agamben holds that a community might be sustainable as ‘Church’ so long as it maintains—and does not seek to efface or resolve—the tension existing between the institutional structure itself and its desires for liberation—broadly construed, I would suggest, as a tension between religious structures and the (Christian) messianic core.³⁸ This is what I have termed elsewhere the *hermeneutical tension* between a canonical structure and its internal messianic forces bent on undoing a given structure

³³ For more on this, see ‘Philosophy and Theology in my *Agamben and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), [page nos??](#)

³⁴ This line of thought can also be found in the work of Gianni Vattimo. See his *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

³⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

³⁶ Martin Luther, *Only the Decalogue is Eternal: Martin Luther’s Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations* ed. and trans. Holger Sonntag (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran Press, 2008).

³⁷ I would note here the ‘Subverting the Norm’ conferences held recently—and with Caputo himself as a keynote speaker—insofar as they try to address the issue of how Caputo’s work could function *within* the Church. It is noteworthy that most of the pastors who attend these conferences are mainly Protestant, though Caputo himself speaks from the location of his own Catholic heritage. [Reference needed here.](#)

³⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Church and the Kingdom*, trans. Leland de la Durantaye (London: Seagull, 2012), 35.

in a bid for more justice to be done, only to see a new, eventual canonical form take shape later.³⁹ But, of course, these tensions were present in Luther's contrast of a theology of glory in opposition to a theology of the cross, or even much earlier indeed, when Christianity itself was that antinomian Jewish movement that quickly gained traction and took off on its own course.⁴⁰ It is the tension we still see dominating many theologies today in fact—whether disclosed or not—and it is that internal plurality that we must return to again and again in order to more accurately address the construction of our identities *as* Christians (underscored in the first section of this essay and contextualized in the debate between faith and reason in the second).

Our foregoing discussion leads us to reassess a number of pressing theological questions, including: What are we to do with the periodic rise of internal divisions *within* the Church, within our institutions (even within thought itself) or within a particular framework that orients a given representational (theological) economy? This is perhaps *the* question that motivates the present theological-hermeneutical project. Should such divisions lead inevitably to the exclusion of one side of the tensions simply because they do not seem conducive to the operations of the institution itself? Should they be doubted, caricatured or dismissed, because they do not measure up to a certain standard and appear as 'erroneous' (i.e. the tradition, as for many within the Church, or even reason itself, as I have already indicated is the case for many outside the church)?

Many within Catholic theology are still playing out the internal tensions brought to light during the middle of the last century, which lay at the heart of Vatican II: continuity or discontinuity, *Concilium* or *Communio*, Rahner or von Balthasar, rather than making the

³⁹ See my *Between the Canon and the Messiah: The Structure of Faith in Contemporary Continental Thought*, Bloomsbury Studies in Continental Philosophy (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁴⁰ The antinomian impulses of early Christianity have received an interesting treatment in Jacob Taubes' final lectures, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

personal commitment necessary to re-envision theological praxis from their own context, utilizing insights then from all of the tradition rather than perpetuating overly facile polarizations or political/ideological divisions. Though practically speaking it is often the case that the Rahnerians and the Balthasarians, for example, still do not ‘get along’ (theoretically speaking), there may yet come a time when, as Fergus Kerr has pointed out, Rahner and Balthasar are viewed more as *complementary* to one another than as contrasting points.⁴¹ Whether we acknowledge this or not, such divisions within the discipline of theology often characterize the political (and even *economic*) field of tensions within the academy, and also within the church and among the general public.⁴²

I look at this and similar dilemmas, in many ways, as the outworking of the relationship between the (general) religious structure and the (particular) theological doctrine, or, from another angle, the canonical form of the faith tradition (its ‘conservative’ side) and its messianic undoing at the hands of a religious structural critique (its ‘liberal’ side), and the necessary oscillation between these two positions. This, I believe, is where history and its vital dynamisms are to be found. From a systematic theological position, I would assert that we already have a history of examining such dynamics, as they have slowly risen to the forefront of history and as they continue to guide our most basic theological practices, though it is one often difficult to isolate and develop as such.

Certainly there are completely erroneous initiatives that merit nothing more than condemnation and, as far as possible, oblivion. But there are also errors that conceal a spark of truth and that are combinations of doctrinal error and doctrinal truth. With

⁴¹ Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 104.

⁴² See the conclusions in Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, and also in Boeve, ‘Theology at the Crossroads,’ 72.

respect to such initiatives, simply condemning them would not be adequate in view of the possibility of a more perfect truth. Then such a condemnation would also have about it the qualities of hastiness [...], of automatic reflex, or of too immediate a response without the possibility of assimilation. That cannot be what governs a church about which St. Irenaeus says that the Spirit of God ceaselessly remains and acts within her, rejuvenating the deposit confided to her, and even the structure into which the deposit has been entrusted.⁴³

These words of Yves Congar in a book on making the distinction between true and false reform within the Church were widely read at the time, though not translated into English until 2011. Congar's book was studied however by the man who would become Pope shortly afterwards, Angelo Roncalli (Pope John XXIII), and before he initiated one of the largest structural changes in the Catholic Church's history.

As Congar elaborated, 'It's true that the structure needs openness to life in order to be ready to receive it. But the living experience needs openness to the structure to accept its regulation. Living experience needs to develop within the structure and according to it: this is an absolute condition for the success of its demands.'⁴⁴ Just as faith needs but is not limited to reason, and as theology needs but is not limited to general religious structures, so too does the institutional life of the Church need but is not limited to theology. The 'growth of the body' that is the Church demands such creative dynamics, or it remains static and dead. The 'mature solution' in the face of protest and calls for 'reform', as he discusses it, is an 'intentionally

⁴³ Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church* (trans. Paul Philibert, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), pp. 306-7.

⁴⁴ Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, 316-7.

patient' dialogue that cannot be circumvented, a dialogue, I would add, that seeks not to eliminate all tensions, but rather to respect and grow from their existence.⁴⁵

The recognition of these tensions has recently been a focal point within the International Theological Commission's document 'Theology Today.'⁴⁶ Calling for a necessary tension between the unity and the plurality of Catholic theology, the commission seeks to inscribe this hermeneutical tension and propensity for critical thought within the heart of theological inquiry. Such a call is indeed much needed today.

Perhaps what is also needed at this point is another recognition: that these dynamics also lie at the heart of *both* the Church and the world at large. In fact, I believe that we must begin to understand the manner in which such (often very political) dynamics permeate the structures of our world as well as our ecclesial bodies and systematic theological structures. Rather than oppose modernity's insights concerning the human subject in its historical context, or claim to be a Christian community removed from the ills of institutional management, we must embrace what Congar called 'the genuine development in Catholic thought concerning meaning from the subject's point of view.'⁴⁷ And here he cites Newman as well as Maurice Blondel, as both seemingly advocated a 'method of immanence' that took the human subject very seriously, but which also facilitated the flourishing of the life of faith. When faced with the problematics that lie within our world, the struggles of the fullness of salvation with the realities of history, we must assert the fullness of a self-reflexive understanding along with Congar, who made clear that

⁴⁵ See Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, 343.

⁴⁶ The call for theology to be open to its own internal plurality in light of its perceived desire for unity is a central directive made by the document. It is, however, unfortunate that the document does not say more about how the hierarchy of the Catholic Church should exercise its own self-critical apparatus. See the International Theological Commission, 'Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria', accessed online (6 July 2013) at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_teologia-oggi_en.html Date of access needed

⁴⁷ Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, 303.

‘I accuse myself of this, first of all’.⁴⁸ If both theology and the Church are to flourish, they must each learn to more fully develop these self-critical tools to understand themselves and their role more fully in our world.

As theologians, and as Christians, we must once again go back to where we started and try to access something deeper of the truth that is manifest concerning the fullness of our communities and of our humanity, of history as well as the history of salvation. Our consciences, as Newman might have put it, are much more complex than mechanisms utilized simply to obey orders or to rebel against doctrines when we find it convenient. There is a faith seeking a critical and rational understanding of itself, and nothing less than a genuine and realistic effort in this direction will suffice today.

Conclusion

So, how does systematic theology approach religion in Western culture? How does faith approach reason? And how does the Church exist in relation to theology? I would suggest in each case the same solution: by examining *themselves* first, laying out their own temptations and their own recurring errors. Only in such a manner will each be able to have an impact upon society at large once again—though, this time, perhaps not as a sovereign gesture of political or rhetorical power, but rather as humbler discourses, ones that lead by example and that recognize these tensions as constitutive of their own identities. This is the poverty of theology to which we should be attuned to more than ever.

Should we fear that such humility would not have the impact we are hoping for, perhaps we might look to the media savvy of the recently-elected Pope Francis. We have been waiting

⁴⁸ Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, 346.

for a more self-reflexive expression of identity to unfold in our lives of grace, and the moment it seems to present itself, we are eager to embrace its obvious truth—or we are at least easily chastised by its call to go where we do not want to go, to look into what we had feared to see. There is nothing else that will satisfy the call which Christians must face again and again: to know only Christ crucified, and to know *oneself* only through such an encounter.