BRILL

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PUBLIC THEOLOGY 16 (2022) 278–283

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PUBLIC THEOLOGY
brill.com/ijpt

Theology and the University: A Reply to Professor Wolfe

Oliver D. Crisp | ORCID: 0000-0001-8866-1548
Principal of St Mary's College and Head of the School of Divinity,
University of St Andrews University, Scotland, UK
odc@st-andrews.ac.uk

Professor Wolfe has provided an eloquent and appealing account of the relevance of the study of Christian theology in the modern university, characterizing it in good Thomist fashion as the study of God and all things in relation to God – a very expansive vision of the theological task indeed. She then goes on to explain how Christian theology still has a place in the modern university, and, to my mind, there is little to disagree with in the vision she casts. Nevertheless, it *is* a particular vision of the theological task, and one that will not be acceptable to all those who practice theology today, let alone those critics of the place of theology in the modern university.

In my response to Professor Wolfe's lecture, I want to draw attention to two issues. First, I want to say something about what we might call the *shared task* of Christian theology – that is, the core concerns, if there are any such, that most theologians think of as part-and-parcel of theology rightly pursued. Second, I want to say something about why this shared task may still be a suitable pursuit for those at work in the modern university. I think of these remarks as, in many respects, friendly additions to Professor Wolfe's presentation, rather than as criticisms of it.

1 The Shared Task

Suppose we think of Christian theology in the way Professor Wolfe, following Thomas Aquinas suggests: as the study of God and all things in relation to God. That is a good place to begin, since it is a traditional conception of Christian theology that has received wide support. Christian theology is a rich and variegated discipline, with different branches. To give just a flavour

of this: there is Biblical, historical, systematic, and philosophical theology, as well as theology that begins from particular lived experiences, and contexts, and much more besides. However, as with practitioners in any intellectual discipline, Christian theologians from these different perspectives disagree among themselves about the nature of the theological task, as well as as about the object of theology. To read the published outputs of different theologians on this topic is to listen in on a debate about just what it is that theologians think they are up to when they talk about God, or *talk about* talk about God. Not all of these theologians agree with Professor Wolfe's characterization of theology. Some actively oppose it. They think that there are important philosophical reasons for resisting the idea that Christian theology is about God at all. For, so they think, either there is no god, or if there is, we have no access to God because we are too limited – like tiny ants trying to fathom the existence of a great bird of prey flying high overhead. But this is just to say that Professor Wolfe's characterization of Christian theology stakes a particular claim about the *scope* and *content* of the theological task – one that will be contested. It is a characterization that presumes certain important philosophical claims, such as that there is a god, that this god is independent of our construction of him, that this god is the entity that gives life and meaning to everything that is not-God, that is created, like you and me, and so on. We might sum it is up by saying Professor Wolfe's conception of Christian theology is *theologically realist*. In other words, it presumes that God is real, and that theology is (at least in large measure) an attempt to understand and reflect on the existence and nature of this deity. As I have indicated, such a conception of the task is controversial. Not everyone will agree with it. For not everyone is a theological realist in this sense. Some Christian theologians are anti-realists. They think that theology is about our experience of the world, or our imaginative attempts to picture God (rather like the imaginative attempts of a child to draw a mythological figure like a giant or a troll).

Well then, is there a way of getting at what Christian theology might be about that is able to avoid such debates? I think there is. This is what I call the shared task of theology. We might put it like this:

> SHARED TASK: Commitment to an intellectual undertaking that involves (though it may not comprise) explicating the conceptual content of the Christian tradition (with the expectation that this is normally done from a position within that tradition, as an adherent of that tradition), using particular religious texts that are part of the Christian tradition, including

> sacred scripture, as well as human reason, reflection, and praxis (particularly religious practices) as sources for theological judgments.[1]

Suppose we adopt SHARED TASK or something like it to characterize the central intellectual undertaking of Christian theology. Notice that it does not presume theological realism, the claim that there is a god that exists independent of any human minds. But it does express something substantive about the theological task that is widely shared. For instance, it captures the idea that theology is an intellectual discipline that has a history and genealogy in a tradition that is expressed in various texts, as well as reason, reflection and religious practices as sources for making theological judgments. It also captures the fact that Christian theology is normally pursued by those who self-identify with that tradition as "insiders" so to speak. It does not exclude those without Christian faith from pursuing theology. But it indicates that usually those who do theology are themselves people of faith. They believe in the intellectual content of their discipline – which is true irrespective of whether or not one thinks that there is a god. (Think of someone who believes in the content of their study of a great work of fiction, though they understand that the work in question depicts a world that does not actually exist.)

Now, to my mind, SHARED TASK is best pursued in the way Professor Wolfe recommends, that is, in a theologically realist way. Theologians have traditionally thought that they were pursuing the task of understanding the faith in which they stood as a kind of intellectual tradition, which provides a *worldview* – a conceptual picture by means of which we can make sense of the world around us and our place in it. I take it that is what it means to say the study of Christian theology is concerned with God and all things in God. But, as I say, this is not a view that is universally shared in contemporary Christian theology. It seems to me that SHARED TASK goes some way to addressing that concern by providing an account of the discipline that avoids the assumption of theological realism – and I say that as one committed to such theological realism.

2 Christian Theology in the Modern University

Well then, what about the place of Christian theology in the modern university? We could sketch the way in which Christian theology has helped to shape the university, even giving birth to it from the cathedral schools of the middle

1 See Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine: Toward a Systematic Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), where this is discussed in more detail.

ages. But, though I think this is undeniable, I am not sure that such a story is entirely to the point. After all, our concern is not with the historic origins of the university, but with its modern successor institution. We want to know what place theology has in the university today, not what role it had in forming the university as we know it – important though that question is.

These days in modern universities Christian theology is often thought to be on the intellectual back foot. There may be reasons for this, and some of those may be good reasons. But some reasons for this perception are bad reasons. Here are several that are poor reasons. First, it is often thought that Christian theology cannot have a place in a world governed by scientific assumptions. That would be like believing in fairies and yet making use of computers and digital technology. Somehow, it is thought, these two things are incommensurate. But notice, this is an assumption. And it is an assumption based on a philosophical idea, not on science. The idea is that the physical world and its contents are all that exists. Once you have given an account of the physical world, you have exhausted all there is to explain. This is a kind of *metaphysical naturalism*. But such an idea is hardly obvious, and certainly contested. As philosophers of the twentieth century discovered, trying to limit what we can know to some criterion that reduces knowable things to testable things – such as things that we can examine in a laboratory – is itself not something that can be tested in a laboratory. It is an idea. And ideas are what universities trade in. Christian theologians have typically rejected metaphysical naturalism. They think that there is more to the world than what can be found in a test tube. But that is hardly a reason to be suspicious of Christian theology. If anything, it may be a reason to welcome it.

A related point here is that these days in many different disciplines in the university we are faced with *epistemological pluralism*. That is, there is no single axial point, no view from nowhere from which we can begin and can survey all that there is to understand from a position of some sort of dispassionate objectivity. This sort of intellectual project, beloved of certain early modern European philosophers, is now regarded by the overwhelming majority of those working across many different intellectual disciplines as mistaken. We begin from where we are. We think, reflect, theorize, and philosophize from our given perspective. That does not make all intellectual pursuits relative. But it does mean that our grasp of the truth of a particular matter may be partial, fallible, and piecemeal. A certain intellectual humility is no bad thing, and often attends more chastened approaches to what we can know that are discussed in the contemporary philosophical literature on the topic. In an epistemologically pluralist world, religion has its place. And, so it seems to me, the study of religion does too. For religious experience, life, and practice is a

fundamental part of the meaning-making of billions of people on the planet. Excluding that from consideration on ideological grounds does not seem to be consistent with the aims and aspirations of the modern university as a place where knowledge in all its different hues is pursued.

This brings me to a third consideration, which I have already touched on in passing in setting out the SHARED TASK of theology. This is that the study of Christian theology is normally done by insiders to this intellectual tradition. That is common in the study of particular religious traditions, whatever they may be. Sometimes it is thought that what is needed in the modern university is the social scientific study of religion, rather than what might be called confessionalism. In other words, what is wanted is the study of religion and religious phenomena by outsiders looking in: historians, philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists who provide accounts of a particular religion as it appears to those who are not adherents but are students of its manifestations and practices. There is certainly a place for such work, and it is often illuminating. But it cannot be a serious objection to the study of Christian theology in the university that it is confessional in nature (where it is confessional). That is, it cannot be a serious objection to the study of Christian theology that often it will be practiced by insiders looking out, as it were, rather than outsiders looking in. There is a great value, including great intellectual value, in the study of a religion understood from the inside out, and not just the outside in. If we did not think this then we would have to cut out confessionalism in other disciplines too. But that is a nonsense. You cannot do philosophy as an outsider looking in, you have to make the argument for whatever view you think is worth defending. And you cannot do political science from the outside looking in, you have to make the case for a particular political stance or particular political perspective. Nor can you law like this: one must stake a claim on why such things as punishment are morally appropriate or not, and why we have the practices of black letter law that we do. The same could be said of even the most arcane disciplines of the university: for instance, you cannot do physics without commitment to at least some things, like the reliability of certain procedures and the importance of testability and what such practices yield.

Christian theology is a living tradition with a long, rich, and deep intellectual culture – or cultures (for there are many within its bounds). It is also a discipline that is, in many non-trivial respects, promiscuous in its intellectual pursuits. Theologians are interested in language, in texts and their interpretation, in the relation of religion to society, to politics, to law, of the philosophical dimension to theological claims, and of their scientific import as well. That is surely one of the ramifications of Professor Wolfe's characterization of the study of Christian theology as concerned with God and all things in God. For

instance, one cannot really understand many of the great works of literature without being theologically attuned. But there are ways in which this is true of many other areas as well, and sometimes this presents in unexpected ways – think, for example of the way in which criminal law presumes a kind of folk psychology about human agency that presumes we have souls and are normally free and responsible persons. Whatever we make of such claims, they are as much theological as they are philosophical.

3 Conclusion

In his famous poem, "On Dover Beach," the nineteenth century poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold wrote that the Sea of Faith, as he calls it, which was once like a bright girdle around earth's shore, is now in retreat. "Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" is like the sound of receding surf as the tide goes out on religious certainty in the modern world. Arnold's poem is a deeply moving jeremiad to a lost world of theological and spiritual significance, and one can almost feel the existential loss which motivated him to write these words. But, as Professor Wolfe has reminded us, though some cultural critics maintain that the desacralizing of the world should be reflected in the purging of the study of religion from the curriculum of the modern university, there is reason to resist such overtures. Moving though Arnold's poem is, it is as much the product of a particular culture and time as it is a reflection on a loss of theological certainty.

We do not live in Victorian Britain. We do not share its values, even if that is sometimes lamented in contemporary society. Victorian Britain was not a golden age of Christianity, and, *pace* Arnold, the tide has not gone out on religion in the modern world – Christian theology included. If anything, recent history has reinforced the fact that the religious impulse is endemic, and for many, many people, *essential* to human life. The tide is not going out on the study of Christian theology. If anything, its place in the university is more vital than ever. For it promises to give us a window onto the kind of life professed by millions the world over. It enables us to grasp something about the world without which much that has shaped and formed the modern university makes no sense. And it provides those who study it with a way of looking at the world that is meaningful and coherent, and that connects in deep and vital ways with other parts of the university, in the arts and humanities, the social sciences, and the natural and applied sciences as well. Theology, and, in my particular context, Christian theology, has a vital role to play. We ignore it or sideline it at our peril.